

## **The Ample Lake Burster: Chapter 020**

By: Indigo Rho

A hazy cloud of cigarette smoke swirled within Sheriff Sutton's police truck, blown around by the air conditioner. The round elephant only lowered the windows to flick away ashes; he didn't need the damn rain getting in.

Shit weather aside, the day had been terrible from start to finish. Roscoe was still spouting off his conspiratory nonsense to any idiot who'd listen, acting like Ample Lake was full of ghosts, demons, and serial killers. Sutton was convinced the ferret was luring in the crazies from all over the state who kept invading their community and fouling the place up. The fucker might even have called in the false report about a crashed car that'd forced him to waste an hour driving up and down the road in the middle of the storm. One day he'd find a charge to stick the slimy fuck with.

About the only good thing that'd happened all day was catching the truck of college kids speeding past Crystal Creek. Watching the scrawny leopard behind the wheel cower in silence was damn near divine.

A glow above the tree line caught Sutton's attention. There was an explosion not even a second later, a brief fireball flashing in the stormy night.

"What in God's name was that?" Sutton's eyes darted between the sky and the empty road. All he could think of further ahead in that direction was Camp Ample Lake. Hadn't the college kids mentioned something about renting it out?

"Fuckers," he growled around his cigarette. He'd warned the kids not to cause a ruckus at the Camp, that Ample Lake wasn't some playground for them to trash as they saw fit. And what did they do the second they thought no one was looking? Set off fucking fireworks! If they thought the bad weather would cover them, they had another thing coming.

Sutton lowered his window a crack and tossed his cigarette out, letting it tumble on the asphalt behind him. The sheriff turned his lights on but kept the siren off. He didn't want to tip off the college kids and give them time to stash the fireworks they hadn't set off yet.

The truck rumbled as Sutton stepped on the gas. He was ready to throw the whole damn book at the college kids. Shooting off fireworks without a permit was just the beginning. He'd check for expired car tabs, missing litter bags in the cars, proper insurance documentation—everything. They'd screwed themselves by not heeding his warnings and disrespecting his authority. Maybe being buried under fines would teach them.

And even if it didn't, the proceeds were bound to fund a fancy new coffee machine to replace the aging piece of shit he'd put up with for years.

The gates to Camp Ample Lake were wide open for Sheriff Sutton. He barely slowed as he turned onto the rough road. Mud splashed, and branches snapped in the wake of his truck. He flipped on the high beams as he exited the woods and Camp Ample Lake came into view, hoping to scare the shit out of the kids. But his lights didn't fall on anyone freezing in place or scurrying away. The whole place was unusually dark, with no lights shining from the lodge, mess hall, or distant cabins. If not for the two parked trucks, Sutton might have worried he'd rode up to the wrong place.

Sutton drove off the road and across the clearing, parking between the mess hall and the lodge. The elephant didn't want to spend any more time in the rain than he had to. Despite the effort, he still ended up soaked on the short trip between his truck and the lodge's porch.

He bunched the end of his trunk up and pounded twice on the lodge door. "This is Sheriff Sutton!" Sutton belted off loud and clear, ensuring anyone around the camp would hear him. He pounded twice more before trying the door. Locked. The small window in the front door gave him a limited view of the interior. No lights inside were on, though he spotted a pitiful fire dying in the fireplace. Some sort of trash covered the floor. Maybe the packaging from the fireworks.

"Wonder if those little shits thought they could turn out all the lights and convince me no one was home," Sutton grumbled, angling the beam of his flashlight around. He guessed that if anyone *was* inside, they were on the second floor, acting like they hadn't seen the flashing lights of the police or heard the banging on the door downstairs. Literal, god damned children.

*Don't act all eager to find them,* Sutton told himself. The fuckers were supposed to come to him so they could act all confused and humble about what had brought him out there. They'd play up their ignorance, for sure, just spewing apologies and swearing they didn't know detonating a firework that big would get them into trouble. That was how outsiders typically worked—break the rules, then hide behind a few sweet words in the hopes someone would look the other way.

That crap only worked on fools without a spine, like Deputy Marsh.

No, any shallow smiles sent Sheriff Sutton's way would be returned with scowls and citations. The damn college kids would be too afraid to jaywalk once he was through with them.

