

## “That Tarnished Gruff Cross: A Chort Story”

By T.D. Smith

For my dad, who taught me to love reading, fairy tales, fantasy, and literature, especially short stories, here is a story, (the best thing I think you can ever give someone!) a fairy tale of my own of sorts, based on his favorite fairy tale, on this, October 30<sup>th</sup>, 2020, his 58<sup>th</sup> birthday.

### 1.

The object was old and invaluable. Tarnished, deeply so, but unmistakably gold. Of the highest kind and quality of whatever era long ago in which it had initially been forged. Its two perpendicular, thick bars intersected in a tiny star, some of whose thin gold rays had chipped off long ago. It must have gleamed when it was first made. Though aged, it yet ever shone in radiant beauty. In the mind's eye and the heart of that artifact's holder, it still gleamed, because of what it symbolized and what it was to him, and he marveled at it.

He had found it at last, after so much painstaking search, that old, tarnished family heirloom. He did not want to part from it.

“Well, what do you want for it? What do you think about the price I said? I can go a tad higher.”

“No,” the old man spoke to the pawnshop owner after a momentary pause, lost deep in thought. “I don't want anything for it. I simply want you to hold onto it and sell it to the next person who walks through your door.”

The old man sidled up to the shopkeeper's clear glass table with an uneven hobble, a case containing a menagerie of various trinkets, antiques, and alluring oddities. He bent forward and uttered instructions to him. The puzzled owner of the shop obliged him, nodding his head in agreement, regardless of being quite uncertain of the intentions of the man before him or his insanity.

Then the elderly man slid the golden relic, its thick brass chain rattling on the glass, across the table to the shopkeeper. He turned and exited the shop and waddled off down the street then, off to find another man he needed, who would dupe the next customer to enter that shop.

“This will work,” he whispered to himself, “it *has* to.”

### 2.

Sometime before that, the old man was much younger. Rummaging through old boxes he found in the basement of his inherited manor in the middle of a quest to tidy up, he discovered an old, dusty journal. He picked it up, dusted it off, and blew the remaining cobwebs that refused to be wiped away from off its brown leather-bound jacket. “H.G. Gruff” the journal's cover bore, inscribed in glittering gold script. He gasped as he recognized the unmistakable initials of his grandfather. He opened the cover and began reading.

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*I knelt in prayer. The year was 1920 and the plague still ravished the city. Man, woman, and child were not to be spared from its rampant snuffing out of the flame of life. I worried greatly for my wife and child. The boy was so weak of stature. Asthmatic. He was at great risk of contracting the plague. Work was especially stressful. I wanted nothing but time with them. Instead, nearly every day was full, and we would send ten or twenty off to the morgue by sunset. I feared that eventually if I stayed here, I would inevitably send my wife and child off in a bag from my practice, too.*

*I wanted desperately to escape, to flee into the countryside with my wife to raise our child in peace and tranquility away from the bustle and omnipresent death of the city. To have space, clean air to breath. To escape and be rid of the plague that had lasted so long, refused to go away. These were all I desired.*

*I was almost there. I was less than a hundred dollars away in my savings. Still a small fortune back then, but after saving every penny and acquiring as much as I could manage into savings for so long, it seemed tiny. It was tantalizing, how close I was.*

*We both adored the manor. Its Victorian spires, multitude of spacious rooms, and large grounds and wooded surroundings. The perfect place to grow and raise the family we both wanted. I was so painstakingly close in my savings to the critical amount we needed for a down payment.*

*I prayed.*

*“Ahem,” I heard.*

*Turning, I saw it, a grotesque looking thing. Short, horned, half man, half beast, with cloven hooves for feet and a pointed tail.*

*“I can give you that which you seek.” it spake in a guttural growl. “You have only to pledge your eternal soul to me.”*

*“Never! I would never do such a foul thing!” I exclaimed.*

*“That’s all fine, then,” the horrid thing said, “but it’s a shame you should let your wife and child be subjected to the torment and death of the plague filling this city, that you care so much about your own soul that you would not give it over to save them!”*

