

The Ample Lake Burster: Chapter 08

By: Indigo Rho

“This is the Baysox year, guaranteed!” Berg hollered and tugged at his backward baseball cap. The hefty polar bear’s enthusiasm shook the sofa, and he liked to think it’d shaken the walls as well. “Our draft picks were phenomenal, we’ve made some exceptional trades, and we’ve been calling up all the right people from the minors. Sure, the outfield could use a bit more work, but we’ve got good pitchers to make up for it.”

And most importantly of all, Berg desperately wanted to see the Baysox in the World Series. Fanatical belief had to be worth *something*. His beloved team hadn’t made an appearance at the World Series since before his birth. But this year they’d go all the way, and he’d see at least one game in person no matter what, even if the seats were shit and he had to stay in a cheap motel while visiting.

Blake nodded in the seat next to him. “The Baysox have played well this year, I’ll give you that. *But*, the Barons have a winning record against them this year, and we’ve got our best pitcher in the starting rotation today. I don’t think the Baysox are gonna be able to stand up to that kind of pressure.” The crowd rested his case.

The Barons’ win record against the Baysox meant nothing to Berg. They’d had a few bad games early in the season, so what? The Baysox had only gotten better, and they were gonna prove it to the Barons and Blake tonight.

“Our batters have your pitcher’s number,” Berg insisted. The hosts of his favorite baseball podcast had said that, and he had every reason to believe it.

“Even if your batters know how a pitcher throws, they still have to hit the balls coming their way,” Blake insisted.

The pair traded back and forth, each coming up with some new reason for why their favorite team was going to win. It was the same conversation they had every time the Baysox played the Barons, tweaked a little here and there to suit the starting line-ups or current injury list. It had become an important pre-game ritual for Berg and Blake.

Kevin and Dante sat nearby, staying clear of the argument. Berg knew they both watched baseball and had opinions about baseball, but their interest rarely extended beyond their cursed hometown team. Which was a shame because Berg was confident Kevin would back him up if he didn’t wimp out and stay neutral.

“Bro, if you’re that delusional about the Barons’ chances tonight, then why don’t we make a bet? Put your money where your mouth is,” Berg suggested.

“I’m not wasting money on a game, even one I already know the outcome of,” Blake said.

“We don’t have to bet money. I wasn’t being literal,” the polar bear lied. Thankfully, it barely took a second for him to think of something far better than money to bet with. “How about we chug a two-liter of soda every time one of our batters strikes out *and* every time a run gets scored on us? Whoever’s up against the better pitcher will end up a sloshy blimp.”

“Deal!” Blake said without hesitation, just as Berg knew he would. The crowd enjoyed inflating too much to turn down a bet that’d puff him up at least a little. Though Berg expected him to be creaking by the end.

Kevin cleared his throat like a stern dad. “Do I have to remind you two again that you’re not allowed to guzzle the party’s supply of soda?”

“Calm down, bro. Blake and I loaded up on soda at the creepy gas station. *And* we packed a private stash since it was obvious you’d have a stick up your ass about it.” Berg was exceptionally proud of swiping a handful of soda bottles from the party supplies back at the frat house while they were unguarded. “Besides, it’s not like it’ll be a huge deal if we dip into the soda stockpile. Beer’s always more popular at our parties. That’s why we end up with so much excess the day after.”

“The extra soda’s the best part of clean-up. There’s no room in the fridge for it, but plenty of room in my stomach,” Blake said with a wide grin.

“Yeah, and you always find a way to blimp up till you’re too big to actually help clean up.” Berg smacked Blake’s belly.

“Only because you keep shaking me up after I drink! I can still help when I’m sloshing, but not when I’m creaking.”

“With all the soda you’ll be chugging during this game, you better be ready for a victory shake, bro.” Berg already imagined his friend ballooning nearly spherical once the Barons lost. He was going to take so many selfies in front of him. “No promises I’ll bother deflating you after, either. A wobbling, bloated borb will really liven the place up.”

“You won’t be able to do any shaking with your belly weighed down by all that soda. Then a few solid smacks to your gut is all it’ll take to turn you into a belching snowball,” Blake countered, slapping Berg’s belly for good measure.

Kevin groaned loudly. “Guys, you can bloat all you damn want, but don’t wreck the place while you’re doing it. You bump it over and break it, you pay for it.”

Berg liked Kevin—and not only because the dude had a great set of antlers, rumors be damned—but he became a buzzkill whenever he was given an ounce of responsibility. Berg wondered if a blimping would chill the elk out. Probably

not, but he'd enjoy teasing his friend. Any revenge blimpings that occurred after might even be worth it.

"We're not gonna break anything," Berg shrugged off Kevin's concerns as he got off the couch. "C'mon, Blake, let's grab the soda before the game starts." Blake nodded and followed him.

In the kitchen, the fridge was half-filled with two-liter bottles of soda, a horde of bubbly goodness ripe for the taking. More bottles were hidden in the cupboards.

"Do you think Kevin will notice how much soda we liberated from the coolers before loading them into the trucks?" Blake snickered.

