

Short Stories

David Shane Burton

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Introduction

I've collected my short stories within this volume, up to the date in the file's title. This version is from November 1, 2009. The two new short stories for this update have their titles done in **blue font**. I've added one short and one long short story from assignments in my writing group. I have two more I'll be adding in the future.

Some of my short stories may be prefaced by a short commentary, which I'll place in parentheses and in italics. Some of these stories were developed for writing groups, some as a serial on a forum, and at least one is related directly to my *Orianus Creation Series* and two are related to my upcoming *Orianus Legends* series.

Though the numbers are not printed on the page, you can easily see them in the Adobe Reader, which this pdf is designed to be read with. My new website: www.dshaneburton.com/ will have the latest version of this file. It also has news about what I'm working on. Anyway, I hope you enjoy these stories.

Sincerely,
D. Shane Burton

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An English Fable

His name was Eustachius Bellerophon Magangues, and he was dotty.

Her maiden name was Regina Beauregard Melliferous, and she made him dotty.

When Eustachius called her “honey,” he was being redundant, until she married him and took his last name, that is.

When she expected him to be humble, he couldn't be, as pride was his middle name.

Their lives were an intertwined web of utter foolishness, which their friends and neighbors were at a loss to explain.

It was A.D. 1719, and the married couple owned a large home and property in Suffolk County, England. Eustachius had been left a fortune by his late father, who'd been an admiral in the British navy and an investor with royal connections. Eustachius had little to do but traipse about the countryside and flit from one expensive hobby to another. Regina did the same. They were incorrigible.

“Regina, dear, come take a look at this!” The excitement on Eustachius' face threatened to split it.

Feigning interest after being pulled away from her collection of rare, pieces of eight, she simply stared at the book he held. She sat in a chair before a grand desk, so she looked up at him and asked, “What is it?”

“Why, a book, my dear, but not any book! What I hold in my hand is fictitious!”

“That doesn't look like a book of ancient fables to me; that book looks new.”

“Oh, but it is, my sweet. It's said to be the first English fable, or fiction. It's written by a chap named Daniel DeFoe.”

“DeFoe? Is he an enemy?”

Eustachius stared in confusion at Regina for several long moments as she held a straight face. The bad joke then dawned on him and he burst out laughing. Regina's mirthful laugh soon followed.

“Oh, good show! A sly jest that was, my love.”

“Yes. Yes, it was.”

They laughed some more, as they had nothing better to do.

Finally, after their mirth had died down, Regina said, “Englishmen don't waste their time on fables, Eustachius.”

“It appears they do now, my dear.”

“Oh, let me see it, then,” Regina said, as she held out her hand.

Eustachius handed it to her, and then Regina flipped to the contents page and perused it.

“My husband, from what I gather, this is a tale about a man, shipwrecked.”

“Yes, it seemed intriguing to me, so I bought it.”

“Eustachius, books are expensive. You could have, at the least, gotten a proper, historical manuscript.”

Regina looked up at him sternly from her chair. Her husband just smirked and shrugged his shoulders. They both began laughing again, as they were filthy rich, and it didn't matter what he'd spent on it.

Taking the book back, Eustachius said, “I'm going to sit in the study and read about the hapless Robinson Crusoe, while you return to admiring your coin collection.”

Regina handed her husband the fictional book and he was off. She turned again to her pieces of eight. Before she began looking them over, she thought, “*Fiction, my word! That will never take off with English speaking people! My poor, silly Eustachius.*”

(This was a short story written for a writing group assignment a couple of years ago. It was only supposed to be five to ten sentences long. It was about a New York street tough's sighting of aliens.)

Big Joe's Night Out

Big Joe Bellegoose shuffled down the alley next to his old apartment building, thinking about what he'd just seen.

"I's can't believe I seent doze littles geen menz! I taught de peoples dat seen doze tings was fruitscakes! Mama Leona's not gonna believe dis!"

Joe placed his now empty revolver back into his jacket pocket as he thought, *"My's tree-fiftee-seven sure dids make short works a dem, dough!"* After a moment, Joe wondered, *"I's wunda what de trash menz gonna tink when dey find doze little suckas in da trash bin?"*

Joe shrugged his shoulders as he entered the main door to his apartment building and passed his friend, Lefty.

Lefty spied some green, splattered substance across the front of Joe's shirt. He just nodded to Joe; he didn't want to know. Joe was always getting into some foolishness.

(This short story is directly related to a character from the Orianus Creation Series, though it is set in the ancient past. If you've read the series, you should be able to recognize who it is by the short story's end.)

Blade of Our Fathers

His face was dark like midnight. His mood was the same. He sat upon the ancient field amidst grave markers generations old. This was the place for which he'd been searching. If the old text was true, a great prize was hidden here—somewhere.

The tall man sat with his back against a particularly large grave marker. He reflected on this place's ancient history. The invading barbarian hordes had attacked the defenders of this land. They were advanced in culture, art, and society, yet lax in the ways of war. This would prove their downfall, as the price of freedom is always eternal vigilance. There were some at that time who tried to build powerful weapons to defend their land from invasion. They achieved their goal, but only three weapons were produced that made it onto the battlefield. This was far from enough. Their people and culture were soon overrun, and they passed onto the pages of history.

The tall, black man stood and looked down upon the ancient grave marker. He could not read the ancient script, but was confident that the size of the marker indicated the station of the one buried beneath it. The secret of the old general, of those overrun, had been kept from the invading enemy for enough years that the legend was nearly lost. The man rubbed his hand across the weathered stone and thought, *"I'm not usually a man of war, but vigilance is now necessary against a great enemy, and if the legend is true, a Sword such as the ancient general's Sword, would be truly welcomed now."*

The man pulled a shovel from a strap across his back. He did not like the idea of digging up a grave, but the long dead man had no need of a magnificent Weapon—but he did. He dug and dug until he reached a wooden box. This was a good sign. Most of the men from this battle had just been buried in the earth with no coffin. Only generals, champions, and other important men had been buried in this manner.

Opening the box, the man looked down upon a skeleton dressed in decaying, but splendid battle gear. He appeared to be an important fellow. The tall man reached down and lifted the dead man's sword, and then pulled it from the sheath. It had been preserved to a degree by being sealed in the coffin, and it was a fine blade, but it was not what the man was searching for. He placed the sword back in its sheath, sealed the coffin, and then began the process of shoveling the dirt back over it.

When he was finished, he stood, cupped his hands over his eyes, and peered across the ancient battle field. He spied another large grave marker in the far distance. He slowly made his way toward it.

As he walked, he imagined he could still hear the sounds of battle. Sword against sword, spear striking armor, and the dull thud of arrows on shields. He also imagined darker sounds; the sounds of horses being wounded, of men screaming their death wails, and the moans of the dying. He hated war. Any sane warrior who'd fought in any serious battle did, deep down, though the bravado of many caused them to say otherwise. He hated it, but he knew that sometimes it was a necessity so people could live a life worth living. He'd seen, and was now seeing, just what an oppressive regime was like to live under. Some days it seemed you'd be better off dead. How many had the enemy killed? How many had been taken to distant labor camps to slave away their lives? The man didn't rightly know, but he was determined to do his part to stand against them, even if he died trying. And for that, he needed a Weapon—a Weapon like the one in the nearly lost, ancient legend he'd stumbled upon in the Great Library of his oppressed people.

His few confidants would say that he'd come upon the ancient text by chance, but he knew better. God in Heaven had guided his search, and the man prayed now that God would guide him further. The man felt an odd sensation deep inside as he prayed, a sensation he didn't feel often. It was what he believed to be God's prompting. It turned him away from the large grave marker he was headed for, sending him far across the field, finally to an area previously beyond his vision. He felt guided to a particular spot and then the feeling abruptly left him. The man spun about in a circle, but all he saw were small grave markers. He was perplexed. He was certain this is where he should be. Spinning about and looking closely at each of the small markers, he noticed an incongruity. One of the small markers bore a faint red color. He knelt down next to it and looked upon an underneath edge. The red color was more vibrant there.

A verse from the ancient text came back to him. It was translated from the original language into his at some time in the past, but the translator had been faithful to include the mysterious line, "Buried under a red sun."

The translator thought that the general had been buried late in the day, when the sun was low and red on the horizon, so the man had thought no more of the odd statement. The crouching man now looked more closely at the grave marker. In the center of the star burst shaped stone, a faded image of the sun was carved.

"Buried under a red sun," the man muttered. Hope flared in him anew, and he dug much faster than he had

before. The man was strong and had great stamina, so in a relatively short period of time, he'd reached a coffin's lid. A few minutes later, he finally managed to pry the well-sealed box's lid open. A skeleton bearing the attire and insignia of a general of the ancient people lay before him.

“Thank you, God,” he muttered as he reached for the ornate sheath and Sword that were still clasped in the bony fingers of the long dead general. The man hesitated. He remembered the story from the ancient text. Several of the general's warriors tried to pull the Sword from the man's grip, to use it in battle, soon after the general had fallen. They couldn't remove it, and they were shocked with energy, rendering them easy prey for the enemy. The survivors of the battle that were commissioned as slaves to bury the dead, decided to bury the Sword with the general, so there would be no way the enemy could discover its power and find a way to use it.

The tall man pushed past his trepidation and reached for the Sword. Hopefully, after all this time, the Weapon would no longer be bound to the remains of the general. He pulled aside the general's bony fingers, which crumbled under the slight pressure. Nothing held the Sword and sheath now. The man grabbed the hilt with no ill effects. Emboldened, he drew the blade and held it aloft. It was an old kukri style of blade, which angled down a bit and had a fatter tip than the blade's main body. Suddenly it flared with energy—a pea green hue of color shrouded its static violence. It was bound to him.

As the man, an Ancient now known as Hephaestus, looked up at the powered Sword, he exclaimed, “Let the Dark gods beware! The lost, powered Sword known as Jumantari is among the living again!”

Bloodwalker: Purple Fire

He battled upon the field—his arm, strong—his determination, fierce. Dried blood returned to liquid in the new, falling rain. It ran in rivulets down his thick armor. His sword and axe gleamed once again as they were washed clean. The battle was far from over, though; he had many more to kill.

A young, yet large enemy warrior charged him with reckless abandon. His axe was soon buried in the man's faceplate, crushing it inward. The large, young warrior fell forward from his momentum as the champion wrenched his axe free. With a backhanded swing, the champion decapitated another foe, while his sword pierced another foe's neck. Three fell dead around the champion in but a few moments, yet his enemies pressed him still.

Suddenly, an arrow pierced the thick armor of his side. The arrowhead only penetrated his body an inch, but it burned like fire. The champion ripped the offending sticker out, but soon all was darkness. The warrior fell amidst those he'd just slain.

The champion's comrades became demoralized when they saw him fall. He was a living legend—he could not fall—he could not die! Their shock and dismay weakened their resolve. Soon the enemy was winning, and many fled the field of battle when the opportunity presented itself. They would regroup at King Malus' castle and let their liege know that his greatest champion had fallen in Pellizor Field.

The enemy captain, Jonah Fike, approached the fallen hero. He stood looking down upon the champion of the Kezzan. He kicked the body, but received no response. He looked over at Fabius Longdraw, the Elven master archer whom he'd employed to take the champion down.

“Ye used a poisoned arrow, didn't ye, Elf?”

“Of course, Captain Fike. Such a man would not fall to a single arrow unless it pierced his heart deeply—possibly not even then. He may rampage a bit before losing his blood flow.”

The captain only grunted. He finally asked the Elf, “I thought ye snooty Elves were all 'bout honor and the like—how come ye had no problem shootin' this one unawares when he be battlin' others?”

“Let's just say that if he were a fellow Elf I would not have done so.”

“So, ye fancy Elves do think ye be better than we mere humans?!”

The Elf, surrounded by such humans, knew he was approaching dangerous ground, so he said, “No more than you humans think you are better than we fancy Elves.”

No one said anything for a few, long moments. Suddenly Captain Fike burst forth with laughter! His warriors followed his lead and began laughing too.

Captain Fike said, “Aye, Elf, ye've laid low the greatest warrior and symbol of our enemy and helped us win the day. We can now push toward the enemy's castle under King Baruch's banner and challenge it for the first time in twenty years! Come, Elf, and earn the rest of ye pay by helpin' us run down those fleeing back to the castle.”

“As you wish, captain, but what of the champion here?”

“We'll carry his body back with us when we've killed those who be fleein' from before us. He be goin' nowhere now.” With that, the captain and his men laughed again. Soon they and the treacherous Elf set off after their fleeing foes.

All was now quiet in Pellizor Field. The wind and light patter of the rain was all that could be heard, until a slight buzzing emanated from the fallen champion. Beneath his armor lay an ancient amulet, a prize from a quest he'd taken as a young man, long ago. It was rumored to have strange powers, but the champion had never witnessed it do anything but reflect light as any other shiny, purple amulet did. He'd worn it though, beneath his armor, ever since the day he'd defeated the Guardian of the Black Tombs, which was no easy task. His left arm had taken months to heal properly after the encounter. Now, on this day, in the far future, he'd been dishonorably shot with a poisoned arrow while he fought men face-to-face. Hopefully his countrymen would avenge him. He felt himself at death's door, wondering what lay beyond. He hadn't considered death that seriously during his life. He now felt foolish for not doing so, but it was too late—or was it? He saw himself surrounded by purple light. It burned within him, and he felt himself pull away from death and become stronger.