*He tutted and turned, striding away from me.*

*“Wait!” I called out.*

*It paused, then slowly turned to me.*

*I agreed to his conditions. He spawned a bag of coinage from thin air, then extended a hand, which I took firmly in mine and shook, sealing our deal. I shivered, feeling some dark, cold energy cross from him into me. Then, he handed over the bag to me.*

*I opened it and counted the coinage therein. Gasping, I jumped for joy, realizing it was more than enough to purchase our home.*

*“Thank you!” I cried out, raising my head to face the monster and express my gratitude.*

*But he was gone.*

*A week later, and my wife and I sat in the den in the new manor. The fire crackled and kindled, warming us, tossing dancing shadows upon the ceiling and walls as our offspring lay on his belly reading a novel by its light, his eyes looking large, refracted by his thick lenses.*

*My wife smiled contentedly.*

*I frowned.*

*Staring at the shapes the fire drew, I could have sworn I saw that same imp that had aided me in my quest to purchase this abode. He was smiling a quite unfriendly smile. Despite*

*the warmth of the blaze in the hearth before me I shuddered. What would become of me, for the deal that I had made? How long would I be allowed to take up abode in this homely estate, and what would become of my soul after such time had elapsed?*

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The young man had shuddered, too, his heart racing as he read his grandfather's writing and made realizations.

His grandfather had lived in that house for five years prior to collapsing suddenly and dying of a heart attack. The young man's father, the youngest of three children, had grown up not knowing the parent who'd suddenly died. His oldest older brother died of polio, and the middle one recovered from it a mere few years later. His mother fretted for her remaining sons' lives. She was a good woman and was not tempted by gold or man's trinkets. She prayed for them and the boys survived to adulthood and grew into strong men.

The young man's father, the youngest son of his grandfather, had used his half of the inheritance his late father had left to him and his brother to attend university. There he had met the love of his life, whom he had married and settled down with in the same Gruff manor, (his brother was a rather unusual character indeed, and had forsaken the family heirloom, giving its ownership over to his younger sibling instead, asking only to rent a guest bedroom in return) raising three children like his father before him. They were prosperous and well off.

Until the Great Depression had hit.

They had lost everything. Nearly lost their home, the manor.

"NO!" the young man's father had said, striking the kitchen wall with all his might. The young man could still remember it. "No! I will not sell the house! It is our home! We will not live in some shanty town somewhere! Heaven forbid it!"

He remembered, too, his devout father stooped by his bedside in prayer. He had wandered in worriedly into his parent's bedchamber later that evening. His father had arisen sheepishly and offered comforting words to him before tucking him back into bed.

Years later, and that same father lay on his deathbed.

"The beast! That devil! Chort!" his father had spoken to the young Gruff man, his only surviving son. He sporadically spat a story about how a demon had visited him that night years ago after he'd tucked young Gruff back into bed. It had offered him a small fortune in order to keep the house, in exchange only for his soul. The young man remembered being terrified by this broken tale and had wondered what "Chort" meant. He assumed his father had been going mad so close to death.

Now, standing in the basement of Gruff manor, grasping his grandfather's journal in hand, his mind racing in recollection, he realized he'd been utterly wrong.

Presently, in the basement of the manner he, too, had inherited and was raising three children of his own in, he reflected.

His mother had grown mentally ill after the death of his two brothers in the Great War, the one that was supposed to have been fought to end all others. He himself had been exempt from having to go and fight, having been born with one leg that was significantly shorter than the other that caused him to walk in an off-center hobble. Deemed unsuitable for combat, he had stayed and home and watched his despondent mother deteriorate, being simply unable to continue living. His father had joined her shortly thereafter, of nothing medically explicable than a broken, failing heart.

“Chort! Do not give into Chort!” his father had urged him with his final breaths. The young man, the last living Gruff brother his father begat, was bewildered, and dutifully obliged him, though he had no idea what his father’s words meant.