"No way. Dude's all about delegation and big speeches, not micromanaging. Even if he does have a list of the supplies, he won't bother going through it to see if anything's missing. And Axel will be too busy having a panic attack about the party once he arrives to check, either."

The rest of the fraternity underestimated Berg. Like a runner stealing a base behind the pitcher's back, the higher-ups wouldn't realize any soda was missing until it was too late, and Berg's belly was sloshing.

"What if he delegates it to someone else?"

Berg scoffed. "Who can Kevin trust with a task that tedious? He'd never let you, Abel, Oscar, or me do it because he already suspects we might take a bite here and there. Cody would throw a fit and just lie about everything being fine. Webb would get high, take forever, and fumble the numbers. And he won't make Dante do it because Dante's his weird kind of rebound relationship but not really, or whatever." Whenever one of Kevin's relationships fell apart, he'd start clinging to Dante. As far as Berg could tell, the two never actually fucked during the brief periods Kevin was single. Kevin just inflated Dante a lot. If that's what made them happy, then all the power to them.

"In that case, why don't we celebrate our bounty with some pregaming?" Blake grabbed a tropical lime soda from the fridge and tapped it with a talon.

"Fuck yeah, bro!" Berg took a cherry cola for himself and spun the lid right off. He waited for Blake to do the same and then started a countdown. "Three...two...one...chug!"

Berg raised the bottle over his open mouth and gently squeezed to increase the flow of soda. He gulped steadily, even as fizzy bubbles crackled and popped on his tongue. The polar bear was an absolute soda fiend, who'd once gone on a cola factory tour and had to be rolled out after going overboard during the sampling section. He and Blake had worn matching soda can costumes last Halloween, which they'd unfortunately ballooned out of before the end of the night. He could drain a two-liter of soda in one gulp the same way most frat boys could throw back a shot of liquor.

Once the final drops had danced off of Berg's tongue, the polar bear tossed the empty bottle aside. Blake finished at nearly the exact same second as him. They bumped bellies hard, causing the soda within their stomachs to swirl and fizzle. Their middles puffed up some from the carbonation, and they belched in unison.

As much as Berg loved soda, he barely expected to drink a drop during the game. He wanted to watch bottle after bottle vanish down Blake's gullet until the crow sloshed like a bottle himself. Then he'd shake him until he fizzed and creaked, turning him into a feathery, belchy ball. Blake wouldn't be able to deny the dominance of the Baysox after that, if only because he wouldn't be able to get a word in between burps.

They retrieved the plastic bags they'd abandoned on the counter and lugged four bottles of soda each to the main room of the lodge. They'd grab the rest between innings when needed. Berg eagerly anticipated how much Blake would swell just from waddling to the kitchen and back with all the soda he'd have to chug. He might very well be too bloated to move before the game even ended.

The baseball game began with Berg's Baysox up to bat first, ready to prove the Barons' star pitcher was nothing but smoke and mirrors. And sure enough, the first batter scored a stunning inside-the-park home run that had Berg on his feet, hooting and hollering. "That's how it's done!" After a short, belly-jiggling dance, the polar bear pointed at Blake. "Alright, bro, time to chug."

"Sure," Blake said, taking his friend's taunting in stride. He picked up a bottle, wedged it in his beak, and tilted his head, guzzling it down hands-free. The soda swiftly poured into his stomach. His beak crunched at the bottle a few times to squeeze every last drop out before he removed it and set it down. The crow thumped his chest and burped.

"Feel free to borrow some of my bottles instead of waddling back to the kitchen for more. It's not like I'll need them for a while," Berg teased.

"It's just the first at-bat. You might have to chug three of those bottles before we even reach the bottom of the inning," Blake reminded him.

"Blah, blah, blah." Berg mimicked a talking mouth with his paw. "Ain't happening, bro."

But the second player up to bat for the Baysox couldn't match the stellar performance of his predecessor. His bat hit nothing but air as he struck out.

"Time to chug, *bro*," Blake snickered.

Berg rolled his eyes. "Whatever." He guzzled his first two-liter of the game and waited for the next batter to regain the team's momentum. He was rewarded with another immaculate strikeout courtesy of the Barons' star pitcher.

“What the hell?” Berg grumbled. He didn’t wait for Blake to order him to chug; he just grabbed a bottle and drained it as fast as he could.

The fourth batter managed to hit a pop-up that was easily caught for out number three. Berg wasn’t happy, but at least he didn’t have to chug a third bottle in a row. The first two—along with the one he’d drunk in the kitchen beforehand—made him slosh audibly. He did his best not to think about his own gut swelling with soda, imagining a perfectly spherical Blake in his head instead.

Just think round borb thoughts. Just think round borb thoughts, Berg repeated silently. “You’re gonna chug all three of those bottles before the inning’s over, bro,” he said to psych himself up.

The Baysox held the Barons back during the bottom of the first inning, but only thanks to their outfield picking up the slack rather than their pitcher. All three outs came from catches and tag-outs, not strikeouts, sparing Blake from drinking.

“If things continue like this, I’m gonna be parched, and you’re gonna be creaking.” Blake poked the side of Berg’s belly and got the polar bear grumbling.