He awoke upon Pellizor Field, his armor steaming from strange heat, boiling off the raindrops. He stood and looked down for weapons. His axe and sword lay near him. He sheathed his sword at his side and hung his axe upon its belt hook. It appeared no warriors, friend or foe, remained alive in the field.

He spied the arrow on the ground, bent down, and retrieved it. He stared closely at a stain that remained soaked into the wooden shaft near the arrowhead. The rain had yet to wash it all away. The style of arrow he knew to be Elven, and the type of poison appeared to be the most potent known to the Elves. His enemies wanted him dead so badly they didn't care if they killed him dishonorably. The champion worked the arrow beneath a sword sheath he wore across his armored back so that he could keep it.

“Just how did I survive?”

His chest felt on fire. He wandered into the woods, beyond the field's edge. He removed his breastplate. He then retrieved a small mirror from one of his belt's pouches. To his great shock, the amulet had burned itself into his chest! It seemed fused to his sternum, its purple energy reaching thin fingers of color across his chest! The odd chain that once held it was completely gone. It now pulsed with an odd radiance and was warm to the touch.

The champion realized this was a second chance for him. Whatever Higher Power there was had seen fit to give him one. Or was it just his great fortune that he'd won the amulet ages ago and was lucky enough to be wearing it when he died, allowing it to release its power and revive him? These two possibilities warred for a time in his mind. Finally, he shoved them aside and reattached his breastplate.

The champion walked out of the woods and looked in the direction of his king's castle. His enemy, the Nordron, would be making their way toward the Kezzan stronghold, killing any remaining warriors. His people were outmatched in numbers when he fell, so he had no doubt the Nordron had won the day here.

Kilgaren Darius Bloodwalker drew his sword from his sheath, but left his axe hanging on his belt. He walked through the field of dead bodies until he found the body of one of his friends. Gladius always carried a good shield. The spear that killed his friend had managed to pierce beneath Gladius' sword arm on the opposite side.

Kilgaren lifted his friend's shield from the ground and fastened it to his own left arm. It had several long scratches and furrows, but was in otherwise decent shape. He then took up Gladius' sword and slid it into the sheath on his back. He looked down upon the dead form of Gladius and promised, "You will be avenged my friend," and then, sweeping his eyes across the whole field, Kilgaren added, "You will all be avenged!"

With a determined gait, the champion made his way to the woods between Pellizor Field and his king's castle. He'd find his enemy there. He'd make them pay in blood and death, especially the one who'd launched the dishonorable arrow.

Soon Kilgaren came across a bloodied banner laying atop a fellow Kezzan warrior. It was their battle standard. Old Caston was the man who carried it. He knelt down and gently lifted the damp fabric. It had a few sword slices, but was otherwise whole and still attached to its banner pole, though the pole was snapped off short.

"Kilgaren, you live," a whisper startled the champion. Still in a crouch, he looked down at the spear-impaled form of old Caston. He reached over and opened the faceplate of the man's helm. The old man, blood coughed up on his lips, smiled at Kilgaren. He was pale and not long for this world.

"Old warrior," Kilgaren addressed him, "I thought you dead."

"Almost, young one."

Kilgaren laughed and said, "I'm twice as old as most warriors, yet you still have many years on me, honorable Caston."

Caston's smile widened, but then he became serious and explained, "I tried to rally our fellows when treachery brought you low. I saw you pull the arrow from your side and then fall. A normal arrow that shallow should not have brought you down, so I thought it was poisoned. I thought you surely dead."

"I almost was. The arrow was indeed poisoned and by the deadliest Elven poison of which I'm aware."

Caston coughed up more bright blood and weakly asked, "Then how do you live?"

"It was the amulet I wore, Caston. You know of the story from my youth. I showed it to you several times."

Caston's eyes grew wide and he nodded.

Kilgaren continued, "It infused me with heat and purple fire, Caston—I cannot explain it—but I was healed as the amulet burned into my chest and the chain disappeared."

Caston's eyes spread even wider, but then they narrowed and he exclaimed, "This whole time! It must be Arden's Gem—unbelievable!" With that pronouncement, Caston's chest hitched and he breathed his last.

"Caston," Kilgaren shook him, "Caston, what is Arden's Gem?! What do you know?!" When Kilgaren realized it was too late for the old warrior to answer, he laid Caston's head and shoulders slowly back to the earth, and then reverently closed his eyes and then his faceplate.

Standing to his feet, Kilgaren brought the bloodied Kezzan banner with him. He stuffed the shortened pole down the center of his back behind Gladius' sheathed sword so that the banner stood proud behind and above his head. The poisoned arrow fell to the ground due to the larger shaft being shoved next to it, flaring the sheath out further than would hold the smaller arrow. Kilgaren picked up the deadly shaft with his left hand and held it at an angle against the inside of Gladius' shield.

Turning his gaze back toward the woods that stood between him and his home, he set his mind on his mission again. He would take the fight to the Nordron, and he was determined not to fall a second time to treachery.

(This was a short story written for a writing group assignment a couple of years ago. No copyright infringement is intended with either Star Trek or The Muppet Show, as this is simply fan fiction and is free.)

Captain Kermit

(Short story for 8/02/2007, D. Shane Burton)

A thin, green arm lifted the phaser. A moment later, a small, green finger pressed its activation stud. The kill setting fired, striking the borg drone in the side of his head. The modulating frequencies had yet to be adapted to, so the borg crumpled to the decking, dead.

Kermit the Frog, the new captain of the *U.S.S. Enterprise-E*, stepped from his hiding place behind the center console of engineering. He looked at Geordi La Forge, his chief engineer, and saw that the man had managed to keep himself from being assimilated long enough for Kermit to intervene.

“Captain,” Geordi said, “we have to initiate the borg countermeasures designed by Seven of Nine! It's our only hope to hold them off!”

Kermit instructed the computer to initiate the untested measures. Seven had recently joined the *Enterprise* crew as their navigation officer. Unfortunately, she'd been rendered dead or unconscious on the bridge from the borg cube's surprise attack. They couldn't raise any of the bridge officers.

The borg cube had emerged from beyond the horizon of the moon they were studying and had quickly taken out the bridge before sending boarding parties. Geordi had managed to raise the new shielding, which was preventing any other drones from boarding at the moment, but a group of ten was enough to wreak havoc. They were also multiplying as they were assimilating the crew members.

As the experimental program was initiated, the two borg drones, who'd just entered engineering, began to vibrate oddly. In a few moments, they fell over immobile. Two more drones then beamed into engineering—obviously the borg had finally overcome the new shielding design. One drone turned and grabbed Geordi, but both invaders began vibrating a second later. The two drones fell to the floor, unmoving.

Kermit said, “Geordi, scan the cube and see what's happening. See if we can fire whatever energy effect is working in here, toward the borg cube!”

“Aye, aye, Captain!”

After several moments of looking at scans, Geordi said, “I think I can use the deflector dish to—”

“Ahh! Just do it!” Kermit yelled as a borg materialized in front of him. He managed to fire on it, but the borg's personal shields had adapted to the modulated phaser fire, so the shot had no effect. The borg hefted Kermit by the neck, causing the stuffed frog to flail his skinny arms and legs. Two assimilation tubules shot out of the drone's wrist, but it began vibrating just at that moment. The tubules started whipping about, instead of penetrating Kermit's plush hide. Kermit thought he was safe, but one of the whipping tubules finally did manage to penetrate his side, pumping borg nanoprobes into him. Kermit fell to the floor along with the vibrating borg and watched as the drone became powerless and still. Kermit extricated himself from the drone's grip and passed his hand over the hole in the Muppet fur of his side. The tubule had fallen free. Since he still felt like himself, he assumed the nanoprobes within him had been neutralized, as well. He pushed a bit of stuffing back inside. A few stitches of thread and he'd be as good as new.

Kermit looked up to see Geordi push a final button on the engineering console. He watched a situational monitor at Geordi's station display an outside view. An odd, coruscating yellow beam emanated from the deflector dish, completely engulfing the nearby borg cube ship. Kermit rushed to Geordi's side and leaped onto the chair at the next console with frog-like grace. Geordi and Kermit watched. Within moments, the borg cube had completely powered down and entered what appeared to be a repair state.

“Can you fire weapons from here, Geordi?”

“I think I can reconfigure the console to do that, yes.”

Kermit nodded affirmatively, so Geordi went to work.

Kermit asked, “Can we back away from the cube?”

“Yes, I have basic flight control tied into the other station.”

Kermit leaned over and worked the console with his small, fuzzy fingers, as Geordi worked on weapons. The ship was soon far enough away to fire on the borg cube.

Geordi looked into his new captain's plastic eyes. He could never get over the fact that a sentient stuffed animal now captained the *Enterprise*. He knew Kermit had earned it, though, so Geordi just targeted the cube and awaited the captain's word.

Kermit said, “I don't know how much longer Seven of Nine's countermeasures will last. We need to destroy the cube now. Fire, Geordi!”

Geordi initiated his firing program. Three ship's phaser blasts punched holes in various sections of the cube, and then three quantum torpedoes fired into those same areas of the cube. When they exploded, the cube disintegrated in a spectacular explosion.

Kermit and Geordi smiled at each other in relief.

Suddenly, both of them shouted, "The bridge!" in sudden remembrance of its condition.

It didn't take them long to make it to the bridge in the turbolift. When the turbolift doors parted, the red glow of emergency power was the only light present, besides the flashlights of several medical crewman. It appeared that every console had exploded, and most of Kermit's bridge officers were either dead or severely injured. The ship's chief medical officer and his medical assistants were all there, attending to those who could be saved.

Seven of Nine was nowhere to be seen, so Kermit made his way to the doctor's side. "Where is Seven?" Kermit asked.

A holographic doctor answered, "The dead and the movable patients have already been taken from the bridge, Captain. Fortunately, Seven was among the movable patients." He'd spoken while continuing to treat a severe laceration upon one of Kermit's science officers; the Bolian was barely recognizable.

The holographic doctor, another transfer from the former *Voyager* crew, was wearing his futuristic mobile emitter. Kermit was reluctant at first to accept the photonic being, but he'd come highly recommended by Admiral Janeway, as did Seven of Nine. Kermit knew how hard it was being green and stuffed, so how could he hold being made of photons against the man? Or hold the fact that Seven was a former borg drone against her? The fact was, he couldn't. He was a stuffed animal—a *stuffed animal*, for goodness sake! He was just as amazed by his sentience as all the stumped researchers in the federation were.

It took hours to clear the bridge of the damage the borg had done, but soon the repair crews were making the bridge look like it was supposed to again. As the crews worked around him, Kermit sat in the center chair, reflecting on his Starfleet career. It had taken him much effort to overcome the bias against him, a somehow sentient stuffed animal. Many people thought he was a joke—a robot or android toy. It took a while for word to get around that he was a new species. No one knew where he'd come from. Some scientists postulated an alternate dimension, and some said he must be from a yet undiscovered world whose denizens had taken on the form of stuffed toys. He had no organs, no brain, no blood—just stuffing. The borg probably couldn't assimilate him, anyway. The scientists had done scans of him and found only an odd energy field that worked to move his small, stuffed body around. One scientist had put forth the theory that his people had made the transition to pure energy beings, but had then decided to return to this plane of existence. For some reason, they took on the form of stuffed animals. It seemed far-fetched, but, then again, so was Kermit's existence. During further research, it was discovered that Kermit the Frog was once a character on a few kids' television programs, namely *Sesame Street* and *The Muppet Show*. This was several hundred years in the past. The scientists eventually decided to the term from one of the shows as the name for his race—Muppet. There were many other Muppets on these programs, yet he was the only one ever discovered. It was assumed that the Muppets were only fictional characters on these old shows, but now, no one was sure. Kermit had been found thirty years ago, floating in a life-pod in interstellar space. The pod looked like a cartoon version of an old spacecraft from ancient Earth cartoons. His existence just didn't make sense, but here he was. And now he'd advanced to the status of a starship captain. When Jean Luc Picard retired, Kermit thought they'd surely offer the *Enterprise-E* to Captain Riker of the *Titan*, but they offered it to Kermit instead.

Suddenly, Kermit could hear it again—the odd music that began running through his mind whenever he deeply contemplated his existence. He heard faintly, "Menominah! Be-be-de-be-dee! Menominah! Be-be-de-bee! Menominah! Be-be-de-be-dee! Dee-be-dee! Dee-be-dee! Dee-be-dee! Ba-dee-deep-de-deep-be!"

The sound dissipated, but it was still in the back of Kermit's mind. Were his kind trying to communicate with him? Was this some latent telepathic ability, or was he just going insane?

"Captain," Kermit's tactical officer, a Breen, the first in Starfleet, interrupted his thoughts.

The Breen, Hassifer, continued his report in the odd electronic voice that came from his Breen breathing/environmental mask. "I must inform you that an unidentified ship is approaching at warp eight point six. Its detection was previously blocked by our position behind the moon. It will arrive in approximately two minutes. Your orders, sir?"

Kermit sighed and asked, "Unidentified? In the complete Starfleet database?"

Hassifer checked again quickly with his computer interface and said, "Yes, that's confirmed."

Kermit sighed and then muttered, "It's not easy being green."

Hassifer looked up from his console and asked again, "Your orders, sir?"

"Just monitor their approach and raise shields. Have one of your firing patterns on standby, just in case."

“Aye, captain,” Hassifer said. He then worked his board to effect the captain's directions.

Kermit said aloud, but to no one in particular, “We never seem to get a break.”

Hassifer asked, “Sir, is that why you made your earlier comment, the one I almost mistook for a Breen saying?”