Young Gruff, too, had used his fortune to enter the university and study. He did not study business, the path of study his father had gone into, determined to make more money than the previous generation, a dream that ultimately proved just as futile in the face of the Depression as his grandfather’s attempts to save his oldest asthmatic son’s life had been.

Rather, the young man instead studied Theology, religion, and classics at the behest of the only other caregiver in his life, his uncle. The man told him to study the deep things in life, looking beyond the mere material surface, that thin curtain veiling reality that blinds so many men. Uncle Gruff urged his nephew to strive to serve and understand and value the spiritual things and their Creator first and promised that all good things would follow if he simply loved them first.

During his second year at university, Uncle Gruff had left his temporary lodgings in Gruff manor and entered a monastery, forsaking worldly possessions and earthly pursuits altogether, and donning the name and spiritual armor of some great Saint he adored who had preceded him in life.

The young Gruff was lonely indeed in the house, then, if still surrounded by the servantry, when he was on breaks from his studies. He sought company and found it and warmth in a childhood friend who had now grown into womanhood, beautiful and bright. He soon married her after he graduated, and though poor and struggling sometimes, they were happy and had three children, a boy and a girl who were fraternal twins, and a third, young son.

Young Gruff loved them more than anything in life. He prayed for them daily. He prayed for the salvation of their souls, and the same for his ancestors and relatives, daily. He marveled at their accomplishments. They were not born with the same impediment as he had been and could play sports. This overjoyed him and he greatly enjoyed watching his children’s games and contests at various times throughout their youth.

This young Gruff was a good person. He did what he could for others, and even went beyond, giving til it hurt. Sometimes his wife would be upset with him for giving what she thought they did not have to give. But she understood the important, *truly* important things in life, and how to properly live, too, and she would soon forgive her husband. Young Gruff had no enemies, only adversaries in life. So he told his children. Those who set themselves against him in life he prayed for, too.

Every so often over the phone on Sunday nights young Gruff spoke to his uncle, the monk, on the telephone when the latter was given blessing by his Abbott to do so, and even went to visit him at the monastery on occasion, taking his children with him to worship there. One such proud occasion was when his uncle was ordained into the priesthood. Years later, after so many years of devoted service, and his uncle was awarded a golden cross.

Now, though, down in the large basement, the young man read these words of his grandfather’s he’d found in his basement and was distressed. He found himself profoundly worried about the spiritual safety and sanctity of his family. Lucky for him, his uncle called him that night.

“Don’t let your heart be troubled.” the monk told him. “Pray unceasingly. When you fall in life, get up. Repeat this til your final day. If you do this, everything will work out. What you have told me I have known, bits and pieces of, my whole life. I have reflected on it and prayed about it

and will continue to do so. When the time comes, I suspect you shall have to confront this monster. I will do whatever I can to help you. But in the meantime, be steadfast, stay diligent, yet go about life, enjoying your blessings, and do not let your heart be troubled.”

The young man did his best to follow his uncle’s advice.

The years passed, and the young man was no longer such a young man. His children were grown and married. He had grandchildren of his own. Four, in fact! He moved out of the manor and gave it to them. Eventually he and his wife moved happily into an apartment for retired people. He lived a long life, taking joy in the fruits of his labors, the greatest of which he always considered to be his children. Times were tough here and there, and they sometimes struggled with money, but they always seemed to get by. He was sure this was owed to the grace of the same one who had blessed him bountifully in so many ways already.

As young Gruff transformed into old man Gruff and his hair grew steadily grayer, so too, did Uncle Gruff age, becoming frail and bent in stature. Family members and people who knew or had the opportunity to visit the monastery and meet the monk marveled at the incredible old age he reached and wondered how he kept continuing in such a feeble frame. As his body waned, Uncle Gruff’s spiritual powers waxed, and he became a well of wisdom and inspiration to his family, if to most extended family members only by the thought of him and his example. The time came finally, however, when the old monk had grown to a point where it was time for him to give away his final earthly possession, his very body and breath, and pass forever into the next realm, becoming altogether fully spiritual.

