

*Humans have often philosophized about Man being made in the image of their creator. In this, they proved correct. A broken sundial is right twice a day, after all. Unless it's the center style that's broken. Then you just have a flat rock.*

*What was I talking about? Oh yes. Men and Gods. Though most men rather think they're gods, yes? I suppose we did create them after our own vices and virtues, so how about that, I guess you can blame God for everything.*

*Ah yes. I forgot to mention that. I am a god (note the lower-case G). I know—it weirds everybody out the first time they hear that. You'll adjust.*

*Alas, however, I shall resign from stroking my own ego overmuch in the intro. This isn't my story. This is merely a story I enjoy.*

*My name is of no importance. I am one of the lesser gods, the kind you only know from high school English. Not that I blame you for not knowing all the Greek gods. There are so bloody many of us. When it comes to gods, three's a crowd, two's a disaster, and one is too many.*

*This story, however, involves not gods, but men. These were not characters of the "god among men" variety, either. No, these two men were the epitome of their kind: true human beings, in every sense of the word. Mostly the negative ones.*

*These men lived long ago, during the era when my flock had a monopoly on the skies. The year was 180-ish BCE, and they resided in the city of Rome, mostly because it's the only ancient city you know.*

*They lived their lives in the epicenter of culture, and were thus inundated by it, for culture is a rapacious, unstoppable organism. It demands to be followed and replicated, and the punishment for denying it is isolation.*

*These two men, Eustace and Leander, grew up together and had been friends their entire lives. Upon close inspection, it is easy to see this is only because they happened to like all the same things. If you think that isn't a deep enough condition to have a life-long friendship, you'd be surprised.*

*Thus, they had become saturated in culture together, and rather liked having all the same opinions on things. It was wonderfully convenient.*

*We find these men today the very moment after having just seen the long-awaited sequel to their favorite play. It was called The Next Warrior. It was the eighth chapter in a long, sprawling saga that took place over decades, passed down by each new generation of orators. An epic tale of gods and their sons, following their lineage as they danced between good and evil.*

*The saga was named after the original play: Time Battle. It's a rather enthralling series. It was like the Roman MCU.*

*This moment, however, is not a joyous occasion. As the murmurs begin to stir from their fellow audience members, there Eustace and Leander stand in awe with gasping faces.*

*Eustace wipes the sweat from his brow before he says*

*"Leander, my friend...tell me my eyes deceive me. Say I have been drugged, and my mind is under a trance. Tell me a witch has cast a curse upon me, and my mind is obscured. That atrocity cannot be the play we have been waiting for these three long years?"*

*"Indeed," said Leander, "I do believe that is so. This is the much-awaited installment in our very favorite thing."*

“But that is not what I wanted!” exclaimed Eustace. “That was different and strange and new and none of my predictions came true. How could a work of art make such an egregious error?”

*How could such a tragedy come to be? They had made a mockery of his favorite thing. Not that it was a terrible play. In fact, much later, he will come to realize it was actually a very good play, but he is a long way away from that. Right now, he is angry that they ignored all of his predictions.*

*At that precise moment, the playwright steps out onto the amphitheater stage and takes his bows. His name is Rionus Jorruhnus, and he had been gifted the opportunity of creating the next chapter of this cultural institution. Indeed, he had been a rabid fan as a boy, discovering it around much the same time as our two heroes.*

*This detail mattered little, however. You see, these two men had tied their identity to this epic because it distracted them from all the things that were wrong in their lives. So they dedicated all their focus to this one thing.*

*Which is why we see them now, wailing and ranting and bemoaning the gods and their cruel twists of fate. From such emotional heights, there is only one place to go. And Eustace dropped right down there when he said*

“Upon witnessing this cruel inferiority of storytelling, I feel drastic action is necessary.”

“What, pray tell,” said Leander, “shall we then do on account of this most grievous and insidious ruination of our beloved play?”

“Well,” said Eustace, “obviously the playwright must die.”