Kermit wasn't sure what comment Hassifer was referring to. He asked, “What did you think I said? And what are you referring to?”

“I thought I heard a Breen lament, 'It's not easy being Breen,' but then I realized you had said 'green.’”

Kermit laughed, as did the rest of his bridge crew. Everyone on the bridge was very familiar with Kermit's personal lament, so Hassifer had to be making one of his rare jokes.

“Captain,” Hassifer said in a serious tone, “the ship appears to be hailing us, but it's audio only.”

“Put it on speakers, Hassifer.”

When the hail opened, Kermit was shocked to hear, “Menominah! Be-be-de-be-dee! Menominah! Be-be-de-bee! Menominah! Be-be-de-be-dee! Dee-be-dee! Dee-be-dee! Dee-be-dee! Ba-dee-deep-de-deep-be!”

Kermit leaped from his chair so robustly that he hit the ceiling and then rebounded to the floor. He lay there in a twisted pile of stuffed body parts. He straightened himself out and stood as he yelled, “Shut it off!”

Kermit continued to hear the music. He looked around the bridge and everyone else had become immobile, frozen in place with their eyes closed, as the strange music continued to play.

Suddenly the huge bridge monitor flared to life. Kermit was now staring at the revealed aliens, and he was shocked to his core! Before him, upon the monitor, was a bridge full of Muppets!

The Muppet captain of the Muppet vessel gave him the chills. He didn't know why, but the stuffed, female pig made him feel like running in terror. She smiled and said, “Kermit the Frog! I thought I'd lost you forever!”

Kermit involuntarily leaped up, over, and behind the captain's chair.

“Kermy! Oh, Kermy—where did you go?” Kermit heard over the ship-to-ship hail.

Kermit was now more frightened of his own people, the female pig in particular, than he was of the borg! The Muppets had somehow rendered everyone on the bridge, besides himself, into a frozen state.

Kermit began quietly but frantically calling over his communicator for anyone in the crew who could hear him, but no one would answer. He reasoned that the odd music must have all the non-Muppet people immobile and entranced. Kermit realized what he could do, though. He leaped onto Hassifer's computer console and quickly shut down the ship-to-ship hail. The female Muppet captain was saying, “Oh, there you are my love, Kermy! I wanted —”

With the hail suddenly cut off, the dazed crew began to come to their senses. Kermit gave them a few seconds and ordered the pilot to quickly take them to warp—anywhere, but preferably where they could shake a ship off their trail. The pilot paused but a moment before laying in a course and jumping to warp, bypassing the odd ship sitting not far from them, which was still displayed on the bridge monitor.

“Hassifer, under no circumstances are you to open a hailing frequency between that ship and ours!”

“Aye, captain,” Hassifer said with a tone of confusion in his electronic voice.

Kermit knew he owed the crew an explanation, but they had to escape first. Did the Muppet pig call him “My love?” Kermit thought, “*Now I understand how Picard felt around Lwaxana Troi! I'll never rib him about that again!*”

“Captain,” the Breen said, “I still show the ship shadowing us.”

Ensign M'VeL, the replacement pilot, a female Vulcan, said, “Captain, I can use a proven method to mask our trail, if you have Lieutenant Angstrom in the weapons room modify a photon torpedo with the specifications I send him.”

“A torpedo, M'VeL? I don't want to start a war—I just want to evade them.”

Hassifer said, “We're at warp nine and they're gaining, captain.”

M'VeL told the captain, “The warhead will serve only to blind their sensors when we next drop out of warp, hence the modifications. May I ask from who we're running, captain? I don't remember any interaction with the mystery vessel's occupants.”

Kermit said, “Hassifer, best speed until the weapon is ready. M'VeL, send your specifications and instructions to Angstrom on my orders.” Kermit heard the two simultaneously respond, “Aye, captain!”

Kermit arose from the captain's chair that he'd retaken. He hadn't answered M'VeL's questions yet, as he was still contemplating the situation. Kermit paced the deck. Just why had he felt such fear? The Muppets were his own people—the people for which he'd been looking for thirty years—ever since he'd been discovered! What was wrong with him? Here they were, and he was running from them! All because he was frightened of the Muppet pig captain and because of the fact that the Muppets had frozen the rest of the crew with that bedeviling music.

Kermit thought a few moments longer and made a decision. He stopped his pacing by M'VeL's station and

touched the edge of her console to get her attention. A spark shot from his finger to the board, startling her.

“Sorry, M’Vel. I build up static electricity when I pace the carpet.”

“Yes, captain. Your stuffed, fuzzy body structure would tend to do so.”

Kermit took a deep breath and said, “I’ve decided to confront the aliens one more time, but we must adjust our audio to not broadcast their strange music. None of you remembers what happened in our first encounter because all of you fell into a trance when they were in communication with the ship. I was the only one immune to the effect, it seems.”

An odd electronic rumble came from Hassifer’s Breen breathing/environmental mask.

M’Vel arched her eyebrow.

Hassifer worked his board a few moments and isolated the musical audio component and every waveform associated with it, hopefully leaving only the normal, spoken word to broadcast. He then said, “I have a music filter ready, captain.”

“Good,” Kermit said, steeling his resolve, “now, M’Vel, drop us out of warp. Hassifer, shields up.”

A few moments later, Hassifer said, “They’re dropping out of warp, as well, captain.”

Kermit had no teeth, but he ground together his fuzzy upper and lower jaws in nervous tension.

“They’re hailing us,” the Breen said.

“On screen,” Kermit said, determined to face his fear again.

Suddenly, the Muppet pig’s face filled the screen. “Kermy! Why are you running away? I’ve not seen you for many, many years! The Muppet Alliance thought you lost forever when we lost track of the life-pod you’d ejected in.”

“You... the Muppet people have been looking for me?”

“For thirty years! What are you doing with the non-Muppet races? You know we’re not supposed to interact with them any longer.”

“No, I don’t know that, as I can’t remember anything before I was found in that life-pod. The other races have been kind enough to accept me, and I’m now captain of the *Enterprise*, their premier starship.”

The female Muppet pig captain and the rest of her bridge crew became silent—their stuffed, fuzzy jaws hanging slightly open. Hassifer moved to check some readings on his board. He was obviously in the scope of the bridge’s video monitor, as the Muppet pig captain shifted slightly and said, “How is that one not in a trance?”

“I’ve blocked your trance music. I had no idea what your intentions were, and with my crew immobilized, I was at a distinct disadvantage if you were an enemy. Actually, I thought you were one, as why else would you immobilize my whole crew?”

“Enemy? I’m not your enemy, Kermy! Oh, poor Kermy! I’m your girlfriend, Ms. Piggy. Don’t you remember?”

“I’m sorry, I don’t, Ms. Piggy.”

Ms. Piggy’s face fell in a dejected manner.

Kermit no longer felt fear; he felt compassion for her situation, if she was indeed his long-lost girlfriend.

Kermit tried to break her sad mood by asking again, “Why did you place the rest of my crew into a trance?”

“We did so because, since we left Earth hundreds of years ago, we decided to leave behind the legacy that we were only human-controlled puppets and not sentient beings. We always use our special music to keep the other races from discovering or remembering us. It has hypnotic subsonic frequencies woven into it.”

Kermit was at a loss for words. The federation had known about him for thirty years—there was no undoing that. He was now the captain of a starship in that federation. But now his people were here, right before his eyes. Should he go with them to find out who he was and what his people were like? Just where did he belong? He’d fought long and hard to be accepted by those who were not his kind. It was a struggle, but he’d gained acceptance. Now he could go to his real home—the home he couldn’t remember! Maybe his own people had a way to restore his memory! The federation doctors were baffled by his energized stuffing and fuzzy outer layer. Kermit sat upon the proverbial fence and didn’t know which side to hop down on.

Kermit had to ask, “So, I take it you want me to leave with you and the others and return to the Muppet home world?”

“Yes, of course, Kermy!” Ms. Piggy said happily.

“But I’ve made a life among these people and many have become my friends! Am I just to up and leave them all behind? The only reason I know my name is because it was found written down on some paperwork I had with me. Everything else I know is from Starfleet and the Federation. I know I’m a Muppet by race, but I don’t know any of you.”

“I think our doctors could restore your memory, Kermy, and then you would! You’d remember all the old friends you left behind!”

Kermit thought, *"She sure isn't making this easy. I could possibly have my memory and former life restored."* The decision weighed heavy on Kermit's mind.

M'Vel looked over her shoulder at the captain. This prompted Kermit to ask her, "What would you do, M'Vel, in my situation?"

M'Vel arched her eyebrow and said, "I've been contemplating both sides of the issue, and I can see strong, logical reasons for either course of action, captain. Honestly, I'm as indecisive as you appear to be."

Kermit grimaced, but then he thought of an important question and asked Ms. Piggy, "If I go with you, could I return to Starfleet after a time?"

"Oh, no!" she said quickly, "The high parliament of our race would surely say we've been exposed enough as it is by your presence among the other races. They're very secretive and wouldn't allow you to return. But they are your true people, Kermy—you've only forgotten."

Kermit looked back over his shoulder at Hassifer. The Breen answered Kermit's unspoken question, "I'm as torn as you are, captain. I also see the reasons for either decision."

"A great help you two are," Kermit muttered.

His two crewmen looked back to their boards for lack of anything constructive to say.

Kermit stood and paced, and then paced some more. Ms. Piggy watched him over the monitor with anxiety on her face. Many of Kermit's crew scattered about the bridge did the same. He paced for nearly a minute, but finally stopped on the upper deck ramp and rested his hands against the railing. Sparks crackled against the metallic part of the rail until the static electricity was spent.

Kermit announced to everyone concerned, "I've come to a decision."

To the reader: We've now reached the crux of the story, but the real question and dilemma of this story is not in what Kermit finally decided. He could've gone either way, with good reasons for doing so, in either case. The real question is, if you were in a similar situation, what would *you* decide?

(This episode is the first meeting of Crag and Shar, which I've reset as episode one. The following episodes feature two of the main characters from the first book of my upcoming fantasy series, the Orianus Legends.)

Episode One of the Travels of Crag and Shar: Meeting

Relarn was a city open to every race. It didn't matter from which side of the Konar Mountains someone originated, they were welcomed there, as long as they remained civil. It was a tough, brutal city in many areas, yet the town's complement of officers were well known for dealing out swift judgment to anyone caught causing trouble.

Only a handful of towns such as this existed along the eastern or western foot of the Konar Mountain passes. Though feelings were hostile between the races from either side, these trading post towns were needed by both.

A Dwarven warrior, from east of the Konar Mountains, was making his way down the thoroughfare to the shop of a fellow Dwarf who dealt in armor, clothing, and footwear. The boots he wore were of the laced style, and he needed some new ones. Several holes could be seen in them, and the old laces had broken and been repaired. He needed a new pair of pants, as well. His worn, brown breeches had seen better days, though they were partially hidden by Dwarven armor.

The Dwarf, who called himself Crag, passed by an alleyway. His warrior's eyes passed over the opening, which ran between two large buildings. But it was not his eyes that alerted him, but his ears. Swordplay could be heard farther down the alleyway, beyond the old crates and wagon that were blocking his view, not far down the passage.

Crag was not one to let criminals go about their business when he was around. Someone down the alley was the attacker and someone the victim. He'd investigate, sort it out, and lay the criminal, or criminals, low.

The warrior wore a mix of Dwarven plate and chainmail, so he was well-suited for battle. He wore a Dwarven long shirt, green in color, on top of the chainmail, yet under the plate. A thick belt was cinched about his waist, causing the bottom of the shirt to form around his thighs like a kilt. His legs beneath it were covered in chainmail and he had pads at his knees. Over the studded plate armor covering his shoulders and chest, a Dwarven battle horn was slung, which rested against his back, beneath his road pack. It was the other item across his back that he reached for as he ran toward the commotion. By gripping its head and pulling, he unsheathed a large war hammer that was engraved with ancient Dwarven glyphs. His dagger was sheathed and strapped to the side of his left boot, if needed. Crag unhooked his Dwarven helm from a clip on his belt and put the intricately engraved piece of armor on his head over his long, black hair, which hung beyond his shoulders in three ponytails tied with leather cord. His long beard could be seen spilling out from beneath the helm and hanging onto his chest in three beard "tails," also wrapped in leather cord. They each also bore a Dwarven medallion.

Hammer in hand, Crag passed the cart and boxes in a sprint. He immediately saw the trouble—three tall, gray-complexioned Orcs were surrounding a young, Verdani man. The jade green Verdani wore several, new lacerations, but so did one Orc. The other two appeared to be striking at the Verdani from the rear as he was engaged with the one to his front. He was surrounded with no defensible position against the three attackers. The Verdani was doing his best to dodge the cowards behind him, to no avail. He'd just taken a heavy blow from a cudgel, though he did shift to one side and lessen the blow as it partially struck the small, round shield still strapped over his back. The Verdani had managed to stab out at the one to his front side with his drawn sword, though, keeping him from dealing a death blow.

"Huge, cowardly, scum Orcs dey be!" Crag thought, *"Dishonorable, dey be!"*

Dishonor was one thing a Dwarf couldn't stand.

Crag charged without battle cry or other warning, as these scum deserved no such consideration. The Verdani wouldn't last much longer if he held back. One good strike from an Orc would allow the others to pile on the blows and finish the Verdani.

