

The Ample Lake Burster: Chapter 010

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The cold water felt wonderful on the broad curve of Webb's back. The inflated rabbit gently rocked from side to side and back and forth, drifting at the mercy of the lake's current and the breeze. His long ears picked up all the sounds of nature. Water lapping against the dock's pylons. Bird calls coming from the woods surrounding the camp. Groaning wood. Faintly creaking hide. Cody's flirtatious threats to increase Oscar's pressure.

Webb wondered why he rarely took to the water as a balloon. Maybe because a fully inflated person would take up too much space in the frat house's small pool. He thought the pool was cozy, personally, but the frat's various aquatic and amphibious members held very strong opinions on its deficiencies. Though even if the pool were three times larger, he'd likely not be left to his own devices if he blimped up. Another frat brother would undoubtedly come around and use him as a beach ball. Which was fine when he wanted to bounce but not when he wanted to chill.

The pools on campus were meant for swimmers, not bloating, so he couldn't go there, either. As tempting as the river was, Webb had heard too many warnings during the summer about the dangers of blimping down it. Every year, someone got caught up in the current and popped on the rocks or debris.

Oh well. Webb would simply have to savor every moment of floating on the lake. He'd get as much in before the party as he could. Any fun after that would require Abel's assistance, both to blimp him and keep interlopers at bay. The big wolf excelled at getting others to back off with a growl. Or, more often than not, a hearty puff that left the offender bloated and wobbly.

As Webb drifted on the lake, so did the thoughts in his head. They started innocently enough, bouncing between things he'd like to do inflated and shows he wanted to catch up on at home. But the more his thoughts returned to college, the more serious the topics became. Anxiety regarding retaking a class he'd failed last year ultimately killed the pleasant vibes he'd built on the water. He didn't need such stress at the lake. Fortunately, weed would fix that. But first, he needed to deflate.

Webb tensed up and tried his hardest to pull his arms and legs close to his body, a considerable challenge while spherical. The motions squeezed the bloated rabbit, causing his head to spin from the increase in pressure. His cheeks puffed out, and a small belch escaped his lips, marginally deflating him. Online videos had taught him the trick to self-deflating; he lacked the strength and experience to put it to good use, though. Squeezing again and again vented

a pitiful amount of air, and he could barely tell he'd shrunk at all. He gave up before he exhausted himself.

Abel lazed on the nearby dock, his legs over the edge and his feet dipped in the water. If anyone could deflate Webb fast, it'd be the wolf.

"Yo, dude, mind helping me deflate?" Webb asked.

Abel leaned up on his elbows and smiled at his friend. "Deflate? But what if I need a floatie again?"

"There's always Cody," Webb suggested.

"I heard that!" the leopard snarled from somewhere out of Webb's line of sight.

"I'm holding off on riding Cody till later. It's a lot funner in private," Abel snickered. Elsewhere, Cody let out a flustered meow. "But I guess I'll let you slim down."

Abel eased himself into the water and paddled up to Webb. He pushed the swollen rabbit forward with playful punches, wildly rocking Webb towards the boat ramp. Once there, Webb was rolled ashore. Abel knew how to manhandle him in just the right way to be more fun than uncomfortable.

"I swear you get bigger every time I blow you up." Abel prodded Webb with enough force to roll the rabbit onto his back.

"Inflating repeatedly stretches out your hide and expands your capacity. Folk used to think it'd make you taller. There were, like, entire inflation saunas dedicated to that." Webb wished they still existed. He didn't believe blimping up would increase his height, but having a place to swell with others sounded nice. Just a bunch of balloons being balloons, wobbling without a worry in the world.

"You need to stop wiki-wandering while high, dude," Abel said. The wolf rolled his shoulders and grinned. "Alright, blimp, time to get squeezed."

Abel leaned against Webb, putting all his weight onto the rabbit. Webb shuddered from the sudden spike in pressure, which zoned him out for a moment. Air rushed out of his mouth in a wavering moan. The pressure eased as Abel pulled away, only to return seconds later as Abel once again used his heft to squeeze the air out of Webb.

Despite the strain of the pressure, Webb quite enjoyed the forceful method of deflation. Having his thoughts scramble and then gradually pull back together was disorienting in a fun way, like a micro high.

Little by little, Webb lost his delightfully spherical form. His arms and legs took shape again, regaining a degree of flexibility. His time as a balloon was over; he had to return to being a regular, boring person with obligations. It was always a bummer, but he couldn't do most of the things he loved while fully inflated, like playing video games or smoking pot. Happiness sometimes required sacrifices.

When he no longer resembled a ball—just a particularly rotund rabbit—Abel began pushing down on his massive belly with both paws to force air out. Webb giggled as the wolf deflated him, imagining himself as a pool toy about to be put back into storage. Anything to prolong the wonderful fantastical thoughts inflation gave him.

“Wait, I think that’s enough,” Webb said.

