

Buster

By

Chris Hunter

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SCCI Hospital, City of Fargo, Fargo Republic
March 8th, 2032/Change Year 33
8:00 PM

The old man walked slowly through the snow; he knew sneaking out of the reception would royally piss off his wife and the rest of the family but this was something he had to do. Entering a night not much different than the one 25 years ago, he walked slowly into the hospital courtyard. The cold was really bothering the old wound in his hip, causing him to wince slightly. He was glad that no one was out and about to see the slight limp the pain was causing. It wasn't that he was vain, well not much; it's just that he hated showing any sign of weakness, especially here on this day at this time.

"Almost there," he thought, turning onto the sidewalk leading up to the

hospital entrance; he was glad that someone had taken the time to shovel and lay down some sand; probably in preparation for tomorrow's ceremony. Slipping and falling on his ass would be embarrassing. Slowly he walked up to the small statue at the entrance, and then gently started to brush the snow and chip the ice from its cold iron surface.

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Fort Courage, Duluth Minnesota

March 6th, 2007/Change Year 8

6:00 PM

Buster was confused, the giant stables was in total chaos and worse yet Jeff and the mayor were arguing! Buster entered high alert mode. Jeff and the mayor were friends so Jeff probably was not in any danger, but you can never be too careful. He was sworn to protect Jeff no matter what; it had been that way ever since that terrible night long ago when Jeff saved him from the eaters. They had gotten Momma and the rest of his family and were just about to put him in the stew pot when Jeff came and opened the eater's skull with his ax. Buster shivered at the memory as he sat in his spot on the sled watching and waiting.

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The Mayor watched as Captain Pavalka carefully inspected his sled. Silently he cursed the Change. He should be sitting back enjoying retirement, playing with the grandkids and spending the royalties from his books, wrestling videos, and movies, not as the leader of an independent city-state worried about running medicine to stop an epidemic in Fargo. Jesus, *Diphtheria!* And it took a week for that rider to get here! How many more would die before they could get the anti toxin to them? Was he risking one of his best people on a fool's errand?

"Well", he thought, "This is why I get paid the big bucks and it was my idea to enter politics; sniveling about it now is a waste of time. Thank God Terri and the kids were on the campaign trail with me and we were in Duluth when the change happened." He wondered for a moment if he would have won

the Governor's race, and if his friend Arnie would have ever entered politics like he kept threatening to do, but knew he needed to focus on the here and now. So with the iron will forged in the jungles of Vietnam, he forced himself to concentrate on the task at hand.

"God Damn It! I asked for volunteers! I didn't expect the commander of my Pathfinder Company to be stupid enough to do it! Damn it, Jeff, you're not a 21 year old Green Beret any more, you're a 45 year old Captain! You're needed here, especially with the Chippewa getting froggie!"

Captain Jeffrey C. Pavalka, commander 1st Pathfinder Company made a final adjustment on his sled and gave the Mayor an evil grin. "First, a Green Beret is a hat. I was Special Forces, but knowing that a Seal can't count to 11 without dropping his pants I'll let it slide... again. Second, didn't I use that same argument on you last summer when you lead that expedition to Hibbing?"

"That was different."

Jeff grinned, "And this isn't?"

"Then be smarter than I was and send some one else."

The captain gave a heavy sigh, "Christ Jess we've been over this, just who the hell can I send? Z, Walker, Mahoney? All down dogs and sleds from that run in with the Sioux down near Mille Lacs right before Christmas. They need at least three months minimum to train up new dog teams.

"Harvey? 229 is down south chasing raiders, Johnson's and 228 are on northern patrol, Stevens and 227 down near Marshal, Poehlor and 226 out east near Richland, and Mother Goose and Wolf have the recruits on a training run down to Fort Senneling. In short Jess that leaves me, so don't bitch about it because you screwed up!"

"Me?"

"Ya, I wanted to form a Battalion, remember?"

"Then send someone from one of the shipping outfits. Fargo's only half

as far as Des Moines - one of their teams can handle it."