Sutton waddled along the covered porch, occasionally shining his flashlight in the distance in case the kids tried running between buildings. Hide and seek would only piss him off more and make their lives worse in the end. One of them was bound to crack and turn themselves in. He bet it'd be the leopard. The earlier ticket had to weigh down on the spotted brat's mind as much as his wallet. He'd undoubtedly betray his buddies for a chance at leniency, for

all the good that'd do him. The cat would get written up like all the others, *and* Sutton would make an example of him. A firm pumping up would do. He'd turn the brat into a big, creaking balloon for the trouble he'd caused, then leave him wobbling for his buddies to curse at and eventually deflate.

High off the rush of his anticipated power trip, Sutton almost missed the debris littering the backside of the porch. His flashlight landed on furry scraps of white and orange scattered all over the place. A short gust of wind blew them across the porch, sending a few into the rainy darkness.

"What the hell's going on here?" Sheriff Sutton knew hide scraps when he saw them. He vaguely remembered a blubbery fox and a large arctic wolf in the truck with the leopard. The scraps didn't necessarily belong to them, but he kept the coincidence in mind.

A hot tub partially filled with white goop grumbled on the porch. The back window of the lodge looked like someone had taken a sledgehammer to all four sides, cracking the frame and shattering the glass. So the college kids weren't just setting off fireworks; they were vandalizing the place as well. Probably drunk as fuck or high as a kite, not giving a single shit about how they left the place. And at least one had gotten himself popped.

The idea of getting saddled with yet another bursting investigation got Sheriff Sutton fuming. "Every one of these shits is spending the night in a cell."

Sutton didn't see what hit him. There was only a sudden flash of pain in the back of his head before the big elephant collapsed on the porch. He tried to pull himself up as his head spun like a ship rocking at sea. A fresh spike of pain erupting from his ribs grounded him again.

Bootsteps pounded in his head like a jackhammer, causing him to wince to the tune. Something wet and rubbery grabbed his trunk before forcing a tube down it. He felt the zip ties clamp around his trunk, one after the other, forcing him to breathe through his mouth.

Then came the chill. It surged down Sheriff Sutton's trunk and throat, ending in his stomach. Once the shock subsided, he realized it was liquid—a *lot* of liquid. The fallen elephant's fat belly ballooned against the porch, rapidly filling out his strained uniform.

Confusion and fury bounced around Sutton's mind as he tried to understand what had happened to him. There was no way in hell a bunch of chicken-shit college kids would have the audacity to assault him, regardless of how many tickets he doled out, but he hadn't cracked his own skull and shoved a hose up his trunk. Whatever the reason for their lunacy, he was going to make them pay.

Sheriff Sutton's body wobbled as he tried to force aside the pain and dizziness and stand up. The growing bulk of his water-logged belly blew out the

buttons of his uniform. Ounce by ounce, the weight added up, greatly increasing the difficulty of his challenge before he'd even begun. He raced against his own swelling middle, sloshing and moaning as he dragged himself to his feet. He managed to stand on quaking legs, one hoof propping up his water tank of a gut.

Standing didn't solve the Sheriff's greatest problem, though; he was still inflating out of control. He grabbed the garden hose shoved up his trunk and tugged hard, but it was wedged tight. The mass of overlapping zip ties bound around the end of his trunk refused to budge, either. Nervous but undeterred, he simply bent the hose to bring the flow of water to a crawl as he considered a long-term solution.

"I don't know what kind of crap you're trying to pull, fucker, but assaulting an officer's going to get you locked away for a long time!" Sheriff Sutton shouted into the night. His attacker was nowhere in sight, though the darkness offered plenty of hiding places. His flashlight lay out of reach, uselessly shining its beam on the wall of the lodge. The sloshing elephant didn't doubt he could bend down and grab it; the real issue was getting back up again.

A small rock whizzed out of the dark and struck Sutton in the back of the head. He released his grip on the hose to hold his head, allowing water to surge into his stomach again. By the time he bent the hose again, his waistline had swelled a few more inches. Another rock hit Sutton, who loosened his grip from the pain.

Somewhere nearby, the Sheriff heard guttural cackling.

