

## The Ample Lake Burster: Chapter 02

By: Indigo Rho

Hooves haphazardly drummed on the steering wheel to the beat of the rock song playing over the radio. The elk driving didn't know the song well, and he didn't care. Drumming gave him something to do with his hooves on the monotonous drive.

"Don't forget to pay more attention to the road than the music, Kevin," the red angus bull in the front passenger's seat said.

Kevin glanced sidelong at Dante, the bull. His friend and fellow frat brother was stocky, with a small paunch gained as much through cheap beer as late-night pizza deliveries. A backward baseball cap pierced by his short horns held his messy head fluff at bay. He wore a simple stainless steel nose ring that was fun to tug on.

Dante was cute, but he worried too much. "I'm fine, dude. We're in the middle of nowhere. Just trees and pavement as far as the eye can see."

"We're not the only ones out here." Dante gestured towards a car that passed them in the opposite direction.

"And I haven't crossed the divider once, have I? A little tapping doesn't weaken this grip." Kevin tensed his muscular arms and rolled his shoulders. He often felt the rest of the frat forgot how in shape he was.

"You don't have to show off to me," Dante said.

"But there's so much to show." Kevin took his hooves off the wheel and flexed.

Dante rolled his eyes at the display, but Kevin didn't miss the slight smile on the bull's face. He could win the dude over without saying a word.

A plump, bluish-black crow leaned in from the back. "How much longer till we get there?"

Kevin checked the GPS screen. "Little less than an hour."

The crow groaned and slumped back in his seat. "Ugh, I gotta pee."

"Just hold it in, Blake."

"You don't understand. I have to piss a river," Blake insisted.

The heavy polar bear next to Blake snickered. "Yeah, bro, I can hear him swelling. The poor borb's gonna pop if we don't roll him into a bathroom right away."

"I'm not messing around, Berg." Blake smacked the polar bear's ample gut with the back of his talon. Berg smacked the crow's belly right back. They exchanged playful smacks and punches, mainly focusing on each other's doughy middles.

“There’s a gas station like,” Kevin stared at the GPS, “ten minutes away, tops. I planned on stopping by there anyway to grab gas and supplies, so just hold it till then.”

“Fine,” Blake replied.

“What else do we really need?” Dante asked. “The back of the truck is packed with stuff.”

“Yeah, stuff for the party. But we’ve got Camp Ample Lake to ourselves for two days before everyone else piles in, and the guys will have my head if they get here and there’s nothing to eat or drink. This party needs to be perfect.”

Unfortunate circumstances had landed Rho Theta Rho on probation for the entirety of the spring semester. As a precaution—an overreaction, in Kevin’s opinion—the fraternity hadn’t hosted a single party since. They’d missed out on the usual Spring Break and graduation celebrations. They hadn’t even hosted a Fourth of July barbecue, one of the fraternity’s oldest traditions.

But now—a week away from the start of the fall semester—Rho Theta Rho was back. Camp Ample Lake would roar to life over the weekend with members of Rho Theta Rho and two other fraternities and sororities. The guests would return to the university with stories of the best party of the year, and the unnecessary probation would be forgotten entirely. It’d be a textbook rehabilitation.

“Would eight people *really* put that much of a dent in the supplies?” Dante raised a brow.

“Don’t forget who we’ve got with us,” Kevin pointed a thumb to the back. “Those two alone can clear out whole pantries on a whim. Oscar and Abel are even worse. And even Webb eats like someone twice his size when he gets the munchies, and we all know he’s gonna be high all the time. Cody’s about the only one I can trust not to stuff himself silly, because he’s got an absurd metabolism *and* watches what he eats.”

Kevin did Dante a favor by not mentioning how much the bull had been eating lately as well. He didn’t have anything against the guys for being gluttonous. On the contrary, his attraction to heftier folk was well-known. He’d made sure to surround himself with ample eye candy on the party preparation team.

Berg leaned in. The polar bear’s seatbelt dug into his doughy middle, which poured over the center console. “Hey, hearty appetites are normal for athletes like me and Blake. We need those calories!”

“You eat enough calories to satisfy an entire team. You’re baseball players, not sumo wrestlers!” Kevin laughed, alternating his attention between the road and the reflection of Berg’s belly in the rearview mirror. Bears carried their heft

so well, and Kevin knew Berg was destined to become a blubber ball the second he stopped playing baseball. It was something he looked forward to.

Blake nudged Berg's plush side with his elbow. "I guess Berg does resemble a sumo after he's binged on soda."

Berg fell back. "Rich coming from the dude who looks like a damn ad balloon every time he starts chugging. Remember when you lost a bet and we blimped you up with helium to advertise the frat fundraiser? I can bring up the photos on my phone if you forgot." The polar bear clapped his thick paws together.

Blake slumped in his seat and averted his gaze. "Whatever, it was for a good cause. We'd have had a lot less beer money without me."

"You drew in huge crowds, dude," Dante chuckled as he looked over his shoulder. "And you were stuck like that for two days straight because we didn't want to waste the helium and needed the extra day to raise money."