“That seems appropriate.”

“But it shall not be his body that perishes first. We shall kill him in the culture. Cut his character to the quick. Poison his own history. Only then shall we cut the tether that binds him to this mortal coil.”

“Okay...” said Leander, not really okay but too lazy to disagree with his friend. “What do you have in mind?”

“We must not stand for this egregious insult! We must rectify this devastation to our very moral character! It is to the emperor whom we must take this!”

*And so they did. However, it is interesting to note that circumstances could have turned out far differently had it not happened at this exact point in time. You see, the nation of Rome had suffered a sudden turmoil in the hierarchy. Not just the usual betrayals, scandals, and tyrannical rule-making that inherently came with the job. No, this pulled at the very thread of the republic.*

*You see, not so long ago the land was ruled by Emperor Aristarches Antisthenes Anastasius, and that tells you all you need to know about him. He had recently succeeded his father, who had died of what modern day physicians would call “the shits.”*

*However, Aristarches was emperor for only six days, after which he was killed by his court scribes. They had been in charge of all the emperor’s correspondence, and were thus responsible for transcribing his name. They weren’t halfway through writing all the thank you notes to those in attendance at his coronation before they began suffering casualties. At first it was a sprained wrist, then a hunched back. By the end of the week, three scribes had leapt out the palace windows to their deaths.*

*The rest stabbed the emperor to death with their quills.*

*It is said that, speaking on behalf of the scribe guild, when asked what good qualities they sought in a new emperor, they replied, “Brevity.”*

*That mattered little, however, as Aristarches was then replaced by his son, who was a rambling, bumbling, egocentric buffoon. Sexual misconduct allegations up the wazoo, corruption charges, some mild treason.*

*So, naturally, he was much beloved by the people.*

*Many said he hadn't even wanted the position, and often complained about how hard it was. It is widely rumored he only wanted to become Emperor so he could be deified.*

*The scribes ended up killing him too. The emperor enjoyed sending out constant, minute-by-minute espousals and proliferations and announcements. He'd send out dozens of notes a day, little slips of paper tied to birds. All throughout the land, the emperor's people began to dread the tweeting sound that accompanied the new day's insanity.*

*After his death, through a cosmically profound turn of events, a duck became the new emperor. He's been in office for seven months, and it hasn't been that bad.*

*He may have been a duck, but he proved to be a rather direct, affective, and consistent commander, if not a little random. Which was more than could be said for the past few dozen humans or so.*

*So perhaps that explained why Eustace and Leander were received so poorly. Emperor Aquaticus Quackinus had much more important affairs to consider than two civilians displeased with their own existence.*

*Before Eustace could finish his third sentence, they were escorted off the premises. The emperor encouraged gratuitous booting.*

*The boys were in rather poor spirits when Leander said*

*"I guess that's that. Time Battle is forever tainted. We have failed."*

*Eustace slapped him. "Never again spew such utterances in my presence! We will not stop until we have succeeded. By every drop of blood, by every bone and sinew, with every breath, my opinion will be heard!"*

*"But how?" said Leander. "Emperor Quackinus said no, and he's got the bread to accomplish what we acquire."*

*"Ah, what does he know, he's still wet behind the ears. I have something even better in mind now."*

*"Is it going back home and giving deep and thoughtful contemplation to our innermost, true being so we can better understand ourselves, which would allow us to look at art and media objectively and empathetically, slowly learning that hating something consumes too much of our energy and we are better off simply walking away?"*

*"Sort of," said Eustace. "We're going to start a coup."*

*It was a classic move: when one parent says no, try to get approval from the other. As it is well known, the father of any civilized nation is the man who commands it, and mommy is the head of the military.*

*At that very moment, many miles away, a monkey sits on a rock. He grows bored within moments and begins to masturbate. When he finishes, he remains sitting, until he masturbates out of boredom once again.*

*The military outpost was just on the outskirts of the city. Classic military move. Separate but apart. Together but alone. Inclusive but segregating.*

*For brevity's sake, the head of the military, General Militares, was standing outside the base for some reason. Just as our two heroes arrived, he was saying*

*"You know, people don't admit this, but without war there wouldn't be any peace. If you want to get new stuff, and you want more kinds of people to vary your bloodline, and you*

happen to notice your neighbors might be suitable, I mean, ya know, do what you gotta do. And hey, if you want to meet your neighbors and bang their women and eat their food, ya know, prepare for war. That's what I mean by *Sic vis pacum parabellum*."