Shortly before his uncle passed away, the now old Gruff received a final phone call from him.

“This is the last time I will be able to call you from this number, I am afraid, my dear nephew. Be at peace and pray every day, okay?” Uncle Gruff whispered into the receiver.

“I will.” the nephew promised.

“Look, when I am gone, that devilish creature will be unleashed. He will seek you. He will want nothing but to claim the soul of another Gruff. He will come to you when you least expect it, when you are at your weakest. As always, stay steadfast. Seek my cross. Bear it. I will leave it to you. Okay?”

“Okay.” the man promised, again unquestioningly, finding himself uneasy and again not quite understanding what a dying old Gruff man meant.

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After the funeral, the man was given a note by the Abbott who had found the tiny piece of folded paper sealed with candle wax in his uncle’s cell. It had his nephew’s name scribbled on it. Old man Gruff was astonished; he had not expected to receive any kind of inheritance from his late uncle except perhaps prayers from beyond. With the utmost care he broke its wax seal and read the note.

*My dearest nephew. It is my duty prior to exiting this great yet temporary creation God has made to tell you certain things. Family secrets, or a secret, as it were, that I did not trouble you with before for fear it would impede your peaceful enjoyment of life with your family. Now I am afraid I must warn you. My toils and prayers have held him off, but soon, Chort, that devilish imp, will no longer be held at bay and he will come for you at some point. You need to be ready. Prepare yourself daily for spiritual warfare! To aid you in this matter I leave you my gold cross, that by it you might find salvation, as will my brother and your grandfather, as well as your wife and children and all Gruffs who come after us. The one I will be buried with will be a false one. I*

*am giving away the real one freely to you, and it is yours and the family's. It always shall be so. I am simply passing it on to others for safekeeping in the meantime, for it eventually to come back to you in a roundabout way. Please, pray daily. Pray unceasingly. And follow the clues at the end of this letter to the cross that you will bear.*

The Gruff man, youngest and last of his brothers, whose hair was now graying and who had to put on a pair of reading glasses to read the letter left to him, clutched his hand over his mouth as he read his beloved uncle's parting words. The remainder of its body served as a reminder, containing the familiar story about his father, his uncle's brother, who had exchanged his soul to a ghoulish creature named Chort, an ancient, hoofed demon, in exchange for money to save his family in the time of the Great Depression. This had not worked, as is typical of demonic dealings, as ultimately two of his sons had perished in battle, his wife had died in despair, and he too, overwhelmed by loss and disconsolation, had perished.

*This beast ailed your grandfather, my father. He tormented my brother, your father. He will come for you, too, and if we do not act together, will do so to your children and your children's children. But we have the light of Christ and the power of his Cross and together we will ensure that this cycle of the beast's torment ends with us, if you are willing to make the sacrifice, nephew, which I believe you are. Know that I will pray for you unceasingly, I pledge and promise, even from beyond the grave.*

The letter continued, then listed a series of clues that the man vowed in his heart of hearts to follow. He did. They were not easy to decipher or follow, but he did and as he followed them, he interpreted them, discovering their meaning. Old man Gruff was as clever as he was good, and his academic pursuits in Theology and the classics had made him adept to solving riddles and understanding mysteries. They were not easy and at times he found himself at the edge of despair, but his wife, who was quite clever in her own right, too, helped him, comforted him, and eventually, one fine day, he discovered the location of the now stained, oxidized metal cross, and held it in his hands at long last. He now understood why his uncle had sent him on this chase and not simply given the hallowed item to him: he had sent it away to have it blessed by people he knew and considered to be holier than himself, over the relics of many monastics who had come before him. Uncle Gruff's cross had traveled the world between monastery after monastery after his death then been laid to rest in the final spot for his nephew to find.

