

The Legend of "Musky" Stelner

By Ben Bar

Musky Stelner was a known commodity. His parents, Bladdy and Felton, had given him the name Marcus at birth, but before long, "Marcus" was a faded, unrecognizable relic having as much to do with Musky as a moonrock. Yet "Musky" hadn't just stuck, as nicknames so often do.

When children first come to grasp the tenuous separation between fact and fiction, they become slaves to the obvious power of the lie. Typically, its luster does not hold the attention of the ravenous child-mind for long. But Musky's brother, Aviro, found one particular untruth absolutely irresistible, and it consumed him to the point where he seemed to have only one purpose in life: to indelibly christen his brother "Musky".

Yes, Aviro was a good old fashioned troublemaker, but he had a hell of a clean haircut, and in that city, that counted for much more than good sense or a keen intellect. And boy did he know it.

During their schoolyears, Aviro zealously campaigned to popularize "Musky", using it at every possible opportunity and then some. "Musky Stelner cometh!" he'd shout in the streets, even when it wasn't true. "Musky isn't trusty!" he'd cry at

public functions. With each bellow of "Musky Stelner", Aviro gained momentum. His grin became wider. He knew he was one step closer to making his brother *be* Musky Stelner.

By the time "Musky Stelner" had become commonplace in New Burbington, and Musky's pariah status was a foregone conclusion, Aviro had already become a man - a man with worldly interests. And so he left, to join the International Murdering Federation.

Yes, Aviro left, while Musky...Musky stayed.

And he *would* stay, too.

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Musky Stelner arrived at the airport at 8:00am.

"I'm here," he beamed. The airplanes all flew away immediately.

"Wait!"

Unfazed, Musky sat down on the airport bleachers to consider his next steps.

"I'm still here," Musky asserted, steeling himself against assured hostility. The airport closed its eyes.

"Go away, Musky Stelner," it said.

"No. I'm at the airport," Musky sternly replied, wanting his words to anchor him in place.

The airport bleacher rolled away from under his bottom and sent him tumbling.

"Wow, my seat," Musky remarked in disbelief. He collected himself and peered down the light-glazed hallway, which seemed to elongate with each passing moment.

Musky walked unburdened through the staggeringly empty premises, his bags having crawled away from him en route to the terminal entrance. Barren food courts, lineless kiosks, and abandoned bars drifted past him on both sides as he shuffled forth determinedly. Then, something stirred in the distance. An airport chatsergeant picked up a blue telephone.

"Musky Stelner sighted. Close your doors. Now. He might give up on catching a flight here. If he does, you can be sure he'll head your way."

Musky raised his hand.

"That will stop me from going there, sir."

The chatsergeant thrust the receiver into the wall-mounted phone housing, sending smashed pieces of the switchhook to the floor with a series of diminishing *clinks*, and closed his entire face.

"Boy oh boy..." Musky mumbled. He dejectedly slid his hands deep into his pockets and walked back to the entrance.

"The planes will get homesick and come back," Musky thought, rallying. The intercom crackled from high above Musky's insignificant head.

Click crkcrkcrkcrk zzzzz crkcrk "Our planes are forbidden from getting homesick." *Click*

"That's outrageous", Musky objected, raising his voice slightly.

Click crkcrkcrkcrk zzzzz crkcrk "Musky Stelner, we know who you are. Please leave the airport as soon as possible." *Click*

Musky looked up at the baggage area clock. As soon as he did, its second hand froze. The clock flipped over.

"Well, I gotta know the time, at least", Musky muttered.

Taking offense, the exit signs became glaringly bright and somehow numerous, bathing a helpless Musky in harsh and horrible scarlet hues. Musky yelped and stumbled away grimacing, with hands shielding his eyes.

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When Musky finally mustered up the courage to gaze on the world, he found himself in a new space, roughly circular in shape, and connected to many corridors. In the center, an airport doorman was sectioning off the halls one by one with retractable belt barriers. As soon as he caught a glimpse of Musky, he yanked the visor of his hat down forcefully, all the way to the bridge of his nose.

"Please follow this path towards the exit, Musky Stelner."

Drunk on hope, Musky wobbled gently beneath the now-calm fluorescent lights as he tried to stand perfectly still,

believing that this tactic would render him undetectable to this brusque man whose eyeless scowl seemed to singe the very air between them and whose pursed lips seemed to say, "I am incapable of leniency."

"Your flight's been cancelled," the man growled.

Musky pressed his lips together in sincere imitation and stared at the airport doorman as hard as he could. He had a feeling this man must understand gruffness more than anything.

"I bought a ticket to Paris...", Musky said, nearly choking on his words trying to lend his speech an affectation of toughness.

"You cannot use that," the airport doorman explained sternly. Musky's lungs crumpled. "Please walk this way until you leave the airport." The airport doorman crossed his arms.

"I would like to buy a cheese pretzel first", Musky complained in a voice so tiny an ant could hear it.

"It is airport policy that Musky Stelner cannot be sold a cheese pretzel. Please leave via the nearby exit doors."

Musky's heart plummeted down a never-ending pit and his mind became plunged in darkness.

An airport sweepman standing at the far end of the baggage area started sweeping dust onto Musky's shoes with a twenty-foot plastic broom. Musky didn't budge. He couldn't. The broom bristles nudged Musky's heels with a *shish, shish, shish*.

Musky spent several hours swallowing his dreams, painstakingly forcing each viscous lump down his throat until his belly ached. "Nothing can be done", he concluded.

"I will go home."

Musky took one very slow, very small, very sad step.

"The nearest exit is this way. You stepped away from the exit, Musky Stelner", the airport doorman barked.

shish-shish-shish-shish

Despite how far away the sweepsman was, Musky could see his forearms bulging as he strained mightily to sweep his broom to-and-fro into Musky's shoes. Musky turned around and briskly walked towards the exit. The airport doorman said nothing.

Click crkcrkcrkcrk zzzzz crkcrk "Attention - Musky Stelner has almost left the airport." *Click*

A plane drew just near enough for Musky to see it on the horizon. Musky stopped dead in his tracks and squinted.

Click crkcrkcrkcrk zzzzz crkcrk "Musky Stelner...continue leaving the airport at once." *Click*

Musky murmured to himself, wishing that some sympathetic force - a spirit, a satyr, a serpent, a senator - would come to his aid.

"I want to get on a plane..."

Musky took several more strides towards the exit. The sweepsman began to enter sweeping range again.

Musky glanced over his shoulder and quickened his pace. As Musky approached the doorway to the parking lot, the sweepman gave Musky's heels a few firm, final sweeps for good measure. No sooner had Musky stepped through the threshold did the doors slam shut automatically with a booming *clunk*.

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As Musky meandered in the parking lot, he could hear the distant sounds of planes landing on runways. He ran his fingertips over the ticket in his pocket. He knew he could get on a plane. If only they'd let him.

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