

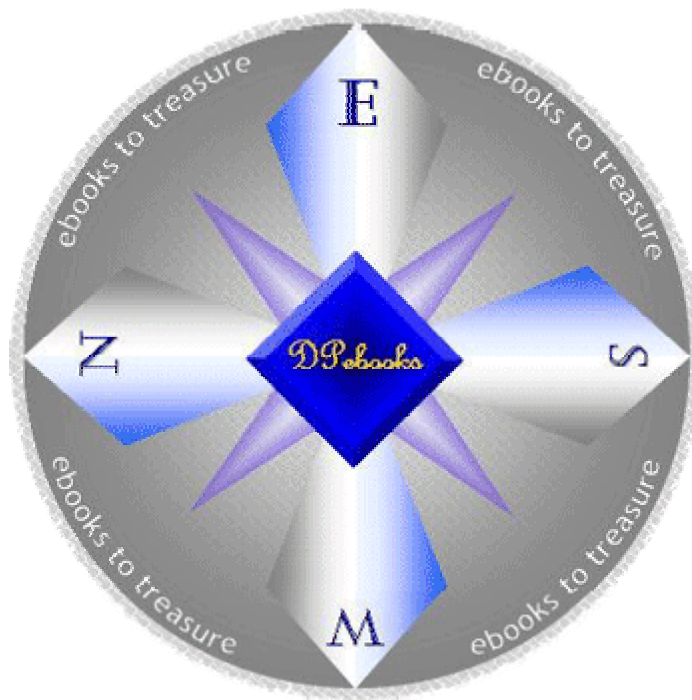
A large, fluffy white cloud is the central focus of the image, set against a clear blue sky. The cloud has soft, billowing edges and a bright white center, suggesting it is illuminated from above. The sky is a deep, clear blue, with some lighter blue areas near the horizon. The overall composition is simple and serene.

Those Eyes...

Those Eyes...

by

Michael Meisberger



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CREATED AND PUBLISHED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

**This work is dedicated to all those who look to
the East and seek Light.**

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A Note from the Author

I am, at the risk of sounding like I am completely off my rocker, going to step up and not only place my real name on this work, but explain to you where this particular short story came from. Both of these steps are a very large step forward and a huge first for me and will undoubtedly ensure me a place in a padded cell...

THE NAME

I have, since 1980, written under the penname MM or Author MM. Since 2001, I have written under both MM and the penname Dread Pirate. I have at various times released a variety of work using these two pennames. This is the very first time I have self-published anything using my real name.

Hello reader, my name is Michael Meisberger. Aka; Author MM, aka; Dread Pirate.

THE STORY

This story was given to me as a gift. I know when dreams are important because my mundane dreams are always in black & white. My special, "pay-attention dreams" are in vivid 3-D Technicolor. This dream was no exception. It came to me in full HD, 3D super-saturated color and in surround sound. I knew from the moment it began, it was a very important dream.

I believe it to be a gift given to me. What I do know is that I am not an overly religious person, as a matter of fact; I would suggest that I am the exact opposite. When I tell you that The Supreme Architect asked me to write this story, self-publish it and give it to all who ask. You probably think I am a lunatic.

To secure my place in the Sanitarium...the night I had the dream (Date: 5/11/2008) a very good friend of mine from high school died at age 43. He was the best baseball pitcher the school ever had. I was one of the few brave (or stupid) enough to catch his 96mph fastball. I attended his funeral two days later with this story still running amuck in my skull like a runaway freight train.

For years, I have been self-publishing trying to make even a few pennies to show for my passion. Yet, here I am giving away what I can truly say is one of my best works, free.

Why? Again, I am not only securing my place in the nuthouse but am seeking a full penthouse suite...my Heavenly Father told me that I would be richly rewarded for writing and freely distributing this story.

The Ebook *THOSE EYES...*

Think of me what you will; all I ask is that you read this work with an open mind and an open heart. Read it for fun, read out of curiosity, read it because it's the right price, free. No matter your reason, all I ask is that you read it. Feedback can be snail mailed or emailed to DPebook.com.

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May you always follow your dreams and never stop listening to that little voice in your head...

Best regards,

Michael

Those Eyes...



The man stood in the doorway of his home awaiting the rising of the sun. He pulled the cloak about him tighter and shivered even in the sweltering heat of the midsummer's night. Sleep to him had been elusive ever since...that face. His entire world had changed after that single day. A day he could not force himself to forget and a day he loathed to remember. He stood tall then and stared up at the star filled sky and muttered a prayer to a god no one worshipped anymore in his native tongue. The old gods seemed to have abandoned their followers, and the new gods were just that, too new to be understood.

