

To Save A Life

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The story you are about to read is, tragically, based on real history: graphic, bloody history. Please don't let your kids read this.

To Save A Life

Constantinople, July 25th, 1261

The bitter wind made him clutch his cloak ever closer to his body, lest he die of the elements. Not that it mattered anymore. To him, anyway.

The waning moon hung far off in the sky, on a night where no stars shone. Its cold light cast great shadows, ultimately doing more to shine out the darkness than bring forth the light. Were there any to see it, the watcher cast barely a silhouette.

There was once light here, and life, too. The towering land walls he stared at, waiting, were once alight with torches of the guards, who worked even at night, admitting tradesmen, travelers, pilgrims. All who knew of the Queen of Cities, the Gem of Christendom, the Apple of the World, would desire it. And so they took it.

Almost a thousand years ago, when Constantine the Great brought the Empire which bestrode the narrow world like a colossus from the precipice of ruin, he decided it should have a capital worthy of its true greatness. Rome was a city washed in innocent blood and offered to the hungers of wicked

men and dark gods: it was a once-great castle built on a swamp of filth and despair. The Empire deserved a new heart, built on the power of imperial greatness and the majesty of the God of the Cross, who had brought Constantine victory and dignity to even the lowest slave. In this place between Europe and Asia, he paid dearly to every artist and holy man to fill his City with light, glory, and beauty. He made an abode of light, driving back the darkness. And so it was a safe place for him, to hide from the sins of his past. For a time.

Staring at the dumb gates hanging silently in their place, the watcher wondered what they were even there for any longer. To keep people out? To keep something in? To fool those who wanted it back that these walls, erected by the titans of old, could care to protect the desperate men who now hid inside them?

Dust swirled in the derelict road below. The howl of the wind was answered this grave-quiet night by a rending iron groan. One of the gates touched the ground, its hinges too brittle to try any longer. It staggered for a moment, then collapsed into the road.

Far away in the City, under the same dying moon, a towering bronze statue of a man long dead

stood atop his massive column. Though long dead, he dreamt that this grand testimony to his greatness would lord over the low men that had to pass beneath his shadow for all time. Though long dead, he would always be wreathed in the glory of this world. Still he sat on his cold horse, arms raised in triumph, eyes staring over his empire, reigning over a dead world.

When the gate collapsed from its own weight, there were none here alive that noticed. The air grew still.

From the outer darkness entered a distant cry, muffled in the silence of the night. Men for whom this City, this Desolation, was their Dream. With God on their side, they could have it once more!

Better to have let God keep it.

Constantinople, 8th of May, 1202

All the nobles and great men of distant courts bowed down once the sitar began playing. High and powerful all these men were, to be sure, but they assembled at the whim of the Emperor, God's Viceroy on Earth, the Man Who Was Equal of the Apostles. Few dared look up to see the older man walk by them to his throne in the East, the blazing sun at his back, much less see the diamonds and precious things sway with his steps. Basil felt the others cringe when the golden lions of the throne roared their acclamation.

As the flute began to sing, the sitar fell silent, allowing the men to rise once more. Standing at the foot of the Imperial Throne, a gigantic Ethiopian banged his silver stave on the marble floor, bellowing, "ALL HAIL THE MOST AUGUST EMPEROR ALEXIUS THE THIRD, PRINCE OF THE NEW JERUSALEM, EMPEROR OF ALL THE ROMANS, DEFENDER OF THE ONE TRUE FAITH!"

"HAIL!" they acclaimed.

The old man, clad in purple and gold, looked pleased, muttering to his herald, "Very good, very good, my good Menelik." He smacked his lips

languidly, his voice barely rising. “Welcome my good men. May the Lord of Hosts bless and keep you,” He finished His greeting, uninterested. “So, what do We have for today?” He muttered under His breath.

A shrew of a man appeared as if from nowhere to kneel at the Emperor’s left heel. “Your Majesty, the Duke Philip of Swabia, husband of Your niece, has sent a delegation to pay homage to the Gloried Throne,” he whispered.