*(No, he is not the originator of that saying. He stole it from his roommate.)*

*(Also, that's not even the quote).*

*As for our two heroes, one is about to say something that is perfectly rational and acceptable, and the other is going to say something immensely stupid. I'll let you decide which is which.*

"Good evening, General Militares," said Leander. "How are you tonight?"

"You have no idea what you're talking about," said Eustace. "As you may know, I have been paying more attention to the news recently, and I've been reading this book about race relations in Egypt, and it has me in this frame of mind that war is a social construct that human beings have implemented to keep up the appearances of draining resources that keeps us all in a desperate rat race against each other when in reality if we all culturally mingled the conflict would wean itself out over time."

*See what I mean?*

*It's only two o'clock. It's nowhere near evening.*

General Militares stared at Eustace. He spit a thick glob of chewing tobacco on Leander's sandaled foot. He hadn't been the target, but Militares's aim was notoriously terrible. Life is like that sometimes.

"What I mean, General Militares," said Eustace, "is that war is unnecessary. Wouldn't there be peace if no one went to war?"

"I dunno, son. I guess that depends on what your definition of 'peace' is. If it's everybody sitting around, singing Kumbaya together, just going about their business, then fine, yeah, sure, I suppose. But, son, I'm telling you man to man, this is real world stuff, now. Getting things ain't all it's cracked up to be. It's a fleeting thing. You get something you want, and then two days later it's just another piece of bullshit in a life full of bullshit. The real thrill is the *taking*. It's the getting, son. The pursuit. Money, women, the hottest carriages, the newest Isisphone. You see, son? The only thing that matters is getting good at the *getting*. That is, in fact, what war is good for."

*Unbeknownst to history, General Militares's gene pool ended up spawning rather widely. His bloodline is one of the few that lasts over the ages, century to century. In modern times, most of his descendants are high school football coaches. They are easy to detect by the demeaning way they speak to anyone who doesn't like or play football.*

*Leander tried to smooth things out from there, but it was of little use. Our boys were unaware that the military wasn't all that inclined to help the Emperor. It was widely known the army only saw its leader as a barrier to profit and glory. It didn't matter how they came about war, only that they could prolong it.*

*They were promptly dismissed. More booting ensued.*

*Our two heroes were not to be deterred. Eustace was ever vigilant and full of ideas. If the head of the government ignored them, and the military cast them out, then it was time to consult the highest authority imaginable. Therein lay their salvation.*

*They headed for the church.*

*As they did that, the monkey was banging on a tree with a rock. While monkeys were known as robust tool users, this act would have boggled modern ethologists. It seemed to yield no purpose, even though he dedicated several hours to the activity.*

*Back in Rome, our stalwart protagonists debated ways in which to further demean the play and gain support. Leander suggested*

"We should get a woman's opinion. Why have we not spoken to one? Should we not consult the fairer sex?"

"I don't think there are any in this story," said Eustace.

"Wait, are there *no* women?"

"Nonsense. There were women in the play we watched at the beginning."

"They were played by men!"

"Exactly. Why consult with women when they'd be played by men, anyway?"

*Within moments they were at the church. It was a fine church, one of the oldest buildings in the city. It was also one of the costliest. Half the city was starving and homeless while the rest was in decrepit disarray, and yet the church stood tall and bright and glistening. When it came to admiring themselves, the gods always found a little extra money in the budget.*

*Our heroes walked up to the priest. Eustace bowed and said*

"Hello, my friend. We are two weary travelers in search of some guidance. Would you be able to help us?"