The old man had had ample time to concoct a plan of his own during those several years it took he and his wife to locate the cross. Finalizing it in his mind, one day old Gruff found himself before a certain pawn shop, which he hastened to enter, walking with an uneven hobble, to give away the family heirloom freely of his own accord, just as his uncle before him had done.

### 3.

The old Gruff sat kneeled next to his bedside. His wife was already tucked comfortably away and dozing under the covers above him. Just like his grandfather a hundred years before him, his heart was troubled by a plague that had broken out. Everyone around him had to stay indoors, to be careful where they went if they had to go out, and to wear a mask. He was worried about his family members. He knelt his head in prayer, begging his Lord to above all

save the souls of his children, his grandchildren, his wife, and his ancestors, and also to spare their bodies from the horrible, seemingly omnipresent disease.

"I can guarantee that happens." A pernicious sounding voice called out to him.

The man raised his head and turned it. There, in the doorway, stood a short, hooved man. Half man, half beast, he had fur on his torso, a deep crimson color, and a long, spindly, pointed tail. Ram-like horns jutted from his head, and his eyes burned orange like fires, with snakelike pupils. He smiled, pointed teeth sticking out from his lips.

"I am Chort." the thing informed the old man in a snarling grunt. "Your grandfather knew me. I helped him purchase Gruff manor. Your father knew me, too. It was I who helped him to keep your family financially afloat through the Great Depression that befell your lovely country."

"I know who you are." the man said, looking right at the monster.

There was a time when he would have been terrified, trembling, taken aback by the sudden apparition of such a beast. He was unafraid. Old Gruff was unshaken. He was too old and too wizened by now to have a trace of tumult in his being.

The demon frowned at him. He had never experienced this reaction to his sudden appearance before and was rather perturbed by it. Nevertheless, he proceeded with his spiel.

"I have an object to offer you. Much like that which I generously gave to your predecessors, it can ensure that you get what you want. What you are begging for." he hissed.

"Oh? And what is that?" the old man inquired, feigning ignorant interest.

"Why don't you take a look?" the hooved thing asked.

He produced something from thin air, wrapped in brown paper. Stepping forward he offered it to the old man. Taking it in his hands, Gruff opened the gift. A soft, golden gleam glinted off his skin and eyes. He smiled. There it was again.

Misunderstanding the man's happiness upon beholding the item in his hands, the centaur-ish imp smiled again, flashing his sharp teeth.

"So, do we have a deal?"

"Yes." the old man agreed.

The centaur galloped forth and held out a hand. The old man took it. The centaur's smile faltered, not feeling the usual passage of evil energy flowing between the two of them, but he quickly shrugged it off and thought nothing of it. Then he galloped away from the man, disappearing into thin air, leaving him behind to look at the golden object in his hands.

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A few more years passed. The old man's family turned out to be fine. Eventually, after what seemed an agonizing aeon, the plague dissipated. Life returned to normal. Many perished in it, but not the Gruffs. This sobering fact troubled the old man. He prayed for the salvation of everyone who had died during the deadly disease's rampage. His grandchildren grew up and flourished. This pleased the grandfather greatly and his soul rejoiced, nonetheless.

One day he knew his time had come. Like his uncle and ancestors before him, it was time to pass into the next life. He called his grandchildren, each of them, that day. He told each of his children he loved them. He took one final glance at his will, having to squint through spectacles that did not correct his vision enough. Finally, that night he kissed his wife goodnight one final time before turning off the bedside lamp and covering himself up in the bed in their tiny retirement home apartment. He breathed his last, deeply and full, then fell asleep, the deepest he had ever gone into and from which he would never return.

He felt himself falling. Slowly at first, like a feather, then accelerating, growing quicker and quicker by the second. Everything was dark. He felt a cold rushing wind. He managed to flip himself over from his back to his belly, so that he was falling into the blackness prone rather than supine. He could see nothing.

Then finally, a tiny amount of light. He was fast approaching something that looked to be a gargantuan keyhole. Growing faster still, he approached and traversed through what he realized was a long, wide crag in the top of a cave. His spirit entered the cave and continued descending into a faint amber light. It was reminiscent of the last glint of twilight after the sun has already disappeared over the horizon.

