

The Ample Lake Burster: Chapter 017

By: Indigo Rho

Kevin crouched in the rain and ran his hoof over the gash in one of his tires. The hole formed a long and jagged line down the side of the tire, damn near impossible to overlook. The perpetrator had been thorough. Whoever was inflating and popping their group wanted to make sure they didn't drive off before everyone was reduced to scraps.

The elk's heart raced in his chest; it had ever since he'd accepted Cody wasn't blabbering nonsense when he'd mentioned Berg and Oscar had popped. Kevin had considered Webb's bursting a nightmare scenario. He was in charge of setting up the party, which meant he'd take the blame for any accidents that occurred under his watch. Not only would the cops have dragged him through the dirt, but Axel would've, too. Ruining the frat's most important party of the year would've ruined him as well. Kevin wouldn't have gotten kicked out of the frat over Webb's apparent negligence, but his association with the incident would've destroyed his reputation. He'd be ignored, ostracized, and blamed for whatever punishment the university decided to dole out.

But there'd been no accident. A psychopath had attacked Webb, along with Abel, Berg, and Oscar. No one would dare blame Kevin for a serial burster going on a rampage. He was as much a victim as the others. That fact brought him a degree of relief that made him feel a tinge of guilt. Anger and determination drowned it out.

Four of Kevin's frat brothers were scraps. Two had been good friends of his, guys he'd expected to remain close to till the day he died. There was no way in hell he was about to let the psychopath pop any more of them.

The elk stood. Dante, Cody, and Blake huddled together, jumping at shadows like skittish children. "This ends right here, right now," Kevin growled. "If this psychopath thinks we'll sit here and let them burst us one by one, then I'll show them how dead wrong they are."

"What the fuck are you going on about?" Cody hissed. The small leopard shivered in the rain, tail smacking around like a snapped power line in a storm.

"I'm talking about putting a fucking end to this! That psycho's going down." Kevin smacked his palm with a fist.

"They've already popped half of us! If you wanna get pumped up and explode, then go ahead!" Cody snapped back.

"The psycho's only gotten this far by isolating us and targeting people who couldn't fight back," Kevin said, standing his ground. He was done letting Cody's hysteria lead the group. "Webb was stoned and a pushover. How hard could it have been to overpower him? Abel was drunk and in shock. Doesn't matter how

big he was, he wasn't going to fight back well in that condition. Then you've got Berg and Oscar, both of whom were blimped up and not in the best shape to begin with. Everyone the psycho's gone after was either bloated, inebriated, or both. Well I'm neither."

Kevin stared at each of his three frat brothers in turn, daring any of them to argue against him. They wouldn't. They knew he was right.

"Cool. So how do you plan on taking out a psycho who's had no trouble sneaking around the place undetected like a damn ghost?" Cody asked. "Maybe the crazy ferret at the gas station was right about the Ample Lake Burster."

"If you seriously think a ghost is after us, then the psycho's already won. And I *do* have a plan." One that'd just come together in Kevin's head. He grinned with the smug satisfaction of having an immediate answer for the panicking feline. "I'm handling them the old-fashioned way: with a bow and arrows."

Cody threw up his paws. "Great, he's lost his mind."

Kevin wasn't surprised by Cody's lack of faith. The leopard didn't know how to be bold. Kevin bet things at the lodge would've ended very differently if he'd been there instead, but he kept the opinion to himself to be diplomatic. He'd need Cody's help, after all. "I brought my bow and enough arrows to turn the psychopath into a damn pin cushion. You've seen my accuracy on the range."

"Yeah, against a stationary target. The psycho's not gonna stand still and wait for you to line up your shot, dude!" Cody said.

"I can hit a moving target just as well!" Kevin insisted with a huff. He didn't practice against them as often, but liked his odds. "The real challenge is getting the psycho to come out of hiding since there's no way he'll attack us while we're in a group. And I've got just the plan for that. We're going to head towards the range and make as much noise as possible so the psycho follows us. I'll grab my gear when we get there, and then we'll stage a very loud fight to give the impression that we're at odds with each other and not working together." He stared at Cody as he spoke the last part so the cat would understand the danger of not showing a unified front.