"Most certainly," said the priest. "My name is Jesus."

*You must understand, this was a few hundred years before that Jesus became a household name. Aside from a Mexican village in Culiacán, no one else had used it yet.*

"Jesus. Huh," said Leander. "Nice name."

"Thanks. It's Jewish, though it's often appropriated by Christians."

"Ah. Those Christians take all the best stuff."

*Many of those Christians would later on become the first wave of hipster: someone who takes over a cultural phenomenon and then gets so into it they spoil it for everybody else.*

*Now, for the sake of clarity, I feel obliged to tell you that there used to be another section to this story. It happened around here, and entailed our two heroes consulting Jesus on how they should deal with the disastrous play. I decided to omit it because, honestly, nothing really happens. Jesus said to turn the other cheek, go with god, and pray for guidance.*

*So naturally, as it happens when you ask the gods for help, nothing happened. Gave me a rather fine chuckle, though.*

*Thus, a few minutes later, our heroes were standing outside the church, no closer to having the black mark that was the play erased from existence. Eustace was busy cursing the gods and his fate, bemoaning his lot in life and the seeming imperviousness of the play. Leander was silently wishing they would do something else. Which is why he tried to change the subject to*

"Why are the gods on Mount Olympus?"

"Well, they need to be somewhere."

"But why don't they ever come down?"

"They do," said Eustace. "Quite frequently. Why, just the other day Hermes turned himself into a horse and copulated with my dear, sweet sister."

Leander gasped. "Is this true?"

"Indeed, I saw it with mine own two eyes."

"You saw a god transform into a horse?"

"Well, no, by the time of my arrival the fornication was well underway."

"Then how do you know it was a god?"

“Ah, because the gods are clever tricksters, my friend. Hermes did not just take on the form of any old horse, no, that would be too conspicuous. Instead, he took the visage of the horse owned by the neighbors down the street. The one my sister emphatically enjoys to ride and brush and kiss upon the nose. One must always keep one's eyes open for the Gods, for they are everywhere, and they are sneaky.”

*Leander decided to keep his opinions to himself. This entire afternoon was becoming a valuable study in doing just that.*

*Eustace, on the other hand, had other plans, for he said*

“I have other plans. I believe we have gone about this in error. We have been searching for someone *else* to do our dirty work. Are we not able-bodied men? Do we not have strength in our sinew, fire in our very loins? To correct this dastardly play, we must rely only on our own wits. Therefore, we shall seek some practical guidance to aid us in our dealings.”

*Which is how they came to the house of a well-known philosopher named Bill.*

*Meanwhile, the monkey sits amongst his fellows and shits into his hand. He raises it to his face and takes a sniff. He licks it and immediately grimaces. He then throws it in the face of the monkey sitting next to him.*

*The philosopher was a local boy, and had garnered quite the reputation for being level-headed and thoughtful. It was said that there wasn't a single issue where he couldn't see the other side. From what I understand of the fellow, he's not even head over heels for Tom Hanks. Which I thought was just a thing that we're all born with.*

*Bill's advice was respected, honored, and always followed. Surely, if there was someone who could understand their plight, it was Bill.*

*Which is why Eustace was so dismayed when Bill said*

“It seems to me that your hatred of the play runs deeper than simply disliking the story. I believe what makes you angry is not the lackluster quality of the play, but what its absence revealed. With the curtain of this, your most favored of distractions, pulled away, it lifted the veil of comfort. You were suddenly struck with the holes that exist in your being, and it is these inadequacies you hate.”

“I just thought the play sucked,” said Leander.

Eustace, however, was redder than the fake blood they used in the play (which, ironically, was made of real goat's blood). “How *dare* you, sir!” he said. Actually, what he said was, “How unfair thee cast!” but, like, what does that even mean?