"Half the frat was betting on whether you'd float off or pop," Berg said. "I lost thirty bucks on floating off."

Blake scoffed. "Good! And you were all wrong, anyway, since I'm still here, grounded and in one piece."

"For now. Bro, you tempt fate with how often you play with helium tanks. You've got an inevitable date with the clouds. I know it." Berg grinned, showing off his fangs.

Blake crossed his arms and ruffled his feathers, unamused by the morbid prediction. "Hey, I'm not the one shoving the hose in my beak half the time. It's not my fault people love making dumb jokes about how I can finally fly. Did you know our frat loses more bird members to helium accidents than popping and dropping out combined?"

"No shit, you squawk about it whenever you're bouncing around the ceiling, borb."

"And you nervously belch out stats about hide durability every time your sloshing gut creaks a little, keg."

Berg and Blake returned to slap-fighting each other in the back of the truck, giving Kevin plenty of belly jiggling to entertain him on the drive. Pound for pound, he'd chosen the best team possible for his own morale.

Kevin had hoped to see something familiar when he arrived at the gas station his GPS had led him to. A national chain, or maybe one of the little local chains he saw now and then but never stopped at. The station was neither of those. It was an old, beige building in dire need of a wash or a new coat of paint that highlighted the grime less. A faded sign read Lake Ample Gas and Grocery.

The dilapidated shell of an old garage sulked beside the station, well on its way to being reclaimed by the forest. He wouldn't have been surprised to spot the skeleton of a truck from the fifties rusting inside.

Despite the lousy first impression, Kevin pulled in. Lake Ample didn't have much else to offer, and he wasn't about to waste money doubling back in the hope of finding something nicer.

"Maybe we should've stopped earlier," Dante muttered.

"Looks can be deceiving," Kevin said. At least, he hoped so. "And the gas here is cheap as hell."

Blake unbuckled and bolted for the gas station before the SUV came to a stop. Berg stomped after the crew at a leisurely pace, calling next dibs on the bathroom.

Kevin opened the door and tilted his head, carefully angling his antlers free of the truck. He'd need to schedule a trimming. He'd felt the tips of his antlers rattle against the ceiling every time he struck a pothole. His sneakers crunched down on crumbling asphalt as he got out. Unfortunately, the pumps matched the rest of the station, but the displays and card readers still worked. Soon, his SUV was greedily guzzling fuel like Berg and Blake at a soda fountain. The thought flustered him more than he'd expected, and he struggled to shoo visions of sloshing bellies from his head.

Dante came around and leaned against the warm side of the truck. "Do you think the camp's gonna look as, uh, rough around the edges as this place?" the bull asked. He took one look at the ceiling of the gas station canopy above and grimaced. Kevin decided against investigating. He'd gotten more than his fill of grime already.

"No way," Kevin said with utter certainty. "You saw the online photos; they all looked fantastic. The place has been renovated to hell and back again. Bro, people rent it out for weddings. No one would pay that much to get married in a dump that resembled this." He gestured at the station.

"Why did Axel insist on some of us heading up beforehand, then?"

"Because he's a perfectionist and the frat president, so we have to obey his paranoid whims. This is the same guy who has us test every folding chair we set up for events to make sure they're not a flimsy safety hazard." He was fun to do shots with but a touch neurotic. "We're just here to make sure there aren't any smashed windows or animal shit on the floors and to rearrange a few tables. It'll be a breeze."

"I hope so. The frat could really use a win right now. No one wants to join a fraternity that gets pledges popped."

Kevin scowled and clicked his teeth. "Rho Theta Rho *doesn't* get pledges popped. It's fucking unfair that an entire frat can be blamed for some dude going

beyond his limits. People make bad decisions and get themselves popped; it's on the news every damn night! That shit last year was a witch hunt, plain and simple." And he hated that anybody thought otherwise, especially a fellow frat brother.

"Dude, it sucks, but don't you think you're downplaying it? The pledge was blackout drunk and so overinflated that his paws had sunk in completely. That's a dangerous combination on its own. And on top of all that, he was being manhandled by upperclassmen who should've known better."

"They didn't pop him on purpose," Kevin snapped. Not that half of campus cared about the truth, considering the rumors that spread.

Dante raised his palms defensively. "I didn't say they did. But they were still reckless, and a pledge burst because of that. We're lucky no one faced charges afterward."

*Because Rho Theta Rho don't rat out their own*, Kevin thought. "Because even the cops knew it was a case of bad luck. It's a shame a dude popped, but the rest of the frat shouldn't have been made to suffer for an innocent mistake. The university threw the book at us for no reason. Every other popping on frat row that year was declared an unavoidable accident *except* for that one. Fucking witch hunt," he repeated.

Dante opened his mouth, and Kevin prepared to counter whatever pedantic argument the bull tried to pull on him. But then Dante closed his mouth again, nodded, and stared at the deep cracks in the asphalt. "I wonder when the rain's supposed to start tonight?"