“Ah. Swabia. That’s in the Germanies, isn’t it?” asked the Emperor, feigning interest.

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“Very well. See them in. Be quick about it.”

The advisor slinked down the purple-tiled dais to the leopard-clad Ethiopian, whispering the Emperor’s wishes.

BANG.

“THE EMISSARIES OF THE COURT OF SWABIA WILL ADVANCE AND PAY HOMAGE TO THE GLORIED THRONE!” bellowed the Ethiopian.

A delegation of four men in brown brocade trimmed with fine pelt walked to either side of the

crimson carpet meant only for the Emperor's feet. The men were proud and clean-shaven, and each seemed to bear the authority of those who had faced great odds. These qualities were ill-suited to the threats before them.

The four bowed in unison, the leading eldest beginning to speak. He wore long, silver hair, aged by war and tragedy beyond his years. "Your Majesty, Emperor Alexius, of the - "

"THE DELEGATION WILL PROSTRATE THEMSELVES BEFORE THE GLORIED THRONE OF THE MOST BENEFICENT EMPEROR OF ALL THE CHRISTIANS, ALEXIUS THE THIRD!" interrupted Menelik.

Taken aback, the leader asked, "I understand that those tied by marriage to this Imperial Court simply bow before the Throne."

"YOU GERMANS WILL LIE ON YOUR BELLIES BEFORE THE EMPEROR, BEGGING HIS GENEROUS ACKNOWLEDGEMENT!" shouted Menelik. The black man lowered his bellow to a snarl, finishing, "Only when He so generously grants it may you, and you alone, kneel and pay homage!"

Basil stood with his companions, Nicetas and Dukas, watching intently from outside the spectacle. Showmanship and the gentler forms of intimidation were common tools of the Roman court. Public humiliation of a kinsman's embassy was not.

"I will do no such thing," bristled the ambassador. "I, Henry of Swabia, brother by marriage to this Court, will do no such thing! My brother, Duke Philip, sent me to bring words of greetings from him and glad tidings from his wife, not to worship a man!"

The Emperor Alexius lazily interfered, saying, "Ah, but only He Who Dwelleth in Heaven deserves such adoration, dear Henry. I am but His Appointed and Humble Servant in this world. Being family, you may kiss the Ring as a show of familial fidelity," He said, extending His arm slowly forward. "Your attendants will lie down before the Throne."

An old soldier himself, Count Basil knew what just happened. The self-indulgent Emperor Alexius III, who only came to power by blinding and imprisoning His own brother, was making a show of strength to His Court at Duke Philip's expense. Weak as the empire was, this seemed a terrible decision.

Henry, if he had any doubt before, saw the same thing. Nodding to his men, these proven men lowered themselves onto the cold, glittering marble under their feet. Henry advanced to kiss the Emperor's Hand, only to be stopped short by the clenched fist of the Ethiopian.

There was a ring on it. The golden seal of the Caesars.

Reluctantly, he kissed it.

"Welcome, brother Henry of Swabia," drolled the Emperor, much pleased. "What good news do you bring Us?"

Scarcely able to hold back his disgust, Henry held up two scroll tubes. "Your fair niece bids You good words, Your Majesty. She is pleased with the court and considers her new home a bounteous country."

The advisor scurried down to snatch her sealed letter.

"And the Duke Philip, Your Brother, Your Majesty, bids You God's blessing. He also sends word of a more urgent matter. He has discovered that some of the Slavs are enflamed with lust for loot and have

eyes on Your European domains. If you will have it, the Duke Philip offers to raid their flanks if You will march against them.”

The advisor snatched the second tube greedily and skulked away.

“It is most generous of Philip to offer his enthusiasm, but We have no such need for his scant efforts. The Court is well aware of the wanderings of the barbarians. Indeed, We find Our Country once again beset by the dumb brutes of the races of men. To end this, We will make such a grisly example that they will all know their proper place again.”