"Going through Chippewa territory, even the southern half, is not the same as running freight between here and Des Moines! Besides they don't know where the caches are."

"OK, OK, you're right. You happy now?" The mayor looked down at the small rat terrier watching him from the sled. "At least leave that mutt of yours behind."

Jeff made a final check of the canisters holding the antitoxin, then reached over to scratch behind Buster's ears. "You volunteering to take care of him?"

"Hell, no."

"So he goes. Now Mr. Mayor, Sir could I ask to have your assistance in pushing this sled outside and hooking up the rest of my dogs so I can be on my way?"

"Certainly Major."

"Major?"

"Have to think about how it will look in the history books."

Both men chuckled as they pushed the sled outside into the cold night.

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Cache # 77, Near Hill City, Minnesota

March 7th, 2007/Change Year 8

6:00 AM

Buster watched as the long hairs wolfed down their food; the stupid wolves would sometimes snap at each other while eating, and next to guarding Jeff, keeping order in the pack was his most important job. Reasonably

pleased with their performance, Buster had to admit that the brutes were earning their keep today. Walk, trot, lope, walk, trot, lope, eating up miles, hour after hour, as they ran through the night. Buster, of course, keeping watch all the way. Nothing really dangerous; a few tigers off in the distance, but no Moose, thank you. Tigers were smart enough to stay away from a running team of husky/wolf mix, but Moose! Those devils were downright crazy! Not many ghosts. Like all dogs Buster could see wandering spirits, and some, especially those that he and Jeff had sent to the other side would go out of their way to distract the long hairs just for spite. There were a few out and about, but nothing to get excited about.

Once he was sure that the long hairs would not try and kill each other Buster made a more thorough inspection of the old abandoned warehouse. Once again satisfied that all was in order he went over to sit down by Jeff as he began preparing their meal on the small alcohol stove. It smelled like good moose kielbasa and it was making his mouth water. Let the long hairs eat cow eyes and pig snout, not that he wouldn't eat lower-class fair but one had standards one must keep up, even in the field.

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Major Pavalka leaned against the sled and scratched behind Buster's ears as he waited for their meal to finish cooking. He was happy with the mission so far; they had covered a little over 80 miles in just less than 8 hours running. Once again the network of caches he had insisted be established over the last 5 years had proved their worth. Most people never realized just how much food was needed to keep a dog team going, especially on a speed run like this. It was caches like these along with the unbelievable speed and flexibility that made the Pathfinders such a force to be reckoned with.

The plan called for laagering here for 6 hours then going to a 4-hour rest/run cycle to the next cache near Park Rapids. With luck they should make it there by first light. Then depending on the weather make the final run into Fargo some time tomorrow afternoon. The route would take them right along the edge of Chippewa territory but the Major wasn't too worried. The Chippewa had learned just how dangerous it was to mess with an enemy that had the ability to strike in the dead of winter, burn down your villages,

and then fade into the night. It was the Pathfinders not the Militia or the Calvary that had changed the Chippewa from major threat to the minor nuisance they were today.

Buster growled softly when the Major stopped scratching his ears to take the meat off the stove. "Quiet, you grumpy old fart, or you can get your own food." He gave his small friend a final scratch. "Or better still I can feed you to the Huskies." Buster's bark at the mention of becoming breakfast brought a smile to the Major's face. He rubbed the small scar on his right cheek, a souvenir from the day he found Buster, "Ya, like I would ever do that." Taking the kielbasa from the pot he cut off a chunk and tossed it to the small rat terrier then wrapped the rest of it in some of his wife's good lefsa and began to eat.

After eating Jeff made a final check on the dogs, jotting down a few notes on things to check on at the next stop and a reminder to have the recruits come out and re-stock the cache; it would be a good training exercise for early summer. Finally, making sure that his battle-ax and ballistic knives were in easy reach, and with a belly full of good moose meat and potato bread, the Major covered himself with his buffalo robe and slept. His small friend curled up next to him.