Faster and faster he fell, and as he did, he knew he would soon smack against the cave floor. Just as he feared he would collide with the floor of the cavern and explode, his descent slowed, and he fell lightly and easily the rest of the hundred or so yards, landing softly and painlessly there in the middle of this cave. He looked all around. The cave seemed to be lined with gold, and the light, for which he could not tell had any source, glimmered off its walls, creating an illusion of constant twilight.

The man walked about, his shorter leg taking longer to reach the cave floor than his long one, walking still with a limp-like stride as he had throughout his life, looking this way and that. Far off he thought he heard screams, which echoed a bit off the cave walls. He heard dripping water here and there. The cave was dank and ominous.

After some wandering, Old Gruff stopped short in his tracks. He had come before two men. He recognized them instantly. They were his father, young as the day he'd died in despair of a broken heart, and grandfather. He'd never known him in life, but he recognized his grandfather here unmistakably, both remembering photographs and *feeling* the fact that he was his kindred.

"Dad!" Old Gruff spoke.

"Yes, my son, it's me." the older Gruff replied. He smiled, but not because he was happy to see his son. There was some note of sadness and defeat in his eyes.

Old Gruff moved forward and flung his arms around his father, then his grandfather in turn.

"Come, walk with me, won't you?" Old man Gruff asked his ancestors. "We have so much to talk about!"

His grandfather frowned, looking at his grandson wistfully. He shook his head.

"We can't," he explained, "look."

The grandfather pointed at his feet. Old man Gruff beheld what he had not noticed before: both his father and grandfather's feet were buried up to the ankles in a mound of gold coins.

"We are bound here, stuck fast by that with which Chort lured us." Old Gruff's father elaborated. "We cannot budge from this place."

Old Gruff futilely tried to help his father and grandfather, taking them by their hands and pulling, but they were right: they could not budge from that place.

At once there was a high-pitched laugh that pierced out, echoing terribly on the walls of the cave. From nowhere, Chort galloped forth and stood facing Old Gruff, an arrogant look of both contempt and victory on his face. He was hideous, even fouler looking here in this place than he'd appeared some years ago in each of the Gruffs' bedrooms. Horns protruded not just from his skull, but all over his body. He looked to be a thing of pointed teeth. His skin was slimy



and dripping. His breath materialized into puffs of black smoke with each one he drew. His eyes were veritable bonfires, billowing outward from their sockets.

“Your relatives are stuck here. Bound here by the things they exchanged their souls for in life. Just like you.”

Chort produced the golden cross. He held it out tauntingly to his new captive by the chain. Gruff took it, clasping it by its upright, longer beam.

“You, too, are stuck here. A deal is a deal. You traded your very soul for that useless trinket, just like your father and grandfather traded theirs before you for so many coins, which themselves are useless trinkets, too. Now, you are mine. Forever. To torment and torture and keep here. And so, too, will the rest of your family be!” Chort chortled, then laughed a raspy, haughty laugh and began dancing all about, his hoofs clacking on the cavernous ground.

Old Gruff ignored the monster. He looked at the cross in his hand. As he did, he saw it begin to glow. The tarnished gloss on its bars peeled away before his eyes, revealing pristine, new gold beneath. It burned brightly, that cross, filling the space with a different light, purer, brighter, and warm. Chort saw it and covered his eyes, frowning.

“No.” said Gruff.

Chort stopped laughing and dancing.

“This is no trinket. Not by a long shot. It is the cross. It belonged to my uncle, who bequeathed it to me. And his prayers now work through it by the same power that this symbol represents and channels. A power far beyond yours and one you can do nothing about! You have failed, Chort. You’ve been out tricked. Your spell is broken. You’ll have neither me, these Gruffs, nor any ever again! We will be taking our leave now.”