"We'll split up after our fake fight. I'll head off in one direction alone, two of us will leave together, and the last person will linger in place as if he doesn't know what to do. He'll be the perfect bait to lure the psychopath out of hiding. And when they reveal themselves, I'll take them down from a hiding spot. Shouldn't take more than one arrow." Kevin imagined himself letting loose the arrow that'd avenge Berg and Abel in an instant and grinned from ear to ear. He'd be a hero. No—he'd be a legend.

But rather than relent to Kevin's superior planning, Cody chose to run his mouth off yet again. "Fan-fucking-tastic. All we have to do is dangle someone in

front of a balloon-crazed psycho while you pretend to be Robin Hood. Who in their right mind would volunteer to be bait?”

“You’re a natural fit,” Kevin said.

Cody let out an exasperated cackle. “And why’s that?”

“Because you’re the only one who’s seen the psycho and not ended up as scraps. They’ll be gunning for you.” And though Kevin would never dare admit it out loud, he considered Cody the most expendable. The leopard was too bratty for his own good, and Kevin already felt a bit bitter that he’d survived while Berg and Abel hadn’t.

“No fucking way! If I see that psycho again, I’m bolting. He popped Berg and Oscar like it was nothing, and I’m not about to let him get his hands on me.” Cody crossed his arms defiantly, refusing to back down.

“I could be bait,” Blake said. “I’m the only one who’s still puffed up, so I’m an easy target. I could even fall over and pretend I can’t get up.” The crow laughed nervously.

Kevin was just about to accept Blake’s offer when Dante spoke up. “That’s too dangerous, Blake. If anything goes wrong, you’re the least capable of getting away. I’ll be the bait,” the bull said.

Kevin couldn’t believe it. He’d counted on Cody being the bait—*maybe* Blake as a worst-case scenario—but he’d never imagined putting Dante in harm’s way. As much as he trusted in his ability to take out the psychopath, there was always the tiny, practically insignificant possibility he’d mess up. And if that happened, Dante would pay dearly.

Aside from his close friendship with Dante, Kevin couldn’t think of a solid reason to reject the bull’s suggestion of being bait. Cody was too terrified to be reliable, and Blake was a blimpy disaster waiting to happen. Dante was their best bet, as much as it pained him to admit it.

The elk took a deep breath to calm himself. He was not better than Cody if he let his emotions get the better of him. “Alright. I’ll make a fuss about wanting to go after the psycho when we reach the range. Cody and Blake will be against it. Shouldn’t be hard for you to sound scared shitless,” he grunted at Cody, who flashed his teeth in response. “Dante will waver between both sides or try to get us to compromise or something. All that matters is that he stays there when the rest of us leave and looks properly distraught so the psycho doesn’t catch on. Everyone think about what you’ll say on the way there. We won’t have time to practice.”

The rest of the guys nodded, even Cody. The need for safety in numbers would keep the leopard around.

Kevin led the way to the archery range through the dark and rain. He made a point of loudly encouraging the rest of the guys so that the psychopath wouldn’t

have any doubt as to where they were. He kept watch for any shadows darting between buildings or the glow of dimmed lights, but he didn't see a single sign of the psychopath on the way there. They were good. But Kevin was better, and he'd soon tower triumphantly over the slain burster. No air tank could compare to arrows.

The archery range's shelter brought the beleaguered frat boys welcome relief from the storm. Water plastered Kevin's clothes to his body and dripped along the length of his antlers. His bow and arrows remained where he'd left them earlier, having been forgotten in the aftermath of Webb's bursting. He whispered to the others as he slid the quiver on. "Okay. So I'll start things off by declaring my intent to return to the lodge and hunt the psycho. How are you two gonna respond to that?" He asked Cody and Blake.

"That we should run away," Cody grumbled. "Which is what we should *actually* be doing."

"I can suggest we hunker down till morning," Dante said. "That's sort of in between the two opinions, so it'll make more sense when I can't decide who to go with."

"Perfect." Kevin wished Dante wasn't going to act as bait, but he couldn't deny the bull might be the most competent for the task. "After we've pretended to argue and yell a bunch, I'll leave in a huff. Then Cody and Blake will leave together. Dante, you'll stick around until the psycho comes out. Just make sure you don't look like obvious bait."