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It was the nightmare that woke Buster up. It was the same one he always had, back in that damn cage again, watching momma trying to protect them from the eater. Momma biting and snapping as the damn creature grabbed her and strangled the life out of her. Buster shivered in fear as the eater skinned her and threw her into the pot, then grabbed his brothers and sister and did the same. Finally grabbing him and just like the last time he snarled and bit, but it did no good, and this time there was no Jeff there to save him. As he stared into the cold eyes and smelled the fetid breath coming from the mouth full of yellow teeth he knew he was dead, and as usual he woke up just before the eater strangled the life out of him.

His ears standing up Buster heard the almost imperceptible crunch of snow just outside the warehouse. He carefully butted his head against Jeff's chin, until he felt his friend's body stiffen as he came to instant alertness.

"Good," he thought, "if the eaters thought they were going to get a free meal, they are in for a very unpleasant surprise."

The Major came to instant alertness before Buster could bump his chin for the second time; carefully he picked up his two ballistic knives. Keeping his breathing steady he started counting his heartbeats and listened. "Yep", he thought as his mind began to process the late morning sounds, *"two, maybe more, but not likely."* He wasn't sure if they were up to no good or not; the abandoned towns still had usable salvage and many small outfits did scavenger work during the winter, but best to be safe.

A few moments later all doubt was removed from his mind as the door to the warehouse burst open and two screaming Chippewa warriors burst in. Just as suddenly, the first to enter crumpled like a sack of potatoes, with 3 inches of cold steel protruding from his forehead. The second was just as unlucky, ending up with 6 inches of steel through the neck. The warrior managed to take two steps into the warehouse before collapsing. Springing to his feet, battle-ax in hand the Major cautiously approached the intruders.

"Damn stupid kids", he thought as he carefully approached the attackers. He looked down at the bodies of the two pale skinned blond teenage boys, wearing the deerskin jackets favored by the Chippewa tribes. Probably out hunting when they ran across my trail and decided it would be a good way to make their bones, impress the elders, and get pussy by bringing back a Pathfinder Scalp. Making sure both Indians were dead the Major pulled the blades free and began the difficult process of reloading his knives.

Definitely time to leave, but before going he took a moment to drag both bodies out into the street. He could have scalped them, and by rights since they had attacked him while he was sleeping taken their eyes and broken their weapons, but didn't. They were just a couple of stupid teenagers, not much different from the ones who showed up every year to try out for selection. They made a stupid mistake and paid for it with their lives; he didn't believe that that was bad enough to leave them blind and helpless in the after life. Let their families come find them, or worse let the wolves have them. Either way it was time to go.

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Old Highway 10, 15 miles east Fargo

March 8th, 2007/Change Year 8

6:00 PM

Buster watched as the sun began to set, the fading light was making it harder for him to see, but that was to be expected. He was a little worried about Jeff, since the run in with the eaters, the team had had to abandon the original run-rest cycle they had used on the run from Duluth to the first cache. The team was still on the same run 4-hour rest 4-hour run cycle but no longer taking a 6-hour break ever day. It was fine for the dogs, they actually got to rest during the down time, but he could see the toll it was taking on Jeff. With feeding, watering, checking paws, massaging sore muscles, and replacing booties and harnesses he was lucky to grab a quick bite to eat and a few minutes of sleep before it was time to move out again. Buster helped as much as he could; a quick bite to a stubborn long hair that did not want to get into harnesses, a growl and a bark to settle down a pair of rookies who wanted to fight over a scrap of meat, but Jeff still had to do all the heavy lifting.

Buster could feel the excitement building up in the team since the last break. Jeff had moved Skeezyx from lead and replaced him with Brandy and Bourbon, the two sprinters, which meant a speed run was coming up. Nothing, absolutely nothing in the world was quite like a sprint; with speed causing the friction to form a thin layer of ice making on the runners making the sled go faster and faster, the long hairs running their hearts out, and the wind blowing in your face as you hung on and enjoyed the ride!