With those words spoken, the bright and golden cross began rising in the air. Still clasping it, Old Gruff took his father by the hand. His father instinctively grabbed his own father’s hand, too. Chort rolled his eyes, scoffing as they rose, but did nothing to try to stop them.

“That won’t work. They are bound here.” Chort snorted.

Chort’s eyes widened and he bellowed out indignantly when the feet of the two men he’d tricked, captured, and tormented broke free of the piles of gold, and, hand in hand with one another, they began rising in the air along with the cross. He was absolutely baffled, speechless, that revolting monster, and he stood there watching his prey get away for a few moments, before he shook his head violently.

“No. NO!” Chort shrieked and galloping forward he dug one hoof into the top of one of the mounds of coins and took a flying leap into the air.

The monster grabbed the ankle of the Gruff grandfather and dug his horned hands into his flesh. The grandfather let out a wail. Glancing down, the Gruff who held the cross saw the new plight of his grandfather.

“Quickly!” Old Gruff ordered his ancestors, “Climb up me! Grab the cross!”

They obeyed him, and first his father climbed up his son’s body and grabbed the upright of the cross and held it tightly, followed by the grandfather. As the grandfather passed, with one arm Old Gruff grabbed Chort around the neck. The demon struggled, sputtering and spitting.

But Gruff held him tight.

“I love you,” Gruff told his ancestors, who now gripped the family cross.

“We love you too.” both the grandfather and father replied, tears in their eyes.

“Pray for me.”

“We will.”

Old Gruff, the youngest Gruff there, let go of the cross then, and with his newly free arm, he ripped Chort's grip from his grandfather's ankle. The two of them hung in the air for a millisecond. Chort's eyes widened fully and his slit-like pupils narrowed. He let out a scared, bewildered cry. Then they both began to plummet back downward, careening toward the cave's floor.

They accelerated as they went, their fall growing faster. Chort screamed in dismay all the way down. Gruff did not. He remained unshaken, still, silent. He did not slow down this time, his second descent into the glittering cave. Chort hit the ground first, though, and caught all the weight and force of the Gruff above him. Chort hit the cave floor and his body exploded, bursting asunder. That ancient beast was no more. Gruff rolled away some yards, then, a bit shaken by the impact, stood, feeling himself all over. He was amazed to find that he was unharmed.

Panting, Gruff looked up then and watched them go. His grandfather and father still rose, clutching the cross. They, too, were now illumined in a golden light, wrapped in it like a garment. It grew brighter and brighter as they ascended by the cross into glory. They would soon be out of the crag in the cave. When they crossed through it there was a bright flash, and they were gone.

Still panting, Gruff sat down on the cold floor of the cave and gathered his thoughts. He smiled, filled with great joy. He had done it. He and his uncle's plan had worked.

"We're free." Gruff remarked to himself. "My family is finally free."

He sat in quiet thought for a bit. How long would he himself have to stay here? An hour? Days? Weeks? An eternity? He had already decided long ago that he was okay with that.

He would far rather go to hell for his family if it meant they would be saved, than to have it the other way around.

The sacrifice was well worth it.

Something came to him in that moment, words of his uncle in the midst of the dark, cold, cavernous environment. Words Uncle Gruff had uttered in a homily once, long ago, that this Gruff and his children had heard when they'd gone to visit the monastery.

"Those who are not ready for it, who cannot stand to be in the presence of God, well, heaven would be hell for them. Those who are prepared spiritually, prayerfully, well, for them heaven is already wherever they are. They carry it with them everywhere they go."

Gruff, the last one who would ever be tormented by the defeated beast Chort, smiled then, content, quiet, and feeling a deep, tranquil resolve in his soul. He could not see his relatives, but he could *feel* them. He was still alive, his soul was still alive, and it rejoiced. He had given them everything, and he would remain here, living on for them. He was okay with waiting here, even if it meant having to wait for the Judgement Day or beyond to be fetched.

He lowered his head, closed his eyes, and raised himself to his knees.

And there, deep in that cave, Gruff began praying.

THE END.