"I'll try." Dante smiled, and Kevin reminded himself he'd get to blimp the bull up over and over again once they'd ended the psychopath's bursting spree.

Kevin looked at Cody once he finished securing his gear. "And don't forget, dude, you're just *pretending* to fuck off on foot. If you try to do that for real, you're bound to get lost and die of exposure before anyone ever shoves a hose in your mouth."

Cody hissed and sulked. Good. The grumpy leopard would have no trouble pulling off a convincing fight.

It was showtime.

Kevin walked out of the shelter and onto the range. Visibility was vital if they wanted to catch the psycho, and the range offered little in the way of cover. "I don't care what any of you say, I'm gonna hunt this fucker!" The elk's voice echoed off the surrounding trees.

"It's too dangerous, dude," Dante jumped in after a slight delay.

"Dangerous? It's fucking suicidal!" Cody darted in front of Kevin to block his path. The leopard looked and sounded genuinely pissed. Perfect. "He'll have you creaking and ready to blow within five minutes of you stumbling off into the dark!"

“Dude, they’re right,” Blake said before burping.

Cody flung his paws up. “See? What we *need* to do is run the fuck away. Once we reach the main road, we can call the cops, and they can swarm the place and deal with the psycho!” Cody glared hard at Kevin. If he was hoping to stealthily change the elk’s mind during their fake argument, he was sorely mistaken.

“And I’m sure the psycho will let you stroll on out of here,” Kevin said. He straightened his back to loom another inch over Cody and remind the cat who was in charge.

“Kevin’s right, Cody,” Dante said. “Running might be just as dangerous as fighting. We could get ambushed trying to leave or get lost in the woods. And there’s no guarantee we’ll actually get a good signal on the road, especially with all this rain. I think we should hunker down in one of the cabins and barricade the door. We can make a break for it in the morning when the rain’s gone and we have light.”

Cody rolled his eyes, an act too subtle for anyone spying on them from afar to notice. “That’s as dumb as *his* plan to going fucking hunting! Just gather up in one cramped, convenient spot with no way out. They might as well pump and pop themselves while they’re at it.”

Kevin felt the performance was going well, but he realized Blake hadn’t officially sided with Cody enough to justify leaving with him shortly. He turned to the crow, intent on nudging him in the proper direction. “We’ve got three different plans, Blake. Unless you’ve got a fourth one, you’re our tiebreaker. You know what I can do with a bow. I can take them.”

Blake looked between Kevin, Cody, and Dante, appearing to debate his answer. He shook his head, causing his belly to slosh. “Dude, we should run. It’s our best bet of getting out in one piece.”

“And there we have it—majority rules!” Cody declared, speaking with a little too much sarcasm for Kevin’s liking. The elk hoped the psychopath didn’t notice. “We’re fucking off!”

“No,” Kevin said. “Be a coward if you want, but I’m going to fight. It’s not like I need any help to deal with the psycho, anyway.” A boast he truly believed. If he actually did plan on tracking the psychopath through the dark, he’d ditch the others in a heartbeat. They’d only slow him down.

“Whatever.” Cody shrugged. “If you’re that desperate to end up as a scrap pile, then go right ahead.”

“Come on, Kevin, just come with us,” Blake said.

“We need to stick together,” Dante added, placing a hoof on Kevin’s shoulder. It was a nice touch.

Kevin brushed the hoof away. "I'm done talking. If you don't get yourselves lost, you can tell the cops I've got everything under control." He stormed away from the guys without looking back.

Kevin turned his lantern off once he reached the treeline and let his eyes adjust to the darkness. He continued onward for a few minutes before doubling back to the range. He knelt behind the cover of bushes at first but worried he wouldn't have a clear enough shot. Then he saw the roof of the archery range's shelter and knew he'd found the perfect perch.

The elk hurried over to the shelter and used a wooden bench to scale the side. Rain drummed hard on the roof, muffling the noise of his ascent. The roof gave Kevin a commanding view of the entire range—ideal for an archer hunting his prey. The psycho wouldn't see him coming. He crouched low and watched his frat brothers finish their show.