Well, not every one was excited. Skeezyx was still pissed about the switch; it meant he had to run next to Billy Joe in the middle of the team, and Skeezyx hated that. He had even tried to twist away from Jeff when he started to hook him up, but a quick nip to the neck and a growl had settled Skeezyx down. Skeezyx had a bit of an attitude; a great lead dog for maintaining a steady pace, but the brute could not seem to grasp the simple fact that he was never going to be top dog. That was Buster's spot, and while the former lead dog might be pissed off Buster knew he would do his job and that was all that mattered.

Buster knew the moment he had been waiting for was coming and quivering with anticipation. He felt Jeff's gloved hand rub the back of his neck as Jeff tucked the sheepskin under Buster's feet. Watching the sky, knowing that soon Jeff would give the word and the team would take off at a full lope. It just needed to be a little colder and a little darker before Jeff would give the command. It was at that moment he saw the Moose, partially obscured by the half-light charging the back of the sled and knocking Jeff into the snow.

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The Major smiled, as they passed the green highway sign that said: *Fargo 15 miles*. He felt some of the bone numbing cold and fatigue leave his body. The team was in fine form, moving at a mile eating walk-trot pace for the last two hours. Reaching forward and down he ruffled the fur on the back of Buster's neck and adjusted the sheepskin covering him.

"Easy buddy, easy. Almost there, about another hour."

In a moment everything changed when the bull moose that had been standing in the darkened forest charged, hitting the Major in the side and sweeping him off the sled.

The attack caught the Major totally by surprise and he hit the ground like a sack of potatoes. With the wind knocked out of him, he tried to rise to his feet. If he could free his ballistic knife he might have a chance. He managed to make it to one knee but the moose was relentless. Charging again, the moose hit him square in the chest throwing him backwards, knocking the ballistic knife from his hand. Sprawled in the snow, weaponless, the Major did the only thing he could, rolling into a ball, covering his head with his arms and presenting his back.

The moose began working the Pathfinder over in earnest. The Major lost track of the number of kicks and stomps inflicted on him, somewhere during the attack a sharp blow to his hip caused his leg to go numb, later he felt the agonizing pain of his shoulder being dislocated. The moose finally stopped for a bit, and the Major risked a quick look. Peering out through

silted eyes he saw the demon outlined against the snow; its red eyes glowing like coals staring back at him looking for any sign of life. If he could convince the moose he was dead, he knew he had a chance, but the moose wasn't buying it. With his lungs burning the Major risked a quick breath, no sooner had he drawn the air into his lungs than the demon renewed the attack.

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Buster watched in horror as Jeff was knocked from the sled. Before he could react he was slammed into the back of the handlebars as the damn huskies panicked and went into a full lope. This was not the exciting sprint he had hoped for but a deadly out-of-control run that, unless Buster did something quickly, would end badly. Working his way free from his sheepskin cover he did the only thing he could think of, sprinting down the short length of the sled and leaping into space. He had hoped to snag one of the long hairs. He missed, but his actions caused Billy Joe and Skeezyx to stumble and trip, forcing a chain reaction throughout the team. Seconds later the jumble of dogs and sled came to a stop.

The long hairs howled, bellowed and thrashed about. Only Buster's nips and growls kept them from making the tangled mess worse. Finally they began to settle down and Buster began pulling on the quick release knot hitching Brandy to the gang-line. It took all his strength; the knot was frozen, but he eventually had the big brute free, and together the two dogs went to work freeing the others. It took time, but eventually he had the team free. With a snarl and a deep-throated growl Buster ran back up the highway, followed by rest of the team. The Moose was about to find out that hell has no fury like that of an enraged rat terrier and a pack of wolf-huskies mix.

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The Major lay as still as possible trying to hide his breathing, but the moose kept attacking over and over again. The pain was unbearable; he had lost all feeling in his right leg, and could no longer move his left arm.

He knew he was dead. Offering up a prayer that a patrol from Fargo would find his sled and get the antitoxin to the city in time, he opened his eyes and tried to rise. If he was going to die it would be on his feet facing

his enemy. Bracing for the moose's final charge he saw something he would never have believed possible.