A crack like thunder echoed down the alleyway. One of the two, huge Orcs assaulting the Verdani from the back, toppled unceremoniously forward as his crude, bone helm split and fell in half. He landed between the other two Orcs as the Verdani leaped aside. Crag had jumped high enough to brain one of the cowardly Orcs from behind, as he deserved. Crag's forward progress had left him standing on the fallen Orc's back.

The Orc who'd been fighting the Verdani to his face was now staring at Crag in surprise. The surprise quickly turned to anger as he yelled, "Nurk will have El-Elar sword that Verdani have! No Dwarf will stop Nurk!"

Suddenly, the tall, injured Verdani spoke for the first time in Crag's presence, as he charged and struck with the sword the Orc had mentioned. "Here, have it!" The Verdani ran the Orc through from beneath his right armpit until the sword emerged from the Orc's chest where his heart was. The Orc grunted in surprise and fell quickly,

sliding off the blade, dead before he hit the ground.

The two turned toward the last Orc, who was charging. The Verdani's blade blocked the Orc's sweep with his crude cleaver, as Crag ducked below the arc of their blades. A tremendous, uppercut blow of Crag's hammer shattered the Orc's huge, jutting jaw and snapped his head back. He fell next to the first one that Crag had smashed with the hammer. Crag checked all three; they were dead.

Breathing heavily and favoring his right leg, the injured Verdani said, "My thanks for your timely intervention, Dwarven warrior."

Crag looked up into the golden eyes of the man who bore a four-point rack of antlers that protruded through his green-black hair. His leather vest was carved up badly, and he wore multiple cuts, though the light armor and the shield on his back had protected him from the worst of it. Crag was sure the cudgel blows had left great bruises on him where they'd struck flesh.

While placing his hammer haft back down its sheath, Crag said, "Dirty, dishonorable, scum Orcs! Dey nearly had ye!"

"Yes, they caught me unawares. They were huddled behind the boxes when I went to use the alley as a shortcut. I should have known better than to use an alley in this town. Once they noticed my El-Elar sword, their eyes filled with desire and they surrounded me. They demanded the sword and said they'd let me go if I gave it up, as well as my money pouch. I know Orcs well enough to know that my dead body would be found in the alley soon after."

"Aye, Verdani! Thievin' scum like dey leave no witnesses." After a pause, Crag said, "Ye need ye wounds tended and some new, leather armor. Me knows just the place for both. Me Dwarven friend sells clothing, armor, and footwear of all types, and his wife be a good healer and binder of wounds. Me name be me own business, but me go by Crag now. What be ye name, Verdani?"

"My name is Sharanee, warrior Crag, and I thank you again for saving my life. I'm a decent swordsman, but I doubt I could've held off three Orcs for very long who had me surrounded as they did."

"True, Shar. The Almighty let me be at the right place at the right time. Now, come with me. If ye have coin enough, we will set ye right. The Dwarves go see be honest, yet dey don't work free. Methinks, that since these Orcs caused ye the damage that needs payin' for, me say we take whatever valuables dey have and use that to pay for ye healing and new clothing."

"I say you're right, Crag, but my name is Sharanee, not Shar."

Sharanee sheathed his El-Elar sword on his left hip, and then they both began pulling valuables off the dead bodies of the Orcs.

Crag said, "Dwarves like short names, Verdani. Me'd rather call ye Shar, if ye don't mind."

Sharanee just shrugged and said, "Okay." The Dwarf had most assuredly saved his life. Who was he to worry about the small matter of the man shortening his name.

The two men found a surprisingly large amount of gold, silver, and copper coins on the three Orcs, as well as a few pieces of jewelry.

Crag said, "Dey must be longtime thieves to have so much coin. Tis ill-gotten gain. Me say we use enough to replace ye leather armor, shirt, and to have ye healed, and then give the rest as alms to the poor."

Crag looked up at Shar with a critical eye, as though testing a student and awaiting his answer.

Shar believed he'd just fallen under the purview of a new mentor as the Dwarf eyed him. By Toreth's antlers, he needed one. He was not only green of skin, but of worldliness, too. Sticking with the Dwarf, an obvious veteran warrior, would do him a world of good.

Shar said, "Yes, Crag, I concur. That would be the most honorable thing to do. We could look over the jewelry carefully and see if there are any inscriptions, so as to return it to its owner before giving it to the poor with the rest of the coins."

Crag straightened to his full four and a half foot height and displayed a wide grin. "A good idea, Shar. An honorable idea!" Crag clapped Shar on the back, causing him to wince. "Oh, sorry, Shar. Me forgot about the cudgel blow."

Shar managed a weak smile and said, "Let's go see that healer now."

Crag laughed and said, "Yes, let's."

The Dwarven warrior exited the alley with the Verdani in tow. Crag removed his helm when he reached the street and clipped it back to his belt. It would be only a few blocks to Crag's friend's business. They garnered only a few, odd looks at Shar's bedraggled appearance.

The two walked in silence, Shar lagging only slightly behind Crag. Finally, Crag said, "I be returning from prospectin' in yonder mountains with me kin. I be called back by me elders. Dey send word that me must return and accept a quest. If ye be not pressed by other things, ye may accompany me."

That was about the most open invitation a Dwarf would ever give, and an invitation from a Dwarf to a non-Dwarf was a rare thing. Shar didn't think long before he said, "I'd be honored to accompany you on a quest, Crag."

Crag let a slight smile touch his lips as he said, "Good, but ye'll have to heed me instruction. No offense, Shar, but ye look to be a bit naive to the way of the world."

Coming from anyone else, Shar probably would've taken offense, but not from Crag. He swallowed his pride and said, "I hate to admit it, but you're correct, Crag."

Crag barked a short laugh and said, "Me assure ye, Shar, ye won't be for long."

Episode Two of the Travels of Crag and Shar: Jumped

The beast's mouth smelled like an open grave. A wave of putrid air rolled over Crag as he barely dodged the huge creature's snapping jaws. If it caught him, the hargel's short arms, tipped with talons, would rip him apart as the beast's dagger-like teeth either held him in place or chewed him to pieces.

A swish and a whack sounded close by as Crag rolled away, but then regained his feet. He looked just in time to see his friend, Shar, strike one of the great beast's legs with his El-Elar (Elven) sword. His jade green friend barely put a mark on the beast's tough hide. Crag watched as Shar's golden eyes opened wide in surprise at the beast's apparent toughness. The huge hargel turned toward Shar and bellowed a loud cry. All Shar had done was anger it. Shar was a Verdani. Members of his Verdani race were known for their speed, great eyesight, and great reflexes, but mainly for their deer-like antlers that protruded from beneath their usually green-black hair. Crag thought that Shar should use some of his vaunted Verdani speed—and soon. Crag's bearded, tanned face contorted into a snarl. He didn't believe he could distract the beast in time, though he tried anyway. Crag, a fully-armored Dwarven warrior, yelled and charged the beast's other massive, rear leg as he raised his war hammer high.

The beast only glanced at Crag momentarily then looked back at Shar and lunged, while also whipping its tail at Crag. Crag redirected his blow and met the swinging tail with all his strength. His hammer just managed to soften the tremendous blow he received. He was thrown only about ten feet away instead of twenty-five. He flipped over once, his three leather-wrapped ponytails flapping in the breeze. As he landed, his three beard "tails," each fastened near their end with a small, Dwarven medallion, impacted against his chest plate with a loud crack.

Shar ducked his round shield under him and rolled beneath the huge beast. Its mouth snapped down at him, barely missing. He had managed to cut through the short, black fur that covered the beast, but its thick hide beneath the hair had only been scratched. His blow had not been full strength though, as he had sought to quickly distract the beast from biting Crag. Shar now lay beneath the belly of the beast, between its thick legs that the beast walked upright upon. The beast's body tipped forward and its huge tail was used for balance. The beast looked to that bruised tail now. Shar knew it would be difficult to pierce the creature's thick hide. Shar wore a protective suit made from a tritonodin's hide and had seen firsthand how it could deflect sword strikes. The hargel's hide beneath its hair must be similar, so Shar struck with the fine point of his El-Elar blade and all his strength, hoping it would be enough.

Crag, stunned, sat up in the bushes. He watched as Shar, now laying under the hargel, struck upward into its belly. Crag rose shakily and hefted his war hammer. He watched the beast suddenly leap into the air—up and forward. It landed about ten feet away from Shar and scratched at a small, deep wound on its belly with its small, but deadly arms. It seemed confused for a moment, but then it looked back at Shar in anger. It roared, as Shar stood to run. Crag noticed a slight amount of hargel blood dripping from Shar's prized Elven sword. Crag knew Shar had done some damage, but he wasn't sure if Shar would get far now. Crag reared back and then pitched his war hammer with all his strength as he prayed, "Almighty, please guide me aim."

Shar scrambled to his feet. The hargel was now out for blood even more so than before. Shar saw a deep anger in the beast's large eyes as it dipped its big head and charged. Its skull's five, conical horns were pointing forward. They would skewer him easily. Shar burst into a full run while glancing back over his shoulder—the beast was gaining ground. Suddenly, a blur from the beast's right side struck the creature. The hargel stopped immediately and stood there. To Shar, the scene played out in slow motion. He saw the stunned look in the hargel's eyes and watched him pause, then he saw Crag's large war hammer bounce lazily off the hargel's thick skull and spin slowly to the ground. Abruptly, time snapped back to normal. Shar noticed the hargel's unfocused eyes, and then he watched as the beast took three awkward steps sideways before disappearing. The hargel had fallen down a steep grade and into a ravine. They had been walking near it just before the beast jumped them. Shar made his way to the ravine wall's edge and peered over it. Crag was soon at Shar's side, after he retrieved his war hammer.

"Good throw, friend Crag."

"Aye, and a nice stab on ye part, friend Shar."

They both watched as the beast, some thirty feet below them, quickly shook off Crag's last blow. It stood and peered up the steep wall of the ravine, which was only twice its height.

Both men stepped back out of sight as Shar asked, "Crag, you're the more experienced fighter and woodsman here. Can a hargel jump twice its height?"

"Me know not, Shar. Me think it be best if we go now." The Dwarf placed his war hammer in the sheath upon his back, just before he turned and sprinted up the path along the top of the ravine.

Shar shifted his shield onto his back, sheathed his sword, and quickly joined Crag. Shar finally said, "Yes, I agree, Crag; a retreat would be wise. The beast may soon find a way up, and I've no wish to battle it again for no good reason."

“Aye, ye are learnin' Shar. Some battles ye needs fight, and some battles ye choose to fight, but tis the wise warrior who knows which battles not to fight at all.”

Gilead's Cold Quest

The cold gripped him like a vise as his chest rose and fell in rhythm with his tortured gasps. He'd fought well, but the second ice-beast would soon return with others of its ilk. One creature lay dead at his feet with a gash through the right side of its neck. Its purple blood stained the snow that now quickly covered its stiffening corpse. Its long, white hair, which covered its large, wolf-like body, began to blend in with the deepening snow. Gilead looked closely at the large, bat-like face of the creature, and wondered if it could drink blood if it so desired, instead of just tearing its prey to pieces and gorging on it. Its fangs were as enormous as the claws on its feet. Large lines of dented and scratched furrows upon his chest plate were testament to the beast's power and ferocity.

Gilead broke from staring at the creature and whistled loudly for his horse. There was no longer the need for quiet, as the ice-beasts had already found him. The second, wounded beast would know precisely where to return to. Their sense of smell and direction was uncanny.

From out of a small stand of evergreens, his horse, Spirit's Wind, trudged through the snow toward him. The horse had kicked the nearest ice-beast during the attack, but soon Gilead had been knocked from the saddle by one of them, despite his slashing sword. Gilead had shouted the command for the mare to retreat. If she were killed in the conflict, he'd have to travel alone, on foot, in the snow, for much too long to survive.

Gilead mounted quickly and prodded his mare back to the nearby trail. He spurred her to the fastest speed he thought safe in the conditions. He prayed that the ice-beast's relatives were a far distance away.

"I've no time for this delay. If I don't set foot in Roderick's home within two days time, it may be too late."

He was determined. Gilead would kill every ice-beast from Lollantia to the Carpathian Wastes if he had to! He knew that Roderick would lend him the blessed hammer, and two days was all the time he could spare before he must head for Sandford's Gap. If he didn't meet the challenge, and on time, they may kill Sir Rothbane's daughter. They may kill her anyway, but he'd do all he could to prevent it.

"Despair not, Elena, despair not. I'll find a way to win your freedom and cut that brute of a man down to size!"

The knight reflected on the legendary and self-proclaimed Lord of Bandits, John Garzone. The man towered above most common men, and there was always the speculation being bandied about that he was half Ogre. Gilead didn't entirely disagree with that supposition.

"No matter—Roderick's hammer, won at so high a price, will add to the strength and speed of my arm! Let the Lord of Bandits fight me at his peril!" Gilead then wondered if his bravado was a response to his fear, or if he truly thought the blessed hammer would enable him to prevail? He sat up straighter in the saddle, as his horse trudged along the snowy trail. He told himself that the latter was true... he certainly hoped it was true.

(This short story concept came to me one day in a moment of inspiration. Don't let the title fool you—this IS a Christian story. You must read it all to see what I mean.)

Headline: Jesus Dies in Heaven

Satan couldn't believe it. He'd been trumped at the cross long ago. Jesus had set the path for redemption to the Father for all the humans who'd believe, but *now* something extraordinary had happened, and he just couldn't believe it!

“Phineas, tell me the news again!” Satan instructed his demonic messenger.

“Dark Lord, I've told you twice what's happened.”

“Make it three times or I'll demote you to resident demon of a pub in Amish country!”