Once Kevin finished filling up his tank, he got back in the truck and parked it. He didn't expect much from the station's minimart. The ice box out front was as grimy as the rest of the building and sat silent. He preferred not to know what inhabited the box. None of the neon signs on the windows were lit. Cigarette and lottery advertisements plastered the front door, faded and scraped and outdated.

The interior of the gas station was refreshingly average, albeit cluttered. There were the usual short aisles crammed with snacks and basic groceries, beer coolers along the back walls, and a cheap coffee maker squeezed between an energy drink fridge and an empty slushie machine. Camping supplies dominated a side of the store, along with shirts and hats promoting Ample Lake.

A lean, scruffy ferret stood behind the counter, pecking away at his phone. He glanced up briefly when the front door jingled to announce the new arrivals, then went back to his phone.

A faint odor permeated the inside, and Kevin made a habit of avoiding eye contact with the floors and ceilings after spotting the first few questionable stains. Still, at least he felt confident none of them would get food poisoning there if they avoided anything not in a sealed container.

The touristy crap lured in Dante, and Kevin followed. None of it looked any better up close. The shirts only came in plain colors or camo with the name of the lake on them. No slogans or designs, just “Ample Lake” in bold font.

Kevin spun a postcard rack, paying no attention to the contents. “I wonder if any of this shit ever sells,” the elk snorted.

“They wouldn’t keep it here if it didn’t,” Dante said. “My mom loves grabbing postcards or hats when we go anywhere on vacation. Little things to remember the place by.”

“Well, when the weekend’s over, I plan on remembering the party, not the lake.” Kevin’s gaze drifted to a small rack of books and maps. “Get a look at this, Dante. *Ghosts of Columbia State. Mysteries of the Cascades. A Haunted History of Ample Lake. The Curse of the Ample Lake Burster.* God, one of the maps is a fucking ghost hunter’s guide to the county. Who believes in this shit?”

“Webb, I think.”

“I should’ve guessed. Dude also believes in tarot cards and psychic readings. Let’s keep him from this side of the store if he comes in. I don’t want to listen to him tell stoned ghost stories all night. He already rambles too much when he gets high.”

“Yeah,” Dante sighed in reluctant agreement.

Bored of the odds and ends the station had to offer, Kevin reunited with the rest of his group. Blake had survived the bathroom and prowled the coolers with Berg.

“Dare you to get the frozen burritos,” Berg told Blake.

“How is that a dare?”

“Because they’re gas station burritos. Those are the things nightmare reviews are made of.”

“They’re just name-brand burritos being sold in a gas station. I buy the same ones at the mart near the frat all the time.”

“But these are sold *here*, not there.”

“That doesn’t make them different.”

“Trust me, it does.”

“Wanna bet? I’ll eat five and be fine.”

“I’ll make sure they write ‘braaaaaaaaap’ on your tombstone, bro.”

Kevin droned out Berg and Blake’s ridiculous argument and took a good, long look at their curves instead to remind himself why he put up with the pair. He swore Berg’s rump had grown rounder lately. “Have you two figured out what you’re getting yet?”

Berg raised a paw and listed things off on his fingers. “Uh, soda, soda, and more soda. I’m not gonna spend the next two days staring at drinks I can’t have because *someone* believes I might wipe out our supplies.” He glared at Kevin.

“I *know* you’ll wipe out the supplies if I’m not careful, tubbo.” Kevin slapped Berg’s belly, holding back a shudder as he watched the doughy ball bounce on impact. “I’m sure you can survive without guzzling a whole keg of soda every hour.”

“Fuck, dude, I *wish* I could buy soda by the keg.”

“You’d explode if you could,” Blake snickered.

“You’re not much better,” Kevin told the crowd. “Didn’t the movie theater fire you for draining the soda dispenser at the end of a shift? And then you had to be rolled out and loaded onto the back of a truck.” He kept photos from that night tucked away in a very private folder on his phone, along with other photos of his frat brothers overindulging.

“We were supposed to dump the soda anyway. It wasn’t that big of a deal,” Blake sheepishly mumbled.

Kevin loved how easy some of his frat brothers were to fluster. “Sure. Grab as much soda and food as you want, but don’t forget you’ll have to carry it all on your laps for the rest of the drive.”

Berg’s jaw dropped, as if Kevin had just told him he’d never get to drink soda again. “What? Why?”

“There’s no room in the back of the truck. You helped load the damn thing, how did you forget?” They’d needed the polar bear’s strength to lift the packed coolers.

“There’s still space at the top.”

“Yeah, if we want to crush all the snacks and cups.”

“Maybe the other guys will have room for it.”

“You’re free to ask them when they get here, but I doubt it. We packed the backs of both trucks tight.”

Dante finally spoke up. “I wonder what’s taking them so long to get here? Didn’t they leave just a few minutes after us?”

Kevin shrugged. “Hell if I know. They’d better not be fucking around, though.” He didn’t want to linger at the gas station any longer than he had to. He’d be pissed if the smell followed him to the camp.