Henry responded soberly, “Your Majesty, Your Brother the Duke Philip sincerely wishes to aid Your Empire in this. Even now the men of Bulgaria prepare to —”

“That is fine and well, Henry,” dismissed the Emperor. “I am glad you came this day, for you may witness and so tell Philip how the wild hordes were brought low by Our Will. Within the year, We will send forth a mighty host to drive the pagan Turks from Anatolia. Perhaps then, We may give Christian charity to your country men you left without succor in the

Holy Land.” Shifting his gaze from the emissaries to the further assembly, Emperor Alexius waited.

BANG.

“COME FORTH, COUNT BASIL ARGYRUS, AND BE RECOGNIZED BY THE MOST AUGUST CAESAR, ALEXIUS, EMPEROR OF ALL THE ROMANS!” pounded Menelik.

Basil had not expected this.

Chamber of War, Blachernae Palace, later that day

It doesn't really matter how slowly you drag your palm across your face: the damn thing you didn't want to deal with will still be there when you're done.

"Unless you want to be the scandal of the whole empire, you might as well accept it, Basil," tittered Andronicus Palaeologus, the Emperor's Chief of the Armies.

Basil knew the Chief's qualifications for the role: he had never once campaigned with an army, knew not one soldier, had never been in a fight, and had never left the comfort and security of the city walls wrought by Theodosius' genius centuries ago. And he was Emperor Alexius' most ardent sycophant.

Count Basil Argyrus was a provincial lord and generally stayed away from the cesspool of politics in the capital, and it was precisely because it was full of useless people who somehow convinced other useless people to join them in a rank conspiracy against everyone else. Even if the petty nobles and ministers of the court occupied sprawling palaces with exquisite gardens, like this one, the only reason they could build it was because they robbed someone else of something

of value to make it. There were some worthy men who strode these halls, but they were hated or assassinated by the rest. The table on which Basil's hand rested was topped with lacquered wood brought from beyond India: the price of this table alone could feed ten families for six months, or pay a soldier's wages for a year. The setting sun filled the polished chamber replete with maps of Egypt and Spain, places the Empire had not ruled for centuries, with a warm haze.

It may not remove the problem, but face-palming does make you feel like you've done something about it.

"I have not been on a campaign in some time, and what precisely is the Emperor's great plan for driving the Turkish hordes out of the half of the empire they've had for the past hundred years?" protested Basil, finally dropping his chagrin.

The Chief continued flippantly, "Count Basil, really, this is a glorious opportunity for yourself and the good of the Empire. We all know you are skilled in the ways of war, you have scored victories against the Turks before, and now is a perfect time to march against them again."

“You mean to say that taking the war against an entrenched enemy who has almost driven us entirely out of Asia is a good idea? With what army will I march?”

“Ah, yes, Basil, 2,000 mercenary infantry, 150 Cuman cavalry freshly hired from Dacia, and six transport ships, provided by Venice,” blithely responded the Chief.

Incredulous, Basil asked, “Do we have no Romans fighting for their country in this war?”

Andronicus batted his eyes almost as if having a fit. “Oh, dear Heaven, no, Count Basil. War is not something for the civilized. We have the brutish nations we can command to fight one another. It is the opinion of the Emperor, taking my humble advice, that one drop of Roman blood is worth more than a whole city of barbarians left to wallow in their filthy ignorance. No, no, there are no provisions for a citizen force to go with you.”

“What of provisions and baggage train?”

“Of what, Count Basil?”

“Horses and wagons to carry our food and supplies.”

“Oh, you will have to see to that.”

“ARE YOU SERIOUS?”

Non-plussed by Basil’s anger, the Chief claimed, “I am afraid I am. There should be plenty of supplies you can buy or seize en route, so being limited in your maneuver by a baggage train would only hinder a clever commander such as yourself. And think of all the riches you’ll be able to plunder from the reconquered lands!” he dazzled the frustrated warrior, hands waxing like sparkling coins falling from the sky.