“Whatever, bro, it’s just the first inning. The Baysox are gonna come out on top, and I’m gonna have a belching ball of feathers to bat around the place.” Berg vowed to squeeze Blake into a pressure daze if he kept gloating. The crowd wouldn’t remember half the night if he had his way.

“No bouncing any blimps around indoors,” Kevin warned.

“It was a figure of speech, bro!” Berg growled.

The next three innings were more of the same, much to Berg’s frustration. His team swung at damn near everything and misjudged pitches like never before. The majority of their hits were foul balls and grounders that got them on base but never to home. They struck out in droves, forcing Berg to drain bottle after bottle of soda. And while the Baysox dutifully prevented the Barons from scoring any runs, their pitcher barely struck anyone out.

A clean hit into right field by the Barons tied the game up to end the inning.

Berg threw his latest empty bottle at the ground and burped. His belly had swollen with soda and carbonated gas, growing into a round ball. His jersey stretched tight over his middle; a small strip of white fur peeked out. Just shifting in his seat was enough to get this stomach fizzing and puffing, so he’d learned to hold back both his celebrations and his curses.

Meanwhile, Blake’s belly merely looked a bit rounder than usual. With how little soda he’d guzzled, he barely belched at all, despite the fact no one in the fraternity burped louder or more than the crowd.

Blake eyed Berg’s bloated gut with approval. “You’re gonna start popping buttons if the Baysox don’t start pitching better,” he said.

Berg took a deep breath and reminded himself that angry comebacks would only upset the soda in his stomach and make him larger. "It's just a rough patch. The game tying up will put a fire under their ass and get them throwing better. Just wait and see, bro. And what matters most is that we win, not *how* we win." Though being too round to move would sour any victory. He wouldn't be able to rub the win in if Blake could casually roll him over and leave him wobbling helplessly.

"Or the Barons are gonna keep up their momentum and win," Blake suggested.

"One run isn't momentum," Berg huffed. It certainly hadn't been for the Baysox that game. "You had to have a runner on third to pull it off, and it's a miracle when you make it to second."

Kevin stirred. "I wonder how many empty calories Berg is chugging over there?" the elk asked Dante loud enough for the rest to hear. "And all because of a silly bet over which team has better pitchers."

Berg tried to scoff at his friend's comment, but he burped instead. "Bro, it's not like I'm stuffing my face with donuts." Though now the polar bear craved them. "And a cheat day won't hurt me. I'll be burning a ton of calories tomorrow to counter it."

"Moving a few tables isn't exactly an intense workout, especially when you've got help," Kevin said. "I still don't understand how you two haven't been benched for being too fat."

As if you wouldn't cream your pants if the whole team were as large as me. Berg narrowly resisted snapping back at Kevin. He had a feeling the elk was simply bored, and Kevin got snarky when bored.

"I still don't understand how you keep forgetting that polar bears are naturally bulky. I'm average weight for my species." Not according to Berg's last doctor's visit, but Kevin didn't need to know that. Being called overweight by an elephant stung, even if the only recommendation had been to watch his cholesterol. "Which is why I make a great pitcher, since pitchers don't need to be the leanest players on the team. One of the pitchers on your team is an *elephant*, for Christ's sake."

"Mercado's kind of lean for an elephant, though," Dante said. "He looks thinner than you."

"Whatever, bro. Baseball players don't have to be scrawny, so I'm not starving myself."

"Then what's Blake's excuse? Crows aren't known for being round like polar bears or elephants." Kevin continued the needling.

“Have you seen the crows on campus?” Blake asked. “Most of them are heavyweights who make me feel light as a feather. And catchers can be on the larger side as well, so Coach doesn’t mind me being a bit doughy.”

“If you say so,” Kevin laughed. “But if you keep blimping up on soda and booze for the hell of it, then you might find yourselves ballooning in more ways than one. I’d hate to see either of you lose your spots on the team because you got too big and blubbery.”

“Bro, we’re fine.” Though Coach *had* sent Berg and Blake a lengthy list of dietary suggestions for the off-season. “I’ll send you pics of the league’s heftiest players so you don’t worry your antlers right off. Once you see how they strain the buttons on their jerseys, you’ll understand why Blake and I are set.”

Berg saw the elk’s subtle attempt to adjust his pants. All it took was the implication of bellies to get a rise out of Kevin, even when he was allegedly offering heartfelt advice. God, the dude was so easy at times. And with luck, he’d be too busy fantasizing about fat baseball players to nag him for the rest of the game.

Kevin crossed his arms in an awkward position over his lap that was blatantly meant to cover an erection. “I’m good,” he said.

Berg smiled big and wide, grateful for a victory after how the bet had been going. It boosted his morale going into the next inning. He turned to Blake and smirked. “I feel my luck turning around, so get ready to blimp, bro.” He smacked the crow’s belly, causing Blake to bloat and burp.

Berg braced himself for the retaliatory smack, which shook his belly with a *thunk*. He puffed out some and had to stifle a belch, but he didn’t care. Tonight was the Baysox night, which meant it was his night. Nothing could tear him down.