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Buster saw Jeff struggle to rise to his feet. The Moose was killing his friend, the man he had sworn to protect, and that caused something deep inside his brain, down in the part left over from his wolf ancestry to go click. With a fury even greater than Buster had felt the night the eaters killed his family, he attacked.

With a deep-throated snarl, Buster sprang into the air sinking his fangs deep into the Moose's tail and held on for all he was worth. The Moose bellowed in pain and the rest of the pack attacked, it was payback time.

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The Major staggered to his feet and watched the short and furious battle play out. First Buster swinging from the moose's tail then flying through the air, distracting the moose long enough for the rest of the pack to move in. Like their wolf ancestors, the pack played stick and move with the moose, howling and snarling like the hounds of hell, the moose bellowing and snorting in return. Hit from all sides and with a crazed rat terrier biting at his hooves, the moose never had a chance. Soon brought to its knees, the moose bellowed in pain as the rest of the pack began ripping it to pieces. The moose was finished, but not before its powerful hind leg made one final kick. A kick that hit Buster in the chest and slammed him, hard, into a tree.

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Buster yelped as unbearable pain shot through his body, and again as he slammed into the tree. His last thought before passing out was that he hoped the long hairs got a good meal.

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"NOOOOOO!" Jeff crawled towards his friend hoping for the best but fearing the worst. He found Buster at the base of the tree, and gently

picked him up. Cradling his friend in his arms he gently probed for wounds, feeling a sickening squishiness in Buster's chest. Hating what he knew he had to do he took out his jack knife, wishing he was back at the sled and could use the morphine from the medical kit. As he pulled Buster's head back to expose his throat, his small friend woke up, but instead of the look of fear and pain Jeff expected, he saw nothing but fierce pride, determination, and love. Looking deep into Buster's eyes Jeff knew at that moment that his friend was not ready to die. He wanted to finish the run like he always did. It might be cruel and watching his friend in pain would be hell on earth, but he owed Buster this final gift, this last run for the small dog soldier.

Giving a sharp whistle, he called the team off the moose. He could see in the last of the light that the creature was still breathing. The humane thing would be to put it out of its misery, and if he had his bow and if the moose hadn't wrecked his shoulder he might have. But approaching a wounded moose could be deadly, and he had a run to finish. Limping back towards the sled, a small part of him hoped the wolves would get to the moose before it died.

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SCCI Hospital City of Fargo, Fargo Republic

March 8th, 2007/Change Year 8

8:00 PM

Doctor Peter Olson was exhausted, it had been ten days since they had sent riders to Duluth for antitoxin. Since then the diphtheria outbreak had turned into a full-fledged epidemic. If the antitoxin did not arrive soon, the death toll would be horrendous.

Walking into the front lobby he hoped to grab a cup of tea before making another final round of the children's ward. No sooner had he poured a cup than the front doors of the hospital opened and the wild man staggered in. At least that is the way he appeared, all bloody, bruised and half frozen, holding a dead dog in his arms to collapse half way between the front door and the desk.

"Nurse!" the doctor yelled as he ran towards the man now trying to

rise to his feet. "I need some help over here." He looked at the wounded traveler, "Take it easy, buddy, you're in a hospital. What's wrong?"

"My sled." The man choked out, struggling to his feet.

"Forget about your sled, buddy. Now let us help you."

"No!" The man pushed him away and stood up and the small dog he was carrying snarled and bared its teeth. "I'm Captain... no, Major Jeffrey Pavalka, Commander, First Duluth Pathfinders and this is my lead dog Buster. We have 4 canisters of diphtheria antitoxin outside on my sled. So get off your asses and go get it, and I need a place to take care of my dogs!"