“Okay, okay! Jesus was working on those mansions He promised His followers and He just clutched His holy chest and keeled over. All heaven has gone awry and the Father and Spirit have been thrown into a turmoil, as they were Three-In-One until recently.”

“This is impossible, Phineas!”

“I know that, but it is so... somehow. I don't understand it either.”

Satan stepped back from Phineas and began pacing. He finally snapped his fingers, pointed at Phineas, and reasoned, “He took away the keys to death, hell, and the grave. Jesus took their sins on Himself! Now that He's truly died—are you sure, Phineas?”

“Yes, Dark Lord.”

“Okay then, shouldn't dominion over man fall back to me—legally? He can't give His followers eternal life, as He couldn't keep it for Himself. Jesus can't fulfill all the prophecies related to the church and Israel in the last days when the beast and the anti-Christ will be ascendant. He cannot return to the Earth again. He's lost His right to be the Advocate, Judge, and King, hasn't he, Phineas?”

Phineas looked bewildered, but then he thought a few moments and finally agreed, “I would think so. Since you still appear before the Godhead to bring accusations against men, maybe you should go there now and see what all this means.”

A dark, brooding look spread across Satan's face. He thought a moment more and came to a conclusion, causing his dark look to morph into a huge smile. He finally exclaimed, “I've won, Phineas! God's plan has failed! I've won! Do you hear me—I've won!”

Phineas stood aside as Satan charged forward with purpose, headed to the throne of heaven. The evil lord soon became a blur and was gone. The being who was once the highest cherub and leader of the angelic host of heaven, now sought the place he'd always longed for—the very throne of God.

With mind-numbing speed Satan rose to the realm of God in the north, to heaven itself. He swept past the outer angelic guard, who milled about in confusion and wept openly. They didn't challenge him. They only looked up as he passed by on his way to God's throne. Satan landed at the base of the huge dais that God's crystal throne rested upon. All he could see in the Father's place was a wavering cloud within which the Father and the Holy Spirit were intermixed. Two aspects of the Godhead, with the Third missing. Then Satan noticed the corpse of the physical body of the Son laying on the dais with one angel standing near Him. It was Michael, of course. Satan made his way up the steps and stood near to his heavenly counterpart in rank.

“Michael?” Satan asked, as the angel just stared down at Jesus' body. Michael hadn't bothered to look up as Satan approached.

Michael didn't look up now, but he responded with a question, “Satan, how could this happen?”

Satan didn't expect that. He expected the Archangel to suspect him of having something to do with this.

“I... I... don't know, Michael. I'm as shocked as you.”

Michael looked up at Satan finally, with tears in his eyes. His faced gained a great intensity, but Satan could see that it wasn't directed at him. Michael finally grabbed Satan by the arms and looked directly in his eyes and asked with fervor, “Satan, how does *God* die!? Even just one aspect of His triune nature?”

Satan shook off Michael's grip and exclaimed, “I don't know! I don't know—but I've won! Don't you see, Michael? All Jesus accomplished is meaningless now! I've won back my rights and powers that He crushed!”

Michael looked at Satan, anger and pity at war on his face. He said nothing, turned, and looked back down at the lifeless body of the Lord. Other angels were milling about the throne in confusion. God's special creatures that tended His throne were flying about aimlessly.

Satan looked on the surreal scene for a few moments more and finally decided that it was time—time to make his claim to the throne of God! Satan ran near to the Father and Holy Spirit, who appeared in the midst of the roiling thundercloud of energy beyond the comprehension of mere men, and even beyond Satan and the angels'

ability to totally understand.

“Hear me, my former God! You've failed in Your plan! Jesus is dead—dead I say! Everything is undone! You've lost!” Then a thought struck Satan. The last time Jesus died, He'd arisen three days and nights afterward. Satan suddenly became very angry and asked God, “Is He going to rise again in three days? Is this some sick joke at my expense!?”

Michael looked over at Satan and then rushed to his side.

Satan turned to see that his enemy stood near him, but Michael now looked up toward God with an expectant expression on his face. It seemed that the Archangel hadn't considered that Jesus may rise again and that this was some kind of joke on God's part.

The dark lord turned back to the Father and Holy Spirit and yelled, “Well?!”

A few moments more passed before an odd, slurred voice proceeded from God. “Not... a joke. Falling apart, I Am.”

Michael's face fell, and then he did—to his knees. His head soon rested on the dais, as he wept loudly.

“Me, me, me,” Satan said with glee, “Give me the throne and step aside! I'm the greatest of Your creation and have great wisdom! I will rule, as You try to... uh... pull Yourself together... somehow.”

Lifting his head, Michael looked from God to Satan, and then back to God again, awaiting God's answer.

“It will... be as... you say, Satan. Take the... throne,” God decided.

“Nooooooooooooooooo!” Michael screamed, before falling on his face before the throne of God.

Satan was overjoyed. He approached the huge seat before him as the roiling thundercloud that contained what was left of God slowly shifted off the throne and to one side of the dais. Satan looked back at all the angels. They were all now prostrate on the ground, pulling at their hair. He found it a satisfying and amusing sight.

Satan spun his back to the Father's empty throne and slowly sat down. Michael looked up at Satan and began beating his forehead on the hard dais, drawing angelic blood. Despite Satan's glee, he said, “Michael, Michael—don't be a spoilsport. You're so melodramatic.” Michael beat his head even more fiercely in response, causing Satan to laugh.

“I will rule now!” Satan shouted to all of heaven, causing all of the angels who were not focused on him, to finally look his way. “I will run all of creation and you shall worship me as you did God!” He heard the angels groaning and looking at him in anger, but they would do nothing, as God Himself had given Satan His throne. They would not disobey their former God, thus Satan would now take God's place. Satan laughed at the delicious thought of it all.

Suddenly God's condition changed—the roiling thundercloud began shrinking and changing colors. Satan and the others looked on in wonder.

“Satan... it is... almost time,” God said.

“Time for what?” Satan asked with hope in his voice, “Are you checking out—completely?”

All of heaven's denizens held their breath as the answer came.

“Yes.”

All of heaven groaned, as Satan laughed maniacally.

“It will be mine, all mine!”

Michael went back to beating his head on the dais and many angels joined him.

Satan was still cackling when God spoke again. The roiling thundercloud was so small, Satan was taller than it was wide. What was left of God was in there somewhere. Satan heard as God said again, “Satan... it is... almost time.”

“You said that before. Go ahead and die already.”

“I will... soon, but you... must take it.”

“Take what, Your power?” Satan asked with desire in his voice.

“No... My power... is almost gone.”

Satan became angry, as he wanted whatever power it was that God held, since God did turn the throne over to him. He yelled in confusion, “If You don't have any power left, then what do You want me to take? You've already given me the throne!”

The cloud grew smaller until it was almost too small to see, as God told Satan, “You... must take... control... of everything.”

“I will!”

“You don't... understand. Now you... must hold it... all together.”

“What?”

“All of... My creation.” With those last words, God disappeared completely.

Satan looked back to Michael. A look of shock spread over both their faces. Satan knew he possessed no

such power—the power to hold the universe and all of reality together. The power to keep each and every part of every atom in the universe in its proper place and everything in its proper order.

Michael began looking about, which caused Satan to do the same. Satan could see the fabric of reality breaking down around him—literally. The fallen archangel and present dark lord reached out with every bit of his formidable power in an attempt to hold at least heaven together, but it was a vain attempt. It was like trying to extinguish the fire of the sun with a drop of water. He had no chance—none at all. Reality continued to come apart as Satan felt himself beginning to lose cohesion. He was melting and melding with nothingness, which was encroaching upon everyone and everything in the universe.

That was when Satan screamed, “Nooooooooooooooooo!”

Someone slapped him. Satan shot up into a seated position. He noticed that he'd been laying on the floor of his own dwelling just before the slap. Phineas knelt next to him.

“Forgive me, Dark Lord, but you were screaming,” Phineas said.

Satan, incredibly disoriented, asked, “What? What's going on, Phineas?”

“You screamed out, so I slapped you across the face.”

“What?” Satan asked, bewildered.

Phineas saw his dark lord's confused expression, so he explained, “You said you wanted to try this 'sleeping' that humans need to do, so you laid back on the floor here and used your considerable power to put yourself into that strange, human state. You must have also done that other thing the humans do.”

“You mean 'dreaming,' Phineas.”

“Yes, yes, Dark Lord! It appeared that you were doing something just inside of your mind.”

Satan arose and went over to the throne he'd built for himself ages ago. He sat down in it, as he looked back to Phineas. “I fear God used my little experiment to tell me something. Remind me to never try this 'sleeping' again. It's very dangerous.”

“Yes, Dark Lord, but what did God tell you?”

At the question, Satan became incredibly angry. “That's none of your business! Now get out of my sight before I slap you much harder than you did me!”

Phineas left like a shot.

Satan sat alone on his self-made throne and answered Phineas' question in his own mind. “*God showed me that if I could somehow win—I'd still lose.*” At that thought, Satan sat there brooding, in a dark mood, for a very long time.

Johnny Brock

Johnny Brock awoke. He grasped at the vague tendrils of his nightmare, but they slipped through the fingers of his mind like smoke in the wind.

"I know it was them again. I glimpse them in the day and dream of them at night."

The young man tossed off his covers in irritation. He arose and went to the bathroom. He looked in the mirror and saw his face, but when he looked down, he caught a glimpse of something strange. He glanced back up quickly, yet the image was gone.

"I know you're there!" he screamed—his irritation blossoming into fearful aggravation.

Johnny made it another hour without seeing anything strange. He was now making his way down to the nearby lake to go fishing. He'd harvest vegetables from his garden later in the evening. He lived alone, far from civilization. He'd learned to live as people did in the days before electricity. He'd lived like this for so many years, he'd lost count.

"Maybe I should visit the city," Johnny thought, but soon discarded the idea. He'd tried walking into town on three occasions he could remember. It was during those times that they haunted him most.

"Hmm... maybe they fear the city. Maybe if I could get there, they would finally go away."

Johnny was soon at the lake, fishing. It didn't take him long to start catching fish. His location was so remote that Johnny had never seen anyone else fishing there.

The isolated man came to a lull in his catching of fish and stared at his reflection in the water's surface. Suddenly one of *them* was standing behind him in the reflection! His heart leaped into his throat and he spun quickly, brandishing his fishing pole like a sword!

"Nothing!" Johnny screamed, as nothing was behind him. A butterfly lazily flew through the spot where the creature should be standing, its arms raised toward him.

Sometimes Johnny wondered if he was going insane. It wasn't long after he'd arrived at his home deep in the forest, that he began glimpsing the creatures. They were always like a shadow or some half-seen fantasy. He'd wondered if they were just his imagination, or were these things the ghosts of some ancient creature from a bygone time of ice and snow. He thought this due to their appearance. The creatures, from what he could glimpse of them, were mostly white.

"Yeah, like a ghost," he thought, causing a shiver to run down his spine.

If all he'd ever done was just glimpse them, he wouldn't be so nervous. The thing was, sometimes they hurt him, and he wasn't sure how, or how to make them stop when they did. He just had to suffer through it until it was over. They usually hurt him in his sleep though, but he couldn't seem to wake up until after they were gone.

Thinking back, he could make out their outline in his mind—they were mostly white with a darker head. They had odd legs in that the legs seemed to not separate at the thighs very well—only below the knees, yet the thighs had full movement. It was as though their white thigh skin stretched as they moved. Their hands were darker too, and they always seemed to be reaching for him. They usually grasped his arms and caused a piercing pain when they hurt him.

"What do they want?!" Johnny screamed in frustration. He then shouted to the empty air, "Just leave me alone!"

Dr. Mark Parmenter approached the side of the bed. He looked down upon his patient, as he asked his nurse, "How long has it been?"

"Sixteen months," the woman responded, as she reached for Johnny Brock's arm to give him a shot. She then added, "We don't know if he'll ever come out of the coma, but he does seem to respond slightly when he receives his periodic injections. Look—see there!"

Dr. Parmenter watched as Johnny's eyelids fluttered open a bit, despite the fact that he was in a coma. He thought there may be some hope for the young man yet. If only they could somehow reach him in his own, private world and bring him back to reality.

Kayden's Song

Kayden was a gifted Singer since the days of his childhood. His kind were rare—those who could change the world through song.

The young man, dressed in the bright blues and drab grays of a bard, continued down the lonely, overgrown deer trail. He'd strayed far from the king's highway in search of a special place—a place rumored to have Old Trees—trees of great age and hidden wisdom. It was said, in rare cases, Singers of the past awoke an Old Tree for a few brief moments and learned some forgotten piece of lore, which was previously lost to the swirling mists of time.

Kayden, early in his nineteenth year, was in search of Dwarven treasure. He was a poor fellow, yet he had an idea how to overcome this lack. Many people did not believe in the ancient legend of the Dwarven Flotilla, but Kayden's grandfather had assured him the story was true. So here Kayden was, seeking a deep wood, only a few miles from a vast stretch of beach. Kayden's research had led him to believe the Dwarven Flotilla had landed somewhere near this location in a bygone age. Their tale was gruesome and ended with the Dwarves' demise, but not before they'd buried their treasure somewhere in the wilderness.

The questing Singer strode deeper and deeper down the trail. He'd never owned a horse, but this overgrown path would be far too restrictive for one anyway. *"This is a good sign,"* Kayden thought. The thickening vegetation usually indicated one was near the edge of a deep wood. It took a few minutes more, but the young Singer finally broke through the small tunnel of vegetation that was the deer trail.