"You won't be laughing when you're in a cell!" Sutton raged. Despite keeping the hose bent, he could still feel water filling his belly. Every passing second made him a little bit rounder, a little bit heavier. Unless he pulled out the hose or turned off the faucet, the water wouldn't stop. Even an elephant's hide had limits, which didn't equal a fraction of the local water supply.

Popping entered Sheriff Sutton's thoughts for a single moment, but that moment was enough to send a wave of fear throughout his entire ballooning body. He knew he had plenty of room to grow left—he hadn't begun creaking, after all. Still, he wasn't *supposed* to inflate. Inflating was for humiliated fools, like Deputy Marsh or whichever college kid had left the scraps on the porch. Inflating led to bursting, and there was no way in hell he was going to end up blowing apart like a damn pinata.

All Sutton had to do was follow the hose, and he'd be safe. If the fool attacking him got in his way, then he'd just have to show them what a trampling elephant was capable of.

Sutton stormed forward, doing his best to eye the outline of the hose in the dark. Slippery goop and scraps made traversing the porch treacherous. He

skidded every other step, his bloated belly swaying along with him. As long as he maintained his balance, he'd be fine.

It wasn't the precarious surface of the slick porch that doomed Sheriff Sutton, though it certainly served as a fine distraction. He'd been so certain the attacker would be by the faucet he didn't consider they'd instead be behind him.

A boot stepped firmly on the loop of hose trailing behind Sutton. The elephant's body tried continuing forward, but his trunk and head snapped back, sending him spiraling to the porch with a heavy thud. Sutton cried out in pain, struggling with brand new aches and bruises as his belly blimped with water.

The elephant's swelling middle snapped the buckle and button of his pants. What remained of his doughy outline smoothed into a more comical ball as his hips expanded in every direction along with his gut and sides. Sutton rocked weakly on his back but couldn't overcome the tide within him. Reaching blindly for the hose, he realized in horror that he could barely bend his arms. He'd already inflated too much.

"Turn off the damn water!" Sheriff Sutton commanded with all the authority he could muster. "Attempting to pop someone is a major crime!" He clung to the word "attempting" out of stubborn optimism.

The cackling returned, louder than before. Sutton swore he heard a hint of familiarity in the gravelly voice but couldn't quite pinpoint it in his panicked state.

Sutton's limbs stiffened and swelled. His desperate struggles shifted to wobbles, which got him no closer to escaping the hose. Patches of stretched hide creaked, warning him in vain of weak spots. The first leaks would spring there, inevitably.

"Stop this! Stop this right now!" Despite Sheriff Sutton's efforts, his order came out more like a plea. He couldn't help it.

Creaks and sloshes filled Sutton's ears as he swelled into a spherical water balloon. He no longer had any way of fighting back or slowing the flow of water into his rounder and rounder middle. Only his attacker could save him now.

"Deflate me, and you're free to go! I don't care who y'all popped or why, just leave me out of it!" Sheriff Sutton begged, willing to do anything to escape an explosive fate. "I'll help you hide the scraps! I can make it look like an accident! I'm worth more to you intact, please!"

Sutton's arms and legs gradually sunk into his enormous, spherical body. It took everything he had to keep the pressure at bay as he negotiated his safety in vain.

The cackling came louder than ever before, mocking Sheriff Sutton from nearby. "Farewell, Sheriff," the stranger laughed in their own voice, doing nothing to disguise it.

A final bout of rage and humiliation washed over Sheriff Sutton as he realized the identity of his attacker, before plunging into a pressure daze he'd never escape.

The elephant's hooves and head sunk completely into his body, leaving only the tip of his trunk jutting from a dimple. A single, tremendous creak echoed from the overinflated Sheriff before he detonated like a bomb.

Water gushed from the former elephant in every direction, washing away the marshmallow goop and the scattered hide scraps of Abel and Oscar. The hot tub was refilled, steadily bubbling once the jets were unblocked.

The stranger in black, soaked thrice over by lake, rain, and elephantine water balloon, took a moment to cackle wildly in celebration. But their work wasn't over quite yet. A single balloon remained to inflate and pop. The Ample Lake Burster had a bull to hunt.