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Buster could not understand why Jeff was so sad. He knew Jeff was tired and to be honest really banged up, but so was he. But taking on a full Bull Moose will do that to a man or a dog. So why was his friend so sad, especially when all these people here were so happy to see them? He felt Jeff's hand scratch behind his ears the way he liked, and kept hearing Jeff say what a good boy he was and how brave and strong, the best dog ever, and a grumpy old fart who always finished the run. Buster wagged his stubby tail at the last remark, and felt a warm happy glow. He tried to raise his head up, to rub against Jeff's beard, but he just couldn't do it, he was too tired. That was ok though, the run was over, and they had completed their mission. Best of all he was in a warm safe place, and Jeff was there and safe so every thing would be all right now. Time for a little nap, just like when he was a pup curled up in Jeff's arms, all he needed was a little sleep... just a little sleep.

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Jeff watched as the life slowly faded from his small friend's eyes, and felt his heart being ripped from his chest. He cradled the small body to him, tears streaming down his face, crying with the wracking sobs of a strong man unused to showing grief, and slowly collapsing to the floor of the Hospital. The Solider in him feeling fierce pride as he gently kissed the top of Buster's head, but the man felt the incredible loss and wondered if all those lives saved was worth the price paid.

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Buster opened his eyes; he stood for a minute looking up at Jeff kneeling on the floor, crying and cradling his body to him. He wanted to bark to let Jeff know that every thing was ok, that he should not to be sad, and finally to thank him for letting him finish the run. But he knew that Jeff would not hear him. Only dogs can see and hear ghosts. He wondered what he was supposed to do next, when he heard a faint but familiar bark from behind him. Momma? He heard it again, louder this time and strangely compelling, it was MOMMA!! He ran straight through the wall and outside following his mother's bark, a happy feeling in his heart. But he could not leave yet; he had one last thing he had to do. Slowly he turned around and walked back to the sled, stopping in front of Brandy and Bourbon. He stared up into the eyes of the two huge brutes, sitting at attention in front of him.

"Sorry I called you stupid wolves." Buster thought, he heard his mother's bark again, coming from a bright light, just behind the sled, it was louder this time and more compelling then the last, but she would just have to wait a bit longer.

"Thanks for helping to save Jeff; it will be up to you to take care of him from now on. So look after him now that I'm gone. Turning his head to look directly at Skeeyx he added, "and don't give him a hard time!" Both lead dogs bowed their heads, followed by the rest of the team. Buster gave them one last bark and then began walking towards the light. As he passed the team he began to trot, and as he passed the end of the sled he began a full fledged lope. He knew this would be his real last run, but his heart was happy, after all, for a dog solider there were worse ways to go. He sprinted towards the light, it was time for the best part of all, and he was going home.

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City of Fargo, Fargo Republic
March 8th, 2032/Change Year 33
8:00 PM

The old man finished brushing the last of the snow from the statue of

Buster. He stepped back to inspect his work, and a small tear ran down his cheek. The image of his small rat terrier stared back with the fierce pride and determination he remembered so well. Looking down he once again read the inscription on the plaque at the base of the monument.

*Buster
Lead Dog Fargo Serum Run
He Always Completed The Run*

"There you are grandpa," came the voice of the small boy walking towards him. The old man smiled as he watched his grandson Quinton scratch the ears of the rat terrier puppy nestled under his parka.

"Grandma said you'd be here, she says to tell you the speeches are about to start and for you to get your butt inside now."

The old man laughed, "Well I guess I better get inside then."

The two turned away and headed back towards the reception.

"Grandpa?"

"Yes, kid?"

"Are you a hero, like every one keeps saying?"

A tear rolled down the old man's cheek. "No, Quinton, but I sure did run with a pack of them. How would you like to hear the story about your dog's great-great-grandfather?"

"Ya! That would be cool!"

Smiling and taking his grandson by the hand they began walking back down the path away from the hospital. "Well it really all started right after the change, I was on the trail of this outlaw. I finally nailed him in an old cabin just as the bad guy was about to kill this puppy and throw him into the stew pot. Any way, the pup was a feisty little guy all full of piss and vinegar and..."

And with that Colonel Jeffrey Pavalka, commander, First Duluth Pathfinder Group headed back to the reception.

The End

In memory of the real Buster, a good friend, and a really grumpy old fart. Born some time in 1997, died March 8th 2007. Sleep well old friend.