Kayden stared wide-eyed at the view! The ground was covered in deep leaves and acorns as far as Kayden could see. They all lay beneath a depth of huge oaks that were not only massive, but whose long, thick branches touched the ground before rising back up into the forest before him. Kayden stood between two such massive branches and saw a small, worn path through the leaf litter where the deer went to and fro.

His hands were trembling as he pulled a lute from his back. Kayden approached the closest oak, its thick trunk nearly forty feet around—and it was a small one. Since this oak was nearest the sea shore, he thought it wise to sing to this Old Tree first.

Kayden squatted down within the large protruding roots after making sure no beasts resided there. He then leaned back against the Old Tree. He'd heard a tree's voice only twice before, and the ones he contacted didn't have much useful information to offer. The only worthwhile piece of information he'd gleaned was the fact that a Singer could hear a tree's words better if his body was in contact with the tree. Kayden hoped that would help him hear this Old Tree more clearly—if he could get it speak to him. It was extremely hard to rouse a tree from its subconscious state, but gifted Singers could do it.

Before the young bard let despair at that fact overtake him, he launched into song. Kayden sang several well known songs with no response from the Old Tree. His patience taxed, he finally decided to sing the lilting song he'd written to get straight to the point of his quest. Plucking his lute, and singing in a clear, bright melody, Kayden sung passionately to the Old Tree:

*In a long, long, bygone age
Dwarves did come ashore
They carried with 'em treasure great
A vast and precious horde*

*I'm a poor lad, far from home
Come to seek a boon
From the Old Trees thick and strong
Old knowledge to exhume*

*Oh, I hear the treasure's call
Oh, I hear its cry
Across the land, and o'er sea
Lost 'neath unending sky*

*Oh, Old Tree, I beseech thee now
Oh, hearken to my words
I ask thee of a mystery
Buried in ye deep and stored*

*Oh, I ask ye, look deep within
Seek where treasure lies
Find me knowledge of the place
Where Dwarven treasure hides*

*Oh, I hear the treasure's call
Oh, I hear its cry
Across the land, and o'er sea
Lost 'neath unending sky*

*Oh, Old Tree, I beseech thee again
Please hearken to my words
Reveal to me the mystery
Buried in ye deep and stored*

*Oh, Old Tree, look deep within
Find where treasure lies
Give me knowledge of the place
Where Dwarven treasure hides*

*Oh, I hear the treasure's call
Oh, I hear its cry
Across the land, and o'er sea
Lost 'neath unending sky*

Kayden fell silent and waited. He didn't really expect anything, so he was surprised at a deep rumbling in the trunk. He could then feel a voice—an ancient voice speak into his mind.

"I know of what you speak," the Old Tree said in a slow, deep voice within Kayden's head, and then it paused. Another rumble shook the trunk, stronger this time, and the voice spoke again, *"They came when I was young. Built wide and short for your kind. They were intent on hiding something. Something in chests of wood."*

"Yes!" Kayden thought, encouraging the Old Tree to continue.

Another rumble and the tree spoke again, *"Buried the little chests, they did."*

"Where?" Kayden thought, prompting the Old Tree once more.

The tree was silent a long while, but Kayden still felt the buzz of connection in his mind. He knew better than to pester the tree at this point. It would be better to be patient until the Old One responded. Many moments passed. Kayden waited and waited. He began sweating, but was determined not to push the tree now. Suddenly the connection was broken. Kayden hung his head.

Instead of giving up hope, Kayden began playing his lute and singing again. He repeated the last song, which had caused the Old Tree to respond once before. When he finished, he fell silent again and waited.

After a long time, just when Kayden was about to give up for the day, the Old Tree rumbled.

"I felt your name, Singer," the tree said, and then added after a long pause, *"You are Kayden. Kayden the Singer."*

"Yes," Kayden answered over their mind link. His father had taught him never to ignore a tree's statement and return to a previous topic, unless the tree gave you a clear indication to do so.

"Kayden?"

"Yes, Honored Tree?"

"I'm old, but not as old as some trees here."

"Yes, I understand."

"Kayden, I was small when the Dwarves came."

The young Singer was excited that the tree was back on topic, but he didn't want to push the matter. He simply responded, *"I see. You were small then."*

"Yes."

A long while passed without a word from the Old Tree. Kayden remembered a technique his grandfather had taught him that may prompt a tree to continue speaking—repeating your last statement in a slightly different manner. Kayden thought, *"Yes, back then you were small."*

A slight rumble proceeded, *"Yes, I was small."*

This time only a brief pause elapsed before the tree rumbled and spoke again, *"They almost killed me."*

"What?" Kayden couldn't help but think, adding, *"Why would they cut down a small tree? Surely you were too small to provide timber?"*

"Yes, I was too small, Kayden the Singer."

"Then why?"

After a brief pause, the Old Tree answered, *"They dug me up."*

"What? Why would they do that?"

"To place their little boxes of treasure beneath me."

Taken aback, Kayden couldn't think of a response. He considered that a moment and realized it would be a good hiding place. If treasure hunters came into this area, they'd surely dig up areas of open ground, not dig up a small oak and look under it. They must have buried the treasure and planted the tree back over the spot. Obviously, they'd no desire to kill the tree—that would ruin their hiding spot, though they'd have to dig up the tree again when they returned for their treasure.

A rumble and then the tree asked, *"Kayden?"*

"Yes?"

"You'll have to cut me down to get to your treasure. It's woven within my roots."

Kayden knew the Old Tree was right, but he didn't like it. Old Trees were *not* to be cut down for lumber or for any other reason. He'd been taught that the Old Ones were to be respected for their age and ability to survive throughout ages of time. Kayden hung his head.

"Kayden, will you cut me down now, or bring others to do so?"

The young, poor bard thought a few moments before answering, *"It's not right—you're an Old Tree!"*

A rumble, and then, *"True, but I've lived long ages, and there are many other Old Trees in this wood. I would only diminish their number by one."*

Kayden pondered what the Old Tree was saying, but he knew that cutting down this magnificent tree would be tantamount to cutting off his own hand—such was the bond of respect between Singer and Old Tree.

"I can't," Kayden said firmly, adding, *"I won't!"*

A few moments passed before the tree rumbled again and said, *"I see."*

Long moments passed as Kayden and the Old Tree were silent. It appeared they were at an impasse.

Finally, the Old Tree directed, *"Kayden, you must go to the hill with the rock that looks like a bird's outstretched wing. It's near the beach, yet seven hundred Dwarven strides into the thin wood there. Beneath the rock, six feet deep, you will find the treasure you seek."*

The Singer's jaw hung open. *"But you said that..."*

"You Singers believe we Old Trees have great wisdom, and in that there's some truth. Did you truly think you just accidentally stumbled upon the very tree that the treasure you sought was buried beneath? No, Kayden. I had to know what kind of man you were before I revealed the treasure's true location. I would never trust a Singer who broke the respect between Singer and Old Tree for a few chests of bright metal and jewels. Go, now, Honored Singer. You'll have your treasure, and now the Old Trees know your name."

At that, Kayden felt a rumbling through his feet. It was as if the whole forest was vibrating—and when he looked about—it was! All the Old Trees in this deep wood were rumbling their agreement with the Old Tree he leaned against. He closed his eyes and could hear within his mind a chorus of beings just on the edge of his perception. It was the Old Trees, and now they called him not just Singer—but Honored Singer! And that particular title was rarer than even the lost, Dwarven treasure. Hayden had done the right, honorable thing, and now he'd have two kinds of treasure—one of silver, gold, and jewels, and a treasure of another kind that could never be bought or found—only earned: respect.

The Last

It crawled from the depths and emerged under the light of the stars. Time, it seemed, had lived ages as it had slept in the bowels of the world. Lumbering onto a vast, red plain, the creature tasted the air. The atmosphere was weak; it was thin.

The creature licked the red dirt beneath its feet. It could taste the remnants of times past. Volcanic in origin, some of the remnants were, while others were laden with minerals formed in the presence of water. The creature swiveled its bony, horned skull and sniffed. It could detect no traces of humidity in the freezing air. Its deep, probing eyes could detect no pools of liquid of any kind within its purview.

Step after thundering step, the creature pulled its massive bulk from the mouth of the deep cavern. It lifted and spread open the huge, sail-like fin that ran down the center of its back. Hundreds of gleaming spikes seemed to be energized within the leathery sail-fin's length. It had used this fin in the depths below to pull energy from the wall of a cavern heated by volcanic flows some distance behind it. That was enough to keep the creature alive in a coma-like state for eons.

In those depths, heated as they were, liquid water remained. The creature slept in a pool of it, absorbing any needed water through its amphibian skin over all that time.

The cold had awoken the beast. The flow of heat through its great fin had diminished. It had to seek another cavern that could sustain it, or return to the world above. The water below had frozen over.

Memories flooded through the great beast's mind as it ambled across vast, red plains. It remembered when these plains were covered with forests and lakes and other creatures. Then it remembered The Sound. The Sound reverberated everywhere, even into the deep cavern it had been exploring. The Sound was followed by a wave of heat and dust that even filled the cavern for a short time, though it was not hot or dense enough to kill the great beast.

After several days, the beast made its way to the surface. There were no trees, no water—nothing but thick clouds of dust filling the sky, darkening the day as though it were night. Burning rains fell from the sky, as well as dirt and ash, so the creature returned to the depths. If it were not for its ability to draw energy through its large sail-fin, in lieu of food and sunlight, and also its ability to derive oxygen and hydration from water through its skin, it would not have survived The Devastation. It feared it was The Last.

The creature knew its kind lived for endless ages, but not without sustenance of some kind. It had searched the other deep caverns; it could find no heated walls or pools of water that were not frozen. It could eat the ice, but it could not live without either the thermal energy or some kind of new food source.

Picking up its pace, the creature flexed muscles in four legs that had been inactive for ages. It was a testament to its remarkable design that those legs still worked.

On and on, the creature ventured, over plains of red dirt and rocks. There was no water, there were no plants, and there were no animals of any kind. Desperation took hold. The creature pulled as much energy as it could from the sun's rays that streamed against its sail-fin, giving it the ability to run faster. When it crested a small hill, it stopped at the top to look all about. It then realized that the ice deep below in combination with the now visible, energy giving sun, could sustain it, yet not while it was comatose.

Swiveling its bony skull like a turret, the beast searched for any signs of life. Nothing—and more nothing. Its deep, complex eyes saw only craters, rocks, and dust swirled by a weak wind, but all the other beasts were gone—gone long ago.

The creature snorted, a weak sound in the weak atmosphere. Its lungs couldn't even fill properly. It was living off oxygen that it was internally drawing from the ice it had consumed before it left the deep cavern. That was one of its amazing survival abilities, but its store of internal water would not last forever. It had to seek out other sources of ice while its energy gathering sail-fin kept its body from freezing on this now strange world.

Something odd happened next, while the beast stood upon the small hilltop. It felt a tingle of odd energy, faint but present, trickle across its great fin. It immediately turned the direction the energy emanated from and then trundled off. It felt it again, several times, as it shuffled along. Many miles passed beneath the creature's taloned feet.

The creature's mind was reeling after the manifold years of inactivity. The level of increased stimuli would take a time of adaptation. The great beast stopped several times to flop down upon the clumpy dirt and just draw in more energy through its great sail-fin. It could see that the sun moved through the sky, as it had before The Devastation. The creature wanted to have enough energy to last the night when the sun dipped below the horizon. It was with that thought in mind, that the great beast finally laid down about an hour before the sun would set, and soaked in as much energy as it could. It could tell it had enough internal water to last until about the middle of the next day, so it determined to find another deep cavern tomorrow, or return to its own for more ice. With that

decided, it folded up its fin and fell asleep.

Groggily, the great beast awoke the next morning when the sun again warmed its pallid, gray flesh. It immediately unfurled its great fin and began energizing its body fully. It had to find more ice or water, yet it could already feel the strange tingle of energy, stronger, passing over its sail-fin. It was not the sun's energy; it was something different, something odd.

Gaining its feet, it ambled on again, in the direction of the strange tingle. It ran miles again. All the time it looked for an opening to any large cavern where it could seek the deep ice. It had yet to spot more than large holes blasted into the ground long ago.

Suddenly, in the distance, it could see them—white mountains! White usually meant ice! The creature increased its speed. Yet, as the creature got closer, it knew something was wrong. The thin air still held no humidity, and the mountains looked, well... too perfect. It approached anyway, fueled by this new mystery.

As the great beast came near the strange, white mountains, it could detect odd scents on the weak wind. The scents reminded it of mineral deposits, yet other scents were totally foreign to its senses. It approached regardless.

And then it spotted movement.

The great beast stopped and craned its thick neck to the right. It focused its dark eyes on an object slightly smaller than itself, yet some hundreds of yards distant. The odd creature was also white, like the mountains, and it was shaped like a somewhat flattened, elongated boulder with smooth sides all around. It had the oddest legs the great beast had ever seen—they had the shape of the sun, yet were silver with black edging. They rotated in constant forward motion beneath the beast. Sniffing the air, the great beast could not pick up the animal's scent on the weak wind, so it trudged off in the new, strange beast's direction. The beast was fast, yet the great beast caught up with it when it neared the too-perfect mountains. The great beast sniffed again, when in close proximity, yet all it could smell were the odd, foreign scents and some mineral scents. Strange.

The white beast slowed and soon came to a stop. The great beast imitated its actions. Obviously, the white beast knew how to survive in this new world, so the great beast would learn how it did so. The white beast never turned or acknowledged the great beast, but it did open a strange, unfolding gill on the forward, right side of its body.