“You’re still bloated as hell, dude,” Abel said.

“Yeah, but I think I can stand on my own now.” Webb rolled onto his puffy, swollen middle and forced himself to his knees with a belch and a grunt. He managed to stand, but only just barely. Satisfied, he smacked his balloon belly like a drum. “Told ya! Yo, now *I’m* the rounder one.” He grasped the sides of his gut and shook it, wobbling it up and down. It didn’t have the jiggle of Abel’s doughy middle, but the result satisfied him.

Abel scoffed and smacked the side of Webb’s middle with the back of his paw. “Joke all you want, but that might be true one day. You get the munchies hella bad when you’re high, and you’re *always* high.”

“Weed does make me feed.” Webb had to keep a hearty stockpile of snacks around to sate his cravings so he wouldn’t order a ton of take-out. It worked about a third of the time. “You wanna smoke? My treat.”

Abel didn’t answer right away. Then he shrugged. “Sure.”

Webb grabbed his vape pen from where he’d left it atop his towel, and the pair alternated taking hits. After a few trade-offs, Abel turned down the pen, letting Webb smoke all he wanted.

Good vibes filled Webb with every inhale. He imagined inflating with pure positive energy, growing big and round and zen. He’d reached such an enlightened high on rare, blissful occasions he didn’t remember much of. It required good music, chill companions, and a lot of weed. Obtaining all three in the frat house was a chore.

The two friends talked of nothing significant, just the games they’d been playing and dumb things they’d heard. Two bros shooting the shit while easing into a cozy high. Webb liked conversations without stakes.

“You need me to pump you up again?” Abel asked when Webb finally pocketed his vape pen. The wolf’s tail wagged in anticipation.

Webb was tempted. Dark clouds hovered in the distance, but it’d take a while for them to blow in and ruin outdoor fun. He could probably get another hour or two of peaceful ballooning in if he wanted. But the rabbit didn’t know if he wanted to deal with trying to deflate once the rain came. If the shower caught them off-guard, he’d be soaked before anyone could pump the air out of him or roll him under cover. Drying his back off was already going to be a hassle. There’d always be tomorrow.

“I think I’m done with the water today, dude. I’m gonna dry off in the bathroom and chill. Maybe listen to music at the lodge or drop back here; not sure yet.” Webb followed his whims while high, foregoing the pain of a structured schedule. For all he knew, he’d do a loop around the camp and go swimming again anyway. Vacations were meant to be unpredictable and improvised, not organized down to the minute like his parents were obsessed with. “You’re free to join me on my wandering.”

Abel looked back at the water. “Eh, I think I want to lay in the sun while it’s still warm out. And bugging Cody and Oscar is hilarious. Try not to get wedged anywhere, bunny blimp.” He smacked the sides of Webb’s bloated belly, then headed back to the dock. “I wonder if a cat floatie feels any different from a rabbit floatie?” the wolf loudly asked. Cody—who had been sprawled atop Oscar—abruptly scrambled at the perceived threat. The cat lost his grip on his wobbling vulpine floatie and tumbled into the water, sending Oscar spinning like a paddlewheel. Abel broke into bellowing laughter at the chaos he’d caused, which prompted a string of howling curses from Cody once the leopard surfaced.

Webb chuckled at the silly spat by the dock and gathered his towel and clothes. He slid on his amethyst pendant necklace, which he’d taken off earlier to avoid snapping the chain when he inflated. He checked his pocket for his vape pen three times before making his way to the bathroom cabin. The bathroom at the lodge was surely better, but he wanted a bit of privacy while he dried off. Besides, Kevin would probably lecture him if he trailed water into the lodge or something.

The bathroom cabin pleasantly surprised Webb. There weren’t spiderwebs in every corner or dead moths in the light fixtures. Doors weren’t carved to hell and back again with names or curses. The curtains for the shower and dryer stalls weren’t tattered and stained. And the dryers were the style with a hose rather than a single, screeching vent in the wall. Obnoxious memories from past camping trips of spinning in place and hoping for the best pushed into his head, but the high pushed them right out again.

Webb ditched his trunks, grabbed the hose, and turned the dryer on with a smack. Glorious warm air poured through the hose and over the rabbit’s face. He angled the hose at his back and moved it up and down, working to dry his wet fur. A song spontaneously entered his head, so Webb swayed to the beat, wobbling his swollen middle up and down. He considered puffing himself up more with the hose once he’d dried, maybe balloon as much as possible while still retaining a degree of mobility. Waddling back to the dock like that would get a kick out of Abel and help the wolf forget about his dumb dad. And if the good vibes continued to be on Webb’s side, then Abel might fill him to the brim with a few lungfuls of air as a prank.

After wasting plenty of time blowing hot air at dry fur while playing with his balloon belly, Webb decided he was no longer wet. But as he hung up the dryer hose, an arm reached around his neck and squeezed tight.