Basil knew that covering his face with his hands would not make the problem go away. What else could he do?

The Chief pepped up, “OH! We will be late for the Emperor’s Party! He’s hosting the saucy actors and the charioteers for the Green team tonight! It should be smashing, as He spared no expense!”

It still didn’t help, but he wished it would.

“Coming, Basil?” chimed the Chief of the Armies.

The Court of Love, twilight

Basil cared not for yet another party at the Imperial Court. While those who knew only the safe confines of this Gilded City lived for and adored them, he knew too much of the dangerous world beyond the walls.

To be sure, he was a noble of this court, landed, moneyed, honored, and pedigreed. His family could claim the Emperor Basil the Second, the Bulgar-Slayer, on whose glory and power the Empire had coasted for over a century. His forefathers had ridden with the Emperor John Tzimisces, and it had been his line that told the Emperor of the spectacle of Jerusalem, the Holy City, laid just on the horizon from where their army stood, deep within the wounded heart of the Muslim Caliphate. Tzimisces, a man who took power and glory by his own hand, humbled himself by proclaiming that he was unworthy to behold the Holy City if he could not hold it against the Saracen army marching from Egypt.

Alas, Basil could claim no such heights of grandeur for himself. His family estate lay in Anatolia, the Land of the Rising Sun, in the province of

Bithynia, between the Phrygian mountains and the Black Sea. His home was under constant threat from the Turkish hordes, and even though he never had the men to meet them in numbers, he kept his lands safe in many dire campaigns. On none of these had he received more than kind words of support from whatever man sat on the Most August Throne, but he had men of stout heart that pledged their lives and fortunes to the salvation of his home and the souls of pure Christians that relied on him. It was a lonely war he fought, but one he had preserved.

Several times, he had been asked, and so kindly compelled, to ride to the defense of the Empire in Europe. He spilt the blood of Bulgars, Serbs, and countless pagan riders from the northern wastes. Against these he had not always triumphed, nor had his men's sacrifices always been honored by the Crown for whom they had spent their lives.

But with her near, he could forget this for a time. His mind began to clear of this history of strife and future of turmoil, as he ascended each step of the vine-laced path under the starry sky. The chambers of

Irene, his love. She was a flower of a woman, a lonely beauty from a foreign land.

Irene had come to the Queen of Cities from the courts of Provence, to be the bride of an imperial cousin. He had been a noble soul, which he gave only a fortnight after their wedding on the fields beyond these very walls.

A horde of Cumans had swept down from the hoary northern mountains, ravaging all in their path on horseback. While courtiers and pretenders plotted to take the Throne and hid behind the walls, the noble cousin rode forth to save the innocents outside the walls. He had studied the art of war as part of his education, but had never been a warrior. Rather than risk his Emperor's Throne or life, he led the mercenaries that would soon abandon him to the mercies of the cruel.

The wild men broke his front line, triggering a panic and flight in his troops, who found their lives more worthy than the Emperor's gold. He and his companions were trapped and fought to their ends, bravely earning their Creator's reward.

Basil, hurrying back to the City from his estates, crossed the waters with his men too late that night to save the defenders of the City, but did scatter the looting barbarians to the winds. Count Basil ordered to most heinous torture every Cuman he captured until they gave up the mutilated body of Irene's husband. His men solemnly bore the body into the Golden Gate, met by the mourners who stayed safe within because of his shed blood.

The Emperor paid his kin honors, and also to the man who brought his body home. Basil paid a visit to the bride while she yet mourned, pledging himself to provide for the dead man's house as his penance for arriving too late. They wept together, and a fresh love bloomed from their tears.

But that was a long time ago, and time had eased their loss. Just before the invasion, Basil had lost his wife, dead with their child within. He contemplated joining them on the other side when word reached him of the City's need; the purity of carnage eased his troubled mind. Basil and Irene were older now, and though never married, they pledged their love to one

another. The Emperor's tribute to Basil had been to never send her away or to marry her to another.