He was once a proud Roman soldier who fought in more campaigns than he could recall. Gone were the faces of the enemy whose lives he took with little or no regret. Gone were the women he had forced. Gone were the spoils of war he had carried home from far off places. Now, so too were gone his polished breastplate and his helmet and cape. His shield, shin guards, and short sword were all gone. He sold them all to a younger man with hopes of fighting grand battles and finding his fortune in a far off land. He saw so much when he looked into the young man's young wild eyes; they mirrored the fire in his own when he was young. That inner fire had led to a self-motivated rise from a mere substandard gladiators' sparring partner to a Soldier of rank in the Emperors Legion.

All the campaigns ran together now. It seemed that he had tempted fate time and again by always being in the foremost ranks of the phalanx. The calls of movement were familiar to him still. On quiet nights the sounds of battle would return to his ears. He would see only the phantom shapes, hear the grisly sounds of metal on metal, metal on flesh, wood or scourge on flesh. Never could he see their faces...no, their faces had faded with the passing of time. But not his; never his. Some nights he could even smell the scent of the battlefield. Unwashed bodies, blood, urine and bowel all mixed with oiled leather, horse sweat, and sometimes the hint of the wonderful smell of fresh green grass crushed under foot of marching men. He was no stranger to battle, killing, slaughter, and worse. The battle rage once flowed freely through his veins. That same rage kept him alive, on edge, sharp and in the thick of any skirmish or battle. Never once had he felt any guilt, compassion, fear or shame...not of course until him.

The man grunted in frustration as if to ward off some unseen force. He stared off into the warm colors of the almost rising sun. Forcing his mind back, he gave a brief smile as the memory of his son passed through the madness. His son. The boy-child born to him from a prize he had taken from a lesser man in battle. She had yielded to him again and again and bore him a fine strong son that would follow his footsteps and march in the ranks of the Legions of the Empire. Yes, his son had been one of the best. He clenched his jaw tight at the memory.

He lifted his chin in defiance and knew his son had been one of the last to have fallen when the Northern Germanic Hordes had swept down out of the heavily wooded forest and ambushed his son's column and killed them all to the last man. Again, in his native

tongue, he cursed the man and his family whose sword had taken his son away from him. For a moment he felt the rage within well up and hate fill his heart and blind his mind. How dare the barbarians defy the great Roman Legions? They all had paid a heavy price. The men of war had returned in force to the North with veterans and seasoned commanders and had laid waste to the defiant barbarian animals. The man spit in the sand at his feet. The animals had taken away his only heir. The very thought of the guttural hairy animals and their crude oversized weapons made him stutter in silent rage.

Almost out of instinct more than habit he glanced at the only piece of equipment he had left from his youth. A long spear stood in the corner, by the front door; standing silent guard after all these years...the spear was made of solid wood shaft and a finely honed metal point that still caught the sun. He closed his eyes and tried to remember the face of his wife or the fine strong jaw of his son...but all he could see looking back at him were those eyes, his eyes. Clenching his fist the old man silently pounded the wall that held him upright. Always that face and those eyes!

He stared at the spear and as if it were yesterday, the memories of that strange day flooded his mind yet again with brilliant clarity. Just back from Campaign he had drawn guard duty at center square. It was a festive day and he thought it would be a day of free food and drink for a man of his rank in uniform. The day of festivities had turned into a waking nightmare.

He reported for duty at sunup, he and a small squad of men were to make their presence known by the citizens by walking around, making a show for the masses. Everything had been going as scheduled, boring and routine until a priest from the Temple had approached him, handed him a scroll of parchment and large sheepskin pouch. The bag of coin he was given was not forgotten when the man whispered detailed instructions into his ear. The old man scowled at him and then passed coin to each of his men looking, in turn, each in the eye.

His men had been paid and given their orders. They would do as bidden by the Temple. He would ensure the man first protected the interest of the state, then follow the old rabbi's orders only if it was the wishes of the government/military. Something told him to walk away, get drunk, and go home...but he was a professional of rank and followed his standing orders. As the day unfolded, so too did a scene that would never leave the forefront of his mind.

Criminal corporal punishment was nothing new to him. He had been whipped as a slave for taking too much time off squatting beside the road. He again had been beaten when he failed to execute the proper move early in his military career. When he had been given rank, he had even dispensed punishment on the hard-headed, the foolish and the cock-proud. The scourge leveled all men and brought them to their knees. It was the most humbling experience any man could endure. The strongest failed under the brutal punishment. Even the most ignorant of man understood his error after the whip.