Unperturbed, Bill did what most self-described thinkers do—just kept talking. “Stories are intrinsic to our very spirit. Culture communicates through its stories. They are your generation trying to speak to you; appreciate what they have to say. Our favorite stories are often used to fill the pieces of ourselves that are taken from us in childhood. Once the bridge that leads back to your formative years is ravaged, a man can never find it again.”

“Blasphemy!” exclaimed Eustace, which even for me is a bit much. “I come at thee!” he yelled, though did not move.

Bill rolled his eyes. “If you will not receive the moral wisdom, then you must suffer the practical wisdom. This play, *The Next Warrior*. This was just the next episode in the entire saga, correct?”

“Well, yes.”

“And this is a continuation of the story from the original play you so dearly love?”

“Indeed.”

“Is the original play now different?”

“What?”

“*Time Battle*, the play you love. Has the script been altered?”

“Well, not in *that* one, but—”

“Has a playwright corrupted the very fabric of the characters with whom you so emulate?”

“No, they’re exactly the same, but—”

“Because of this new ghastly play, will *Time Battle* be different the next time you see it?”

“Well, no, it’ll still be the same play, but—”

“Then go and watch the goddamn original play, stop bitching so much, and hashtag *getoverit*.” Bill went inside his hut and slammed the door closed. This is historically the first time the “hashtag” has ever been used. It would take another 2000 years for the fad to catch on, however, on account of its inherent awfulness.

*Alas, our heroes had come away empty handed. It was as if no one else cared about their feelings towards the play, or their feelings in general. Leander would sometimes wonder if that was really the issue behind Eustace’s anguish.*

*Mostly, though, he thought about all the things he could be accomplishing if he weren’t spending so much time and energy on hating the play.*

*Eustace came to a sudden halt, having been struck by a true Eureka moment. His eyes were gleaming as he said*

“We have been approaching this all wrong. We have been seeking aid from generals and great thinkers and religious wise men and duck emperors, the highest of high moral character. We have been aiming in the wrong direction. Why rise to the occasion when we can sink down in mediocrity? Let us rally the common man!”

*At this precise moment, the monkey was getting his ass kicked. Things had escalated quickly after the poo flinging incident. The monkey was experiencing an emotion never felt before by his species: regret.*

*Our heroes, meanwhile, were engaged in their difficult task. Which they accomplished in seventeen minutes. It proved incredibly simple to rally people to their bullshit cause.*

*Within a few hours, Eustace had dozens of his countrymen prowling the streets, eliciting their unhappiness upon people. For there were indeed many who were as unhappy with the play as our heroes. History wants you to think these cretins were in the majority. They were not. They never are.*

*There were enough of them, though, and what they suffered in numbers they made up for in obnoxiousness. It was the only time in history when thirty-one people successfully rioted in the streets.*

*At first, they did so freely, scurrying around shouting their opinions into the faces of the general public. This tactic, however, contained considerable risk. More than one of these rampant no-gooders ended up with a broken nose, walking home covered with their own blood like it was a medieval *Scarlet Letter* that said “I deserved this.”*

*In the beginning, these irritation-mongers only shouted about the new *Time Battle* play, but the newfound freedom quickly erupted a yearning desire to scream all their opinions and ideas across the ethos. They screamed at a distance, though, and wore masks to conceal their identities. These cultural provocateurs unanimously agreed upon which mask would represent their crusade, and for whatever reason, they decided on trolls.*

*Their displeasure could not be stopped, and grew to cacophonous proportions. It was only within a matter of days when these trolls starting showcasing their anger by furiously masturbating at things they didn't like.*

*The streets were filled with the shrieks of women, the groans of angry young men, and a wet, shucking sound that could never be unheard.*

*Eustace was very proud. He subtly gave the impression that it had been he who had thought of it. A fact Leander did not take kindly.*

*"You know," said Leander, "that was my idea."*

*"Don't be selfish, my friend. It's not about you, it's about all of us. Our fellow trolls are to be admired: they took to our simple instructions and subtle commanding so well! This is a victory for us all."*