Her arms enraptured him from the candle-shadowed room, her parlor caressed by the night breeze. The sweet flowers of her perfume filled him, the breath from her body lifting him to that height only men who have truly loved can dare know.

"I've waited for you, my love," she whispered softly. Brushing her locks aside, he drank in her twinkling eyes. "I heard the Emperor was having a gay party, so I knew to wait for you here," she jested. Her full lips formed a smile, the red lipstick on those tender petals glistening in the dark.

"You know me too well, my heart," he smiled back.

Letting his arms clasp at her back as she draped his neck, their lips met, parting enough for only the Holy Ghost to see. Her delicate gown pressed against the rough cloth of his hunter's vestment. It was easy for them to get lost in the swirl of passion and scented oils in the air.

He prayed that was all of today's news she heard.

Placing her slight hand in his, she led him to the window, open to the glowing City sky, before setting them upon the lover's couch. Her painted fingers played with the knot of his cloak. "Have you no manners, Basil?" she smiled. "I don't want the dirt of the streets on our couch!"

"Of course. You wouldn't want me to ruin this expensive couch, you usurer."

Her mouth opened, curled in feigned scandal. His lips brought them back to their proper place.

The cloak found its place on the marble beneath them.

They curled in embrace, as the musicians hidden in the back of the room lifted the delicate tones of the water piano into the air.

"I hear that Bithynia is beautiful this time of year. Do you know anyone who might let me see it?" she asked coyly. She had never once been to his home.

"Oh, it's a nasty place right now. My peasants are in revolt again, crying about their taxes. Apparently, they think I'll ask for their blood when I get their last bit of cabbage." He had often proffered flimsy excuses to keep her from seeing his home.

There was something too dangerous out there, beyond these walls, for him to ever want to take her there. In these walls, he told himself, she would stay safe, and his.

“Well, it is true that their lord is foul, and smells of unwashed bear pelt.”

“My beard was washed just yesterday, thank you,” he reposted, his fingers jabbing her precisely to elicit giggles and squirms.

And so they reclined in their bliss. She had not heard of the Emperor’s Grand Campaign, so it seemed. If he could keep it from her until the deed was done, all the better: she always worried when he campaigned.

She had already lost so much beyond those walls.

Magnaaura Palace, Constantinople, after sunset

Nicetas Choniates enjoyed a good party! To be sure, Alexius III knew how to throw a lavish affair, even if he was already bankrupting the Empire. After overthrowing his younger brother Isaac, who had ransomed him from a Muslim prison and given him important positions at the Court, Alexius thought he could buy real loyalty by throwing money at anyone who seemed to be important. Empires and armies live and die by the fullness of their coffers, and the Roman Empire was showing signs of its excess. Nicetas should know of these things: he served as the Chancellor of the Treasury when Isaac realized he was spending and taxing the Empire into ruin.

After betraying his own brother, Alexius needed an owned man to rob his people blind for him, and Nicetas gracefully tendered his resignation. Oh, a little graft and making sure certain friends found gold coins waiting for them for favors paid is fine, but not on this scale. As the coachman pulled to a stop outside of the palace, Choniates the philosopher prepared for a night of revelry and witty duels. There would be more temptations in this one gathering than most people face

in a lifetime. It is said that virtue untested is not really virtue at all. Nicetas had settled for being found wanting. And why shouldn't he enjoy it? Someone else would pay the price.

He strolled past the peacocks, glimmering in the light of the olive lamps. He and a party of senators were led to the garden facing the sea, and none of the senators objected to his scandalous touches on their wives. One of the joys of philosophy, Nicetas mused, was that it could be used to confuse the minds of men: done properly, a philosopher could convince a faithful woman that cheating was the highest form of loving fidelity, a priest that trembling blasphemy was the only way to curry God's favor, and that acceptance of the most shameful acts was the hallmark of morality. And to think, his father had sent Nicetas and his brother to learn a righteous education in this City. At least it had worked on his brother.