After a lot of wild gesturing and cursing, Cody stomped away, joined shortly by Blake. Dante begged them not to go. He took a few steps forward, as if to follow, but stopped to stare in the direction Kevin had originally wandered off in. He looked back and forth, doing a wonderful job of seeming torn between choices. The lantern he held onto lit him up like a beacon in the dark, an ideal lure for the psychopath. Just like the light of an angler fish.

All Kevin had to do was wait for his chance to be the hero.

The arm wrapped swiftly and tightly around Kevin's throat, reducing the elk's attempt to shout to a choking gasp. A hose was crammed so far down his throat that he swore he felt it poke into his stomach. He didn't hear the pump turn on over the sound of the drumming rain, but he felt the surge of pressure in his stomach as air gushed in. His flat middle ballooned to the size of a basketball in seconds, giving him the appearance of having a beer belly, something he'd had nightmares about.

Desperate not to meet the same fate as the others, Kevin swung his head and threw himself backward. Antlers were an elk's greatest defense, and he'd rake them across the psychopath's face until they released him.

Pain shot through Kevin's skull as his antlers cracked against the roof on the way down. He could tell he was lying on top of the psycho, but his attacker barely flinched. Their arm remained tight around his neck, and his belly continued to swell out of control. Fighting through the pain in his head and neck, Kevin thrashed about, certain the psycho's hold would weaken eventually. One slip-up was all he needed to escape and turn the tables on the psycho. It'd happen any second now. Any second!

Unwavering conviction had no effect on the stranger. Kevin couldn't will them into being weaker any more than he could will his belly to stop ballooning. The tightness around Kevin's waist lessened as the button of his pants burst off,

flying into the night. His hips and chest puffed up until his entire middle was big and round, his hard-earned physique hidden by creaking curves. Struggling suddenly became more difficult, and Kevin was horrified to realize why; his arms and legs were growing stiff as they swelled.

The blimping elk wobbled from side to side. Every second brought him closer to becoming a helpless, fragile ball. His eyes jutted wide open, and he breathed like he'd just run a marathon in record time. No matter how fiercely and persistently and frantically Kevin fought, he made no headway against the stranger. They outclassed him in every way.

Doubt and fear flooded Kevin's mind. Nothing made sense. He'd planned out the perfect ambush, one that put him in the least amount of danger while giving him an opportunity to save the day and put an end to the psychopath. He shouldn't have a hose down his throat. He shouldn't be swelling like a balloon. He shouldn't be creaking under immense pressure!

The idealized, invincible aura of competence Kevin had built for himself evaporated as his massive body tore his wet clothes to soggy shreds. His limbs sunk into his body, and then so did his hooves. The lower points of his antlers dug into the taut curve of his hide, creating permanent spikes of pressure. Antlers turned into a liability at a certain size, and Kevin feared his might do him in.

The psychopath reached and yanked the hose from Kevin's mouth. Kevin instinctively tried to shout for help, but he only managed a raspy cry that barely reached his own ears. Raindrops bounced off his massive, spherical body, reverberating through his hollow middle. An encroaching pressure daze blurred Kevin's vision and thoughts. He sort of made out the stranger looming over him, dressed all in black with the skull painted on their mask. He whined.

"No one defiles my lake."

Thump!

Kevin felt the firm kick for a split second before the pressure that came with it scrambled his head. The swollen elk launched off the roof in a low arc, spinning through the air. He briefly pulled his thoughts together mere moments before slamming into the ground.

Thunk!

The horrendous wave of pressure made him bugle in distress.

Thunk!

Thunk!

Thunk!

He bounced three more times on the wet grass, and was convinced he'd explode each time. But despite the terrible tingling of his hide and the deafening creaks, the elk held together.

“Shit!” Dante’s shout brought Kevin relief. His friend would roll him out of there. They’d find a place to deflate him, then run away. He no longer cared about being the hero. He just wanted to live.

“Help,” Kevin groaned pitifully. The pressure washed over him in waves. He could see Dante in the corner of his eye. And he could see the roof of the archery range, where the psychopath stood, bow in hand. “Help!” Kevin bleated with greater urgency, begging Dante to notice the danger. But he was too late.

The arrow raced from the bow towards a target impossible to miss. Hitting the giant balloon elk was as easy as hitting the broad side of a barn. Kevin felt the impact of the arrow on his side and the needling pressure that pierced him. It was the last thing he felt.