A peculiar thing happened then, which surprised the great beast. A smaller creature, also mostly white, yet with some odd markings, emerged from the larger creature's unfolding gill. So, two beasts had survived The Devastation. The little one had hid within the larger. This was a good sign that the larger beast knew how to survive here, as the small one depended upon it.

As the great beast watched from behind, the small beast lumbered forward on only two of its legs. The great beast was hard-pressed to remember any beasts from ages ago that did this, yet the little beast made it look easy. The small beast then approached the base of the too-perfect mountain. It pressed a glowing stone that marred the white mountain's smooth surface. A piece of the mountain then opened, revealing a cavern beyond. This was just what the great beast needed. A perfect mountain may hold heat and water, and possibly a food source that did not smell of foreign or mineral scents.

The great beast suddenly shifted to the left, folded its great fin, and hunched down behind the large, white beast, as the small beast moved to turn back to the large, white beast. The great beast would not have its attempt to enter the cavern thwarted by either odd beast, so it had decided to remain undetected, if possible. The little beast could no longer be seen by the great beast, but soon the large, white beast moved forward again toward a large, lighted cavern, which appeared to dead end into a white wall, not very deep within it. The outer wall began closing, so the great beast crept quickly inside. The outer wall closed with a bang, as the great beast remained still and crouched to the ground, which was also too-perfectly smooth beneath its taloned feet.

A sudden hiss filled the chamber. The great beast turreted its head about, but otherwise remained unmoving. And then the great beast felt it—pressure from the air—it could breath again! The great one then began to fill lungs not used in eons. The great beast felt more alive than it had in ages. The waxy, gray tone its skin had taken was changing back to its original greenish-red hue. Dead end or no, the great beast liked this cavern.

“Dear Lord, Michael, this is Alpha Base mission control, stay in the land vessel! You two didn't notice that *thing* that followed you in here?! I look away from the monitors for a second and you two let in a freakin' giant lizard!”

“Quit jokin' around, Davis, you know Mars is a dead world. Okay, we've discovered fossil evidence that life lived here, ages ago, but that was before the water dried up and most of the atmosphere was lost.”

“Michael, just humor me and use your periscope to look behind you.”

Michael laughed, as he turned to Zoe, his copilot. She'd previously opened Alpha Base's outer hatch in zone twelve, which had allowed them into the airlock. Michael winked at her and said across the open channel, "Okay, Davis, I'll play along." Michael then punched in the commands to raise and turn the periscope camera to the rear.

The great beast heard strange sounds emanating from the white beast. Suddenly an eye on a stalk popped up from the creature's head and turned to look back. The great beast knew it had been spotted. It hoped the beast would remain calm and not bolt, though it had nowhere to bolt to. The eye stayed fixed and the white creature stayed frozen in place. The great beast unfurled his sail-fin partially and could feel the odd, energy signatures again.

Michael's hands were shaking. Zoe had screamed, nearly deafening Davis and Michael over the communications system.

Davis finally instructed, "Okay, okay—you two just stay calm! The beast obviously followed you in and has not attacked. It isn't attacking now, so—"

"But what do we do?!" Zoe interrupted.

"Wait! Let me think. I'll get the coordinator on the phone. Just don't move and don't leave the vehicle."

"Well, duh!" Zoe mumbled as Davis cut to another communications channel.

The great beast felt an increase within the cavern of the odd energies that played across its partially opened sail-fin. It was breathing regularly now. It felt invigorated, yet a bit overwhelmed. It laid down on the ground and closed its eyes.

"Where did it go?!" Michael exclaimed, but after tilting the camera down he spotted the beast laying with its head on the ground, eyes closed. He and Zoe could both see it resting now.

"Hey, Mike, do you think the air in here is hurting him?"

"I don't know. He looks like he's getting healthier by the minute to me. And how do you know its a 'him'?"

"Yeah, he kinda does look like he's improving. And he just looks like a guy giant lizard thing."

The two looked upon the alien beast in wonder. Their immediate fright was now falling away, and Michael finally commented, "Hey, we actually have evidence now of a huge beast living on another planet, and not some fossil—a living beast!"

"Yeah," Zoe agreed, "but how can we get him where..." She trailed off in thought.

Within moments they both came to the same conclusion and exclaimed to each other simultaneously, "The quarantine habitat!"

The two were back on the line with Davis not long after, and the coordinator had come to the same conclusion. The passages beyond the inner air lock were being reconfigured now. All that was left would be for someone to exit the land vessel and press the inner door lock release. For security reasons, the doors could not be opened remotely. It looked as though that policy was a detriment to them now. Someone would have to brave the great beast's presence in the airlock with them.

"I'll do it," Michael offered, adding, "You already opened the outer door."

"No, it's my job as copilot, Mike! The beast didn't eat me before, so let's hope he doesn't eat me now."

Michael locked eyes with Zoe through their closed visors. He could see she was serious. He told her, "If you get eaten, just remember I offered."

Zoe gave him a lopsided smile and turned to exit the land vessel.

The great beast opened its eyes and watched as the white beast opened its right gill again. The small creature exited once more. It did as it had done before, yet in a more hurried manner, no doubt because the white beast was now aware of its presence. An odd glowing, stone set in the edge of the dead end wall was pressed by the small, mostly white creature, and the far wall began to rise as the first wall had. A long cavern stretched beyond. As the great beast stared down the length of the cavern, the small, mostly white creature had quickly hidden itself in the large, white creature's gill again. Slowly, the large, white creature began treading forward in a slow manner. The great beast arose and followed at the same speed.

"He's following us like a dog, Zoe!"

"I see him!"

The two drove the land vessel from one corridor to the next, turning when needed, and even ascending and descending inclines and declines when necessary. The great beast followed obediently. They finally emerged into the quarantine habitat. It resembled a chunk of Earth's rain forest a thousand yards in diameter. It had never been

used for quarantine yet. It now served as an oxygen farm and wildlife habitat for Alpha Base, as they'd never discovered any animals or plants, until now, that needed quarantine. It had always been a vague hope though, so this area had long ago been designated as the quarantine habitat. With the arrival of this giant miracle beast of Mars, it had finally earned its name.

The great beast froze in place. It beheld a sight reminiscent of its ancient memories from a bygone age. The air was thick, heavy with the scent of trees, other plants, and animals, though strange ones. The great beast felt water well deep within its eyes. It cocked its head back and trumpeted its ancient cry, not heard in thousands of years.

Both Michael's and Zoe's skin flushed with goose bumps beneath their suits as they heard the beast's cry through their external microphones. It was unearthly, yet it was magnificent and real. They were sure the researchers had heard it, as they would now have all the habitat's hidden technology focused upon the great beast's every move. Who knew what they could learn from this magnificent beast that somehow still survived on desolate Mars? Could its alien blood hold the key to cure diseases, or hold the answer to extending human lives?

Michael held his hand out toward the great beast, touching the clear, polymer window before him. God's creation, in all its wonderful range and diversity, never ceased to amaze him. He watched as the beast ambled forward to the nearest pond and drank deeply. The great one then opened a huge sail-fin on its back that had hundreds of upright spines encased in flesh, which seemed to glow from within. Maybe they could even learn something about energy utilization from this prime example of intelligent design.

The great beast raised its head from its bout of drinking. It was invigorated beyond imagining. It looked to the trees and saw winged creatures. It looked to the water and saw tiny amphibians floating, with only their eyes above the water's surface. On the ground, it spotted a small animal that walked on all fours, which was covered with an odd, plush carpet of some kind that completely covered its body except for its eyes, nose, and mouth. The great beast may be the last of its own kind, yet it was definitely not "The Last."

(This serial was posted on Third Day's forum originally. I present it in the pieces from there. It is a light-hearted story about Scamper the Cat, though it gets serious near the end.)

The Misadventures of Scamper the Cat

(Yes, I have lost my mind...)

On a warm, spring afternoon, Scamper—as he was affectionately called by his keeper, Mrs. Hildebrandt—sat on a windowsill and stared out into the yard. He looked out at the world before him like a king surveying his lands.

Breaking his stare, Scamper suddenly lifted his right paw and licked it ferociously, as though its cleaning were tied to his continued existence.

"Scamper, do you want out?" the pleasant voice of his keeper resounded.

Scamper froze in his licking, as though some court jester had intruded upon a meeting of state. His dignity came under assault again when his keeper snatched him from the windowsill, and then began carrying him in one arm. Scamper resisted the urge to shred the huge, but simple human, limb from limb. He remembered that he must make allowances for the woman's lack of understanding of all things "Cat."

Scamper hung limply in her arm. At least she was releasing him into the wild beyond the giant door. Many adventures awaited him this bright morning. He perked up in anticipation as she turned the door's great knob.

The Misadventures of Scamper the Cat *continued...*

Scamper hit the ground running—a gray streak, headed for his favorite oak tree to climb. The words of caution from his keeper were heard by his sharp ears, but went ignored.

When Scamper was finally perched in the nook of the tree where the main branches forked, he turned to see Mrs. Hildebrandt close the door.

Suddenly, cleaning his right paw was of the utmost importance again. He lay there scraping his rough tongue across it, oblivious to the new action down in the yard.

Several moments passed before Scamper caught a blur of motion with his blue-gray eyes.

"Ah," Scamper thought, "Excellent! One of the bushy-tailed rats that so brashly invade my yard! The villain will pay this time." With those thoughts, Scamper spun his body into a hunting stance within the crook of the small oak. His ears stood up straight and pivoted toward the interloper. His eyes kept perfect movement with the bold, bushy-tailed rat. He flicked his own tail in anticipation of his eventual and perfectly-timed leap onto the ground, which would then flow directly into his swift and expert charge of the offending rodent!

The Misadventures of Scamper the Cat *continued...*

In a gray blur, Scamper leaped from the tree. He hit the ground running, low and fast, heading directly for the thieving, bushy-tailed villain!

At the last moment, the villain spun his white-bellied form toward Scamper and dropped the acorn he held within his two small paws. Scamper unceremoniously plowed into the invader, causing them both to roll, flipping over and over across the yard.

When the two came apart, Scamper landed on his feet, his back arched high, his ears pointed to the sky, and a challenging hiss in his voice.

The squirrel looked at him dumbfounded as he stood to his feet. The squirrel spoke in his own language, yet Scamper could understand him. It seemed that only conversation between humans and animals was clouded over now. The squirrel said, "Hey, what's the big deal? I'm just gettin' acorns. Cats don't eat no acorns!"

Scamper, taken aback by the thief's attitude, answered, "Nay, villain! You are stealing from my yard. My keeper lives here—you are but a denizen of the forests. Within this fence is the purview of house Hildebrandt, and I cannot let you remove their acorns!"

"But they rake them up, or cut them up with that noisy contraption the man sometimes pushes," the squirrel protested.

Scamper relaxed his stance. The bushy-tailed rat had him on that one. He never did understand why the man saw fit to shave the yard with the contraption. Many more interesting insects could be found in the tall grasses, if he would let them grow.

While Scamper pondered, the squirrel scurried away and climbed a tree that had its branches starting high up. Scamper followed, climbing up the trunk only a few feet before noticing the squirrel leap from one high branch

to another upon a tree outside the yard. Scamper stopped climbing. The villain had made his escape into the wilds beyond the fence, but Scamper would watch for his certain return. Though the sly squirrel had distracted him with good arguments, when it came down to it, the acorns needed protecting, and he was the cat for the job.

He slid down the tree a bit, and then turned and dropped to the ground. Scamper surveyed the yard. No other pesky rats of any kind were about. He laid down on the grass and began cleaning his right paw again. He would remain vigilant. A cat's work was never done!

The Misadventures of Scamper the Cat *continued...*

Scamper sat on top of the outdoor grill and licked his left paw clean. His right had been finished long ago. He surveyed his vast domain, an eye out for any interlopers. It had been several hours, and the bushy-tailed rodent had yet to return. Scamper figured that the simple-minded bloke had moved on to yards that were less well-guarded than his was.

The sliding glass door opened and out stepped Scamper's favorite human, Chloe. Scamper stood, stretched, and then let loose a loud meow. The young female human ignored him. She promptly crouched down and began drawing on the back patio concrete with a huge piece of pink chalk. "She is very unpredictable," Scamper thought, "much like a cat."

Chloe, Mrs. Hildebrandt's daughter, continued to draw with the chalk until Scamper's curiosity got the better of him. He dropped down from his surveyor's perch onto the concrete patio beneath him, and then made his way near to Chloe.

"Hey, Scampster! I'm drawing a hop-splotch game!"

Scamper looked upon the odd array of chalk-drawn boxes before him. They made absolutely no sense to him, but only a small fraction of what the young girl did ever made sense to his cat mind. He liked her anyway. Well, except when she held him upside down for extended periods of time. He would stretch his dignity thin for the little girl—but only so far before he would wriggle free, causing her to chase him briefly. She would soon lose interest and go on to some other odd activity.

Scamper had moved into the square drawing on the end. He sat there, looked about, and then began flicking his tail in consternation—what purpose did the rough, pink box serve?

"No, no, silly! Ya don't sit in it, Scampster! You hops through the pretty boxes!"

Scamper was unceremoniously scooped up in Chloe's arms, pink crayon ruffling the fur of his right side. She had him cradled against the fringe of her dress, just below her neck, as she started singing a strange song. She then began jumping from one rough chalk box to the next. Scamper's ears shot up in alarm, yet he refrained from clawing the girl's arm more than lightly.