Nicetas did not always use his powers for evil, but some company preferred it above others.

The African obelisk set in the midst of the garden dwarfed all in attendance, as well as the bronze animals that circled it in the fountains. "Ah, a good

crowd tonight,” Nicetas thought. Already, a pair of lovers was writhing in drunkenness in the reflecting pool, their soaked white garments slipping away from what little decency they had.

Nicetas was startled by the sudden appearance of the dark-browed grin of his friend, Alexius Dukas. Nicknamed “Mourtzouphlos”, which means both “bushy-browed” and “sullen” in the original, Dukas possessed both characters of the word. He was shrewd enough to climb to the heights of power in the Empire, all the while in a fury about the decadence and lack of any sensibility in its ruling class. His family was quite guilty in this public shame, since they produced several emperors, not all of which were worthy of the title.

Dukas had personally waged two expeditions against rebels in the Empire, for both Isaac and Alexius, and rode with Count Basil to fend off the Turks on occasion. Nicetas came to trust the man when he put down a conspiracy at Court against Choniates, while he was busy stabilizing imperial affairs in Philippopolis after a disastrous war with the Germans.

Dukas’ problem, as the Court came to see it, was that he couldn’t really be trusted: he could so

rarely be bought, and he kept so few mistresses. He wasn't like the rest of the Court at all.

"Hail Caesar!" Dukas gave with a mock salute, enjoying the sarcasm.

"Hail Caesar," said Nicetas, waving his hands about in mock awe of the invisible Emperor. "Has the Emperor arrived yet?"

"I haven't seen anyone being pulled on a sled by mechanical bulls tonight, so no. Is Basil coming?" Dukas inquired.

"You know he can't stand these things. I'm surprised you come, considering all the iniquity and moral turpitude to which you bear witness, and so tacitly approve of, at these parties," the philosopher teased his stoic friend.

"You want to touch me? Is that why you keep coming to these parties, hoping I will give in and you will have your chance?" roared Dukas, his rough hand grasping Nicetas by his long goatee.

Nicetas did not approve of violence, at least when it involved him, he wasn't winning, and featured a bigger man. Wincing his back up, he hated it when Dukas escalated the only way he knew how.

“Take it back,” Dukas offered politely.

“LAY DOWN WITH DOGS AND WAKE UP WITH FLEAS!” defied Nicetas.

Considering this for a moment, Dukas realized he was a little flea-bitten and released his prisoner. Now safe in the knowledge his beard wasn't about to be ripped from him, Choniates joined his friend in a laugh.

The two continued on their way to the obelisk, which offered the best heights from which one can look down on their fellow man, especially gratifying if your fellow man is a divinely-ordained, irritating, and grasping ignoramus. The two men ascended to the viewing platform that rose some twenty feet from the ground, barely a fifth of the way up the colossus, alone and away from the chattering sycophants below.

After the announcement of Basil's appointment at Court earlier today, all three men had been in shock. Only a few days earlier, Dukas had held his nose and began working with the Chief of the Armies on imperial strategies for a potential campaign to be waged at some time in the future. Basil had stayed at a polite distance from the Emperor and his

Court, offering his respect when needed, defending his borders when the Turk reared his accursed head, and avoiding the lot of these vipers when he could. Nicetas, while loyally shirking opportunities to serve his Empire at every turn, used his glib-tongue and prying ears to help his companions and himself where he could. To all three, the declaration of war came as a complete surprise.

“Were your strategies so pathetic that the Chief of the Armies decided he couldn’t trust your entire generation with the task, and found the last general that had not gotten all his men killed to do the job?” Nicetas asked.

Dukas shook his black beard. “We had been discussing an expedition to reclaim Cyprus from the rebel emperors, and I’ve been speaking with the ship makers’ guild the past few days. Is there any in your higher circles who would have suggested such a thing: a land war with the Turk when the army is in such disrepair?”