*"Well, we shouldn't pat our backs too hard."*

*Eustace gazed around at the landscape of self-milking men.*

*"Our backs need not worry."*

*It was these hand-fellating trolls that tracked down Rionus Jorruhnus to his home. For days they posted outside his dwelling, yelling obscenities, curses, and terrible puns through his windows. The only thing society loves more than entertainment is hating entertainment.*

*The playwright was nothing if not stalwart, however. Oddly enough, one must acquire a thick skin to create leisurely material for people. Don't ever let anyone tell you that art does not require armor.*

*Things only grew out of hand when these trolls hand-humped towards Jorruhnus's young daughter. It was the act that finally weakened his resolve.*

*To a surprisingly large portion of the population, these men were considered heroes.*

*Though it was not as terrible a crime as you'd might think. When I say that society has come a long way since my time, I am not exaggerating. We're not talking about apples and oranges, here, but apples and Elvis. And yet you still have so unfathomably far to go. Sobering thought, eh?*

*Anyway, Rionus decided to face the mob. He was forced upon a platform in the street and tied to a post. The trolls said it was so he could "defend himself" and "clear the air," but really they just wanted to pelt him with shit. Mostly vegetables and racial slurs.*

*"You should never write another play again!" shouted one troll.*

*"Why not?" asked Rionus.*

*"Because your last one sucked."*

*"To you. Others quite enjoyed it."*

*"No, they didn't. Everyone hated it. They all told me."*

*"How is this guy still making plays?" came another shout.*

*"Why wouldn't I be?" asked Rionus.*

*"Because your last one was such a huge failure."*

*"No, it wasn't. It's already grossed three times its budget. I'm taking it on a country-wide tour. It's being described as 'high art.'"*

*"High fart, maybe."*

*It was this remark that finally broke the camel's back. Turns out the good playwright did have something to say. This is the part of the story where the hero (the real hero) gives a glorious, uplifting speech that changes our worldview.*

*"I created what I did from a place of love," said Rionus. "Upsetting you was the last thing I hoped for. I grew up on *Time Battle* too. I love those stories. They inspired me to become a*



playwright. But they were constrained. Caged within their own clichés. I sought to elevate it, to give you something new. I didn't want to see *Time Battle* relegated to stale stereotypes and nostalgic references. This is just my telling of this story. My version of *Time Battle*. It only came out of a place of love, because that's the only place where I keep *Time Battle*."

*The crowd of self-flagellators had fallen silent save for scattered sniffing and the occasional sob. Heavy sighs all around. There wasn't a wet eye in the joint.*

*Rionus was ecstatic he had finally reached them. This is all he had wanted. From the beginning, he only wanted to share his love of *Time Battle* with others.*

*If only he had known that the tears were not for how connected they felt, but by the tremendous loss generated from realizing their favorite thing was not going to be changed the way they wanted.*

"But it's not my *Time Battle*!" shouted Eustace, who then proceeded to beat the playwright to death with a copy of his own script. The others quickly joined in the assault, and within moments there was a flourish of exultant, ravaging masturbating once again.

*Elsewhere, our thoughtless monkey was shaking hands with the monkey he had attacked without provocation, burying the hatchet. This monkey, who pleased himself to excess, had eaten his own shit, and carelessly flung his filth at his peers, had learned the error of his ways.*

*Back with Rionus, the angry mob was quite pleased with itself. They felt like heroes who had performed a great service to society. The pride they felt at assailing this play, the next episode of their very favorite thing, was commensurate. Many of them were confused, then, about why they had this hollow, empty feeling within their chests. Most of them ignored it by searching out another creation to tear down.*

*And there we have it. A fairly good yarn, wouldn't you agree? Though I will say it was better with the raunchy poems, but they had to be cut for time.*

*You know, I can't quite recall why I started telling you this story. I'm positive there was a moral element somewhere.*

*Oh well. It's not like stories are intrinsic to our culture.*