Webb's eyes bulged and he cried out in shock, though the chokehold reduced it to a squeak. "Dude, cut it out!" he gasped, squirming frantically. He didn't understand why one of the guys would be so rough on him, especially during a stupid prank. He didn't feel a soft gut pressing against his back, which reduced the possible culprits to two. Cody was too small to grapple anyone, and Webb would've smelled Kevin's cologne from a mile away. With horror, he realized the person behind him might not be any of his friends at all, and he wasn't simply the victim of a mean prank.

"Help! Help!" Webb yelled as loud as he could, but between the pressure on his neck and the droning of the dryer, his cries didn't go beyond the bathroom's walls.

The attacker yanked the hose off its holder and shoved it into Webb's mouth. Webb gagged as he felt the hose lurch into his throat, too deep for him to spit out. When he made a grab for the hose to pull it out, the attacker smacked away his paw with a gloved hand and forced the hose in deeper.

Warm air blasted into Webb's middle, heating and swelling him up. He thrashed from side to side, elbowed, kicked, and stomped—did absolutely everything he could think of to break free of the attacker and bolt. But the stranger wouldn't budge.

Webb ballooned rounder and rounder with every squandered second. The dryer hose pumped him up far faster than Abel's breath had, blowing a constant stream of warm air into his belly. Bending his arms and legs grew harder as they bloated as well. His struggles steadily weakened into wild flails, then useless wobbles. He saw his sides swelling out and felt his whole body taking on the spherical shape he normally adored.

Never before had Webb experienced such a nightmare inflation. His attacker had yet to say a word; they'd just grabbed him and started inflating him the second he fought back. He had no clue if they only wanted to immobilize him or if they planned to keep pumping him up until he reached his limits and exploded. The very real possibility of bursting apart shook Webb to his core and unleashed a burst of adrenaline, but it was far too late. All he accomplished was a vigorous round of wobbling that got him no closer to freedom than before.

The attacker backed off, releasing Webb and sending the blimping rabbit toppling onto his back. Webb bounced twice, already well on his way to becoming a balloon. He immediately rocked back and forth in an impossible attempt to get up, not that his puffy legs could bend enough to walk. Unable to stand or remove

the hose lodged in his throat, Webb was entirely at the stranger's mercy, and his hope of remaining intact plummeted by the second.

Webb didn't give up. His heart raced, and fear soaked his every thought, but he wobbled and struggled for dear life, praying for a miracle. The attacker might be leading him on. The dryer could short out and fail. The rest of the guys could come running to his rescue and yank the hose out of him. Maybe the ghosts of Ample Lake would intervene to prevent the rabbit from being added to their number.

The rabbit's round body swelled in every direction, pulling in his wiggling arms and legs. The chain to his pendant dug into his puffy neck. He winced when it snapped off, flinging his precious amethyst across the stall. Heat radiated from his middle, reminding Webb of a sauna. He desperately wanted to leap into the lake to cool off. The oppressive warmth made him dizzy even before the building pressure muddled his thoughts. He felt lightheaded. He felt light in general.

Webb had just become a sphere when his body gently drifted off the floor. He'd been turned into a living hot air balloon. His wiggling fingers brushed the edges of the dryer stall, too weak to halt his ascent. He spun slowly as he rose, turning upside down. The curve of his bottom bumped against the ceiling. There was nowhere else for the rabbit to go; all he could do was grow.

Long, worrisome creaks echoed from the giant gray and white balloon. Webb's paws were sinking into his bloated body, growing too puffy to even wiggle. Creaks erupted all across his body when he wobbled, and the pressure spike nearly made his eyes roll into the back of his head. He felt his paws stiffen, fully buried in his taut body. He'd never inflated to that point before, and the circumstances turned the achievement into a thing of horror. His head tilted up as it sank, and at last, Webb got a good look at his attacker.

They sure as hell weren't one of the guys. He couldn't tell *what* they were. They wore a heavy black raincoat with the hood up, and pants to match. Thick black gloves covered their hands. Under the hood, their face seemed to be a dull white skull in a dark abyss. A gravelly voice rumbled from the stranger. "No one defiles my lake," they hissed.

Webb froze, too terrified to squirm. He knew with certainty that he stared at the legendary Ample Lake Burster that Roscoe had tried to warn him about back at the gas station. His first encounter with the paranormal would also be his last.

The pressure daze freed Webb from the fright of the explosive fate that awaited him. Every last one of the rabbit's thoughts was scattered, and his head sunk completely into his body, transforming him into a pure balloon. The rabbit's thinly stretched hide quaked, no longer able to hold together. There was a vast creak, then the high-pitched hiss of leaking air, followed by a deafening boom.

Webb blew apart, reduced to a shower of gray and white hide scraps in an instant. The Ample Lake Burster didn't move an inch as scraps pelted them. They let out a low, horrible laugh before walking away.

In the abandoned dryer stall, the loose hose swayed from side to side, scattering fallen scraps of Webb.