Choniates quaffed his wine, “I’m afraid a plot is afoot. Consider that the Emperor declared in public, very late in the year to adequately prepare for

campaign season, a general that he hadn't consulted and barely knows to lead a pittance of men laughably termed an army, with no supplies, against our most implacable and capable foe. This reeks of a set-up to me.”

Nicetas spied a crowd gathering around the lovers in the fountain, more passing through the palm trees surrounding the waters to behold the licentious enjoyment. On the night air, he could smell the burning intoxicants of the Far East and see the smoke wafting from the cover of the palms. He knew they did not hide from fear of discovery or condemnation: it just made the experience more fun, pretending that anyone cared about their illicit indulgence.

Dukas mulled it over. “This could be a way of making sure that Basil either dies without the inconvenience of assassination, or stays away from the City for a long time. To what end, do you think? He has no great position in the court, and few here have the stomach to hold and defend a province as dangerous as his.”

“Hmm, he does have one valuable thing in this City,” the courtier let the words out to hang in the air.

His companion thought for a moment. “Irene,” stated Dukas. “Nicetas, I don’t like this. Basil is a good man, and he is a pillar of this Empire. Men like him, who ask so little and give so much, are what this Empire needs, like his uncle of yore, the Bulgar-Slayer!” His mind working with this new possibility, Dukas concluded, “We must help him. Can you discover the villain possibly behind this? You know their ways far better than I. I will begin assembling a force to campaign with Basil. What he is being given is enough to make the Turk mad, but not enough to stop the enemy from laying waste to all he reaches.”

“Of course, Dukas. Had it not been for him, Athens would be short a bishop, and I would be without my dear brother. I do not need reminding of the time Basil rescued him from the Turk. Not a moment to waste for us, comrade,” said Nicetas, hoisting his empty chalice in salutation. “If I’m to sail this wine-dark sea of sin and betrayal, I better get at it,” he finished, sliding off his perch on high.

At that moment, a trumpeting of brass horns blew in the garden, signaling the arrival of the Emperor Alexius III. Heralds cried his name, and the peacocks

sang. Two great bronze beasts spewing flames trod down the marble path, a jeweled throne astride their shoulders. On it sat the Emperor, loosely clad in a tunic of rubies, holding a golden chalice aloft in his left hand. He was clearly already drunk.

The partiers saluted him, some wishing his health, others his death. All were drowned out in the din his horned steeds made, so they could speak freely. So long as he felt them adore him, that was all that mattered. He begged the Empire's enemies to rob him of less, and he let the vices of every man run rampant without thought of hindrance within It, so what did it matter if he didn't really know what they thought of him? He was Caesar, and they must render unto Caesar that which Caesar wants.

God can collect his own for himself.

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About the author

Stephen Clements was born a poor, black child in the hills of west Tennessee, and he grew up in Memphis, where he graduated from the University of Memphis with his Bachelors and Masters degrees in political science. He then made another great life decision by joining the US Army, where he got to do exciting things, like hate life and see beautiful, sunny Baghdad for over a year. While there, his reporting on engineer missions for the stabilization of Iraq were carried by more than 17 news outlets.

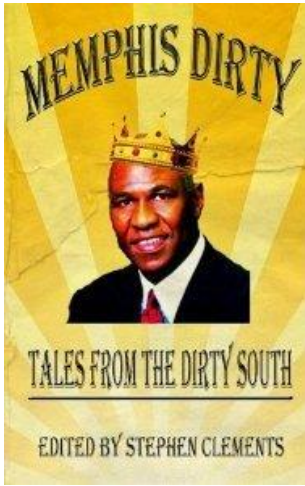
Through a twist of metaphysics, Stephen is also Jeff Klitzner, who is available for parties and bar mitzvahs. He can usually be found haunting the Starbucks at Vanderbilt in Nashville, where he lives with a spiteful woman and two bitchy cats. He loves to travel, study history, and drink. Whatever you have will be fine.



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