The Misadventures of Scamper the Cat *continued...*

Scamper's mind was still reeling. He had finally managed to wriggle free from the bouncing little girl, and then make his escape behind her father's shed. He peeked around the corner slowly. She had forgotten him already and was bouncing, yet again, through the pink chalk boxes. He could still hear her odd song.

"Hopsey once, hopsey twice, hopsey three times is nice!"

Chloe had hopped through three boxes singing the song before pausing a moment. She then twirled in a circle, causing her skirt to umbrella slightly before settling down again in a momentary twist. As the garment swung back into place, Chloe began hopping once again, this time placing one foot in each of a set of two boxes that were next in line. She resumed her singing.

"Twisty then splits, then a-hopsey we go!"

Chloe now proceeded to hop into the next single pink square, then on to two more singles.

She sang again, "Hopsey once, hopsey twice, hopsey three times is nice!"

Scamper had already made his way back through the yard and now sat near a potted plant that was just on the edge of the patio. He twitched his tail in consternation again. Just what did all this mean? Just what purpose did it serve? Did the small human think this would somehow keep the squirrels away?

Suddenly Chloe leaped from the third square of the second set of single ones into a huge circle at its end. She slammed her feet down in its center, prompting Scamper to raise his ears in alarm, as she also screamed.

"WHEEEEEEEE! Now jumps to da middle of the roundy end!"

As Scamper watched, Chloe then left the end circle in a sprint, headed back to the beginning.

In the next moment, Scamper heard a voice coming from behind him. It sounded familiar.

"I thinks dey all be daft!"

Scamper turned to see the squirrel he had previously assaulted, standing on top the backyard fence. He was staring at Chloe and had obviously made the comment. Scamper also noticed that the bushy-tailed rodent held several acorns in his paws. The villain must have lifted them from the yard while Scamper was watching Chloe. The squirrel was a sneaky one, especially for one that came across as a simpleton.

The squirrel looked down at him and taunted, "But dey do have a way of distractin' cats so a squirrel can collect a decent meal." With that said, the squirrel somehow managed to stuff four acorns in his cheeks before he leaped down behind the fence and into the woods.

Scamper was not amused.

"Next time, rodent," Scamper thought with determination, "you will not catch me unawares."

The Misadventures of Scamper the Cat *continued...*

Scamper had decided not to stay in the house this evening. Mrs. Hildebrandt had called for him while standing in the open back door at sunset, but he had stayed hidden. He knew she would eventually give up and return inside the large dwelling. Scamper felt that tonight would be suitably warm to work on the mystery of the giant.

It was now several hours after sunset. Scamper had made his way onto the top of the rear fence. It was thin, and he had much more trouble balancing upon it than his nemesis, the squirrel. He managed to traverse the distance he needed to with only a few, minor slips of a paw. Scamper prided himself on being an expert in balance and climbing.

"Well now," Scamper thought as he leaped onto the limb he sought to reach, "I should be able to spot the giant from here—if he reveals himself."

The giant had been a legend in the neighborhood for months. Scamper's friend, Smoky, a fellow gray cat from a few yards down, was adamant that he had seen the giant actually cross the street of the neighborhood and enter the wooded area behind Scamper's rear fence only a week ago.

Climbing higher in the small oak tree, which actually was in the edge of the woods beyond the fence, Scamper found a suitable spot to rest comfortably while on his stake-out of the area.

"If any wild giant is out there, I will spot him," Scamper thought confidently.

A sound startled Scamper, causing him to spin his head back to the fence. A large, gray cat, half again his size, leaped loudly onto the branch near the rear fence. His fellow feline then made his way noisily up the tree to lie next to him.

"Smoky, you make more noise than a clumsy bulldog," Scamper commented.

"When ya get a bit more meat on ya bones, you'll do the same, sonny boy. Don't matter, I be here and situated to watch ya see the giant right with me. This'll teach that lass, Ariel, to believe me!"

"Smoky, are still trying to impress that young, empty-headed kitten of a tabby cat?"

With seemingly no offense taken, Smoky said, "Yes."

Scamper rolled his eyes, but did so only after turning his head away from Smoky. If the elder, male cat suspected any disrespect, he would and could slap Scamper clear off the oak limb they rested upon. From nearly a year of interaction with the older male cat, he had learned just what he could and couldn't say.

As Scamper quickly turned his gaze back over the dark woods, he offered, "Well, if the giant appears, we will surely see him together."

"Surely," was Smoky's only response. He then laid his wide head on the oak branch and shifted his glowing eyes like turrets seeking a target in the dense wood.

Scamper followed his elder's lead. Two sets of glowing eyes combed the woods for nearly twenty minutes before the sound of something striking the branch near Scamper made both cats jump to the defensive.

"What a bunch of fraidy cats!" an odd voice quipped from a few branches above them.

Both cats looked up to see Scamper's nemesis, the squirrel, sitting a few branches above them. He wisely sat far out on a branch too thin to hold either cat, even if they scaled the tree after him.

"What are y'all two wackos doing out here after dark? Shouldn't y'all be safe and warm in the humans' houses? You two be domesticated, don't y'all be?"

"Hello, Percival," Smoky said in a calm voice.

"Oh, it's you, old Smokster! I didn't expect you to be hangin' about with Scamper, Acorn Protector Extraordinaire," the squirrel, Percival, said with mocking disdain in his voice.

Scamper retorted, "I'll have you know—"

Suddenly Smoky hissed a short burst, calling for silence. Scamper was looking up at Percival at that moment. He saw the irritating creature lift his head and stare off into the woods. Percival's eyes flared and his little,

powerful jaws then fell open. Scamper turned stealthily on the branch and hunkered down next to Smoky, who was already staring at something moving through the underbrush.

Just as Scamper locked his gaze upon the creature, he heard Percival whisper from above, "Now that be a big cat."

Percival was correct. And Smoky had been correct. Scamper was now looking upon a giant cat—at least four or five times Smoky's size, who was near twice his own size.

"I told ya," Smoky whispered.

Scamper was too mesmerized with the sight of the beastly, huge feline to comment.

Percival whispered from above, "They say that kinda cat is wilder than us squirrels, and that none of his kind be domesticated like you fellows."

Scamper didn't know whether to believe the squirrel or not until he heard Smoky say quietly, "That's right, and they are all named 'Bob.'"

Scamper was fascinated. A giant, undomesticated monster of a cat, whose entire population was named after a human male's name—very odd. It was rumored to be hostile toward normal cats like himself, as well as other beasts and even humans. Scamper was prepared to sprint back to the yard, though how he would get inside was a problem. He did have one or two hiding places that he didn't think that the giant could squeeze into though.

Maybe he could alert the man, if need be. Scamper, as a kitten, had witnessed the fury of the angry man. A large reptile called a snake had entered the yard and frightened Mrs. Hildebrandt and Chloe. The deadly reptile had then manged to corner Scamper where the fences came together. It coiled onto itself, moving only its head while flicking its tongue. If Scamper moved to one side, its head tracked him. If it moved to the other, it tracked him that way as well. It lashed out once, but he had anticipated the strike, barely escaping it. The snake took off across the yard after him. Scamper saw the man's feet planted on the patio. He quickly dodged behind the man's feet and looked back to see the snake stop short and coil again. Before the snake had fully coiled, Scamper heard a loud, brief noise, and witnessed the snake's head turn to mush before his eyes. Scamper ran quickly and hid behind the shed, but soon peeked out again. The man was calling to him, saying he was safe now. The man held a long, stick-like object that was smoking slightly on one end. The man's wife had come out as her husband was scooping the dead snake up in a bucket. Scamper remembered the deadly stick that made the loud noise was called a shotgun by Mrs. Hildebrandt.

Scamper refocused his attention on the giant cat, who stood revealed partially by moonlight. It appeared to be a bit furrier in some places than a normal cat, especially its ears.

Abruptly, the giant feline, with a burst of speed, attacked some unseen animal in the bushes. After a short wail, the victim fell silent. The last glimpse he, Smoky, and Percival saw of the wild, deadly hunter, was a furry streak in the moonlight, headed deeper into the woods.

"Goodbye, cats," Percival said, explaining, "I need to make sure it wasn't me girl that's just been taken." Percival then made a quick exit.

Smoky observed, "I told ya, Scamper. The giant gets closer and closer and don't have no respect for us house cats. He'll probably eat us too, if he gets hungry enough. Now, I'm going to make sure that wasn't Ariel out in the woods for some reason."

Smoky stood to leave, as Scamper commented, "It didn't sound like a cat's wail, or a squirrel's. I've heard it on a few nights I've stayed out, and I think it was a rabbit."

The old, large male cat wasn't convinced, but he said, "I hope you're right Scamper." He made his way quickly down the tree to the fence, and then expertly ran across the top of the thin boards, surprising Scamper with such agility in so large a cat.

Scamper made his way down soon afterward. He thought of the giant's increasing boldness and it worried him. He worried that one day the giant may come out in the daylight and threaten he, his friends, or even Chloe. Suddenly, keeping acorns from Percival seemed a foolish waste of time. His keepers didn't give a care about acorns, but they would certainly be concerned with the giant cat hunter.

As Scamper approached the rear door to the patio, he noticed that the main door was open, and only the glass and screen door was shut. He could see that Mr. Hildebrandt was just coming into the nearby kitchen. Scamper launched himself at the door violently and hung onto the screen. Startled, Mr. Hildebrandt looked over at him, and then made his way to the door. His keeper opened the door, peeled him off the screen, and then set him inside before closing the door again.

"Scamper, you should have been in hours ago. Just where have you been?"

Scamper meowed an answer, but knew that the human just couldn't understand him. Mr. Hildebrandt just smiled and shook his head at Scamper, before continuing his mission to the kitchen. Scamper followed, meowing his story, but it was no use.

"What's all the fuss, Scamper? Are you hungry? Here, have a piece of this."

Scamper was overjoyed as the man dropped him a large piece of ham from a sandwich he was making. While he quickly consumed his impromptu meal, Scamper didn't forget the danger and importance of the deadly giant. He'd think long and hard and would find a way to alert the man to the killer's presence.

The Turning Place

He'd entered this place of his own accord. When he'd done so it felt right and he'd felt good about entering. There were many others here, and they partied with reckless abandon. He'd felt right at home as the people frolicked, and he'd joined them in their pleasure.

It had been a few hours and he'd finally gone to the extreme. His pleasure high had peaked, and now he was on its downside.

Suddenly, he remembered who he was. It was as though his mind had been blinded to the reality of just who and what he was, when he'd entered this place.

"How do they do that to me?" he wondered, as he looked around at the faces that were just moments ago his best friends. They seemed alien to him now.

"I... I have to get out," he realized, setting his mind to the task.

The man looked for an exit, but the place was huge—he couldn't locate it. He moved through the crowd, as they tried to drag him back to where he was before. He resisted their influence, which only caused them to entice him more.

He pushed and slipped his way through the crowd, as careful as he could, so as not to upset anyone. They clawed at him all the more.

"Where the @\$% is the exit!?" After he thought it, he realized his crude language was influenced by those here as well. It was just another sign that he was where he shouldn't be.

As he passed through the crowd, the men taunted him for leaving, and the women displayed more and more flesh, trying to keep him at their party.

"This is insane! Where the @\$% is the door!?"

The crowd parted and an odd man stood before him. The fellow could have been his twin.

The odd twin asked, "Hello, friend, what's the rush?"

Ignoring the uncanny resemblance to himself, he answered, "I need to get out of here. I need to get home."

"Do you, friend? Haven't you heard that home is where the heart is? Isn't your heart really here—with us? It seemed to be while you were having fun."

The odd twin had him there. Maybe the others didn't do this to him. Maybe he came of his own accord.

The man thought a moment before he answered forcefully, "I did, but it was... never mind, I just know that it's time for me to go!"

The odd twin just shook his head. He sighed, and then revealed, "Don't you know that you come here often? Sometimes you do manage a stretch away from us, but you always return."

The desperate man felt crushed because he knew the odd twin's words were true. They caused him to feel a shame that had been lacking before. The shame brought his mind more into focus. He knew now more than ever that this place was just wrong!

Staring at his odd twin, the man asked him, "Do you know where the door is?"

"But I don't want you to go," the odd twin said, and then added with a sweep of his arm, "*They* don't want you to go."

The crowd seemed to focus in on him again. The man knew he was on dangerous ground. He felt the dark power in their gaze and in the gaze of his twin. They had the power to turn him, he knew, but he also knew there had to be a way out—there had to be a door!

The man prayed. It was all he could think to do. He called out to the Lord and ignored the press of the crowd around him. Suddenly, he could feel them no more. His eyes were closed, as he prayed, while he just stood in the middle of the place—the dangerous place. Yet, suddenly, he didn't feel afraid any longer.

A still, small voice said, "I am The Door."

And in that moment came his epiphany. He truly confessed and repented of ever entering the place. As he opened his eyes, he found himself drawn up and away from the crowd below him. He ascended into a portal of pure light, the Spirit filling him again, where before the Spirit had been grieved.

The man now stood alone in his room, at home, having just come back from the dark place he sometimes visited. The place that seemed, at times, bright and fun, but the place that eventually tore him up inside. It left him truly unfulfilled and hollow, and the more he went there, the more insidious, yet enticing, the place became.

"I have to stay close to the Lord! I have to stay away!"

He knew the place was a cancer, and now he remembered its name. It hung as a neon sign from its ceiling. The sign read "Sinful Desire."

The End
(For now)