The usual crowd gathered to hear crime and summary punishment leveled at the poor bastards accused that day. A few more were in the crowd than normal. He saw men from the temple standing intermingled with the crowd. Today of course was holiday; one would be allowed to go free for his crimes. He remembered thinking to himself; one would be spared death for no other reason than tradition. When the accused were pushed forward in front of the Governor, he knew something was very amiss. The crowd went wild with boisterous accusations and calls for both freedom and death. While he had never pulled center square duty during this feast, he had seen many a trial and this one would be no ordinary day.

The louder the crowd, the more people seemed to appear. He pressed closer to the state building and not so gently pushed more than a few aside to gain a position on the front steps. Soon, his men stood in the shielded arc formation around the front door of the small building. Right foot to the rear, shields locked together in a half moon shape, spears anchored at the arch of the right foot was the call. Only he and a few other veterans had slapped their visors down over their face when he barked the call to anchor. He snarled behind the metal visor as he felt the battle rage flush his face and chest when the spears crashed to the top of the giant shields in perfect synchronicity making the entire crowd step back in fear. Any fool would fear even a small contingent of the Legion. Their training, their purpose and their ability were second to none. He called out encouragement to his men, for he was the ranking officer present. Should anything go wrong here, it would be his shoulders on the board. He would face summary punishment by a military tribunal and not some pasty-faced politician. He remembered that as he glared at the throng as they jeered and yelled.

As if it were yesterday he felt the hand of the Captain of the Guard on the center of his back and his rear right foot being anchored by a comrade. His blood began to boil now. Someone had called in a second and third squad to control the growing throng of people to his front. The Captain barked out orders and words strange to the common man's ear. Yet, each word, each guttural utterance, united, fortified and gave guidance to the military men who now faced down what seemed to be a frenzied, out of control mob.

His mind drifted. Only once had he seen this, in a port town they had captured, the people tried to overpower and mob the small garrison left behind to hold ground. He had been a young soldier, just off the long boats and fresh off the field of virgin battle. When the rotten vegetable had hit him in the face, he lashed out taking first blood. Of course, the official report read that the locals had risen against the garrison in armed resistance. The truth however, was he had killed more than a dozen unarmed men before his fellow soldiers could pull him back and steady his hand. He had earned the reputation of being the "first in-type" and was quickly promoted into the forward ranks.

The hand on the center of his back and the foot intertwined with his would hold him in ranks. The battle range might boil over but he was now part of the precision ranks of the Legion. Each man had his place; each was an integral part of the whole. If one man moved out of position, he would jeopardize the entire formation. Brutal and grueling

days of training and practice had made the Legion what it was. He could not break ranks if he wanted too. His shield was interlocked on each side, his spear was anchored and the soldier behind him not only blocked and anchored his right foot in place, but the soldier behind him used his shoulder to level his spear at the mob of people and add yet more "death" to the formation. If he should fall, the man behind him would drop his shield and step forward filling the gap. The Phalanx was not a solid wall but a fluid bristling mobile killing machine.

The man leaning against the cool stone closed his eyes and held himself tighter yet. The back of his mind floated, unbidden and uncontrollable.

He heard only part of the accusations, trial and punishment handed down over the roar of the crowd and through his helm. The next thing he knew he was ordered to handoff, step forward, to carry out sentence. With sharp crisp movements, he handed off his spear, left his shield in place, and almost as if by magic stepped out of formation to approach the accused. Someone handed him the cat-o-nine and he tugged hard at the man's collar, ripping his tunic in half. It exposed his back but still hung off his arms. His bound wrists were hung over the hook on the pole and he laid into the lashing with almost inhuman strength. After the second strike the man's knees buckled, yet he continued to rip the flesh from his back as the strikes were counted down.

When the last strike was finished, he stepped back and watched as the guards lifted the now frail looking man from the hook. Sweat stung his eyes, his muscles burned, his visor acted like a blast shield and made the water pour down his face. He stood, broad, upright and tall. He heard little but his own labored breathing and the roar of the crowd. Keeping his eyes on the now empty pole he stood in the sweltering heat, and waited. After what seemed like an eternity and what sounded to him like a disbelieving official setting one man free and passing the death sentence on three others. Then he heard orders barked and the now doomed men were moved off to the outskirts of the city where the poles stood awaiting their victims.

When he was sure all attention was off him, he took off his helm and took in a deep breath. He wiped his face and looked around. Most of his squad had moved off to escort the three men through the city to their deaths. Only a few stood at the door. They talked quietly to each other now. He stood alone, holding the bloody whip. A man approached him hurriedly and in hushed tones frantically gestured.

The sun was now coming over the hill and the temperature jumped exponentially. He dropped the cloak off of his shoulders revealing a bare scarred muscular chest. Just for a moment the heat of the morning took his mind off of his torment.

Gently as a soft flowing river, the memory came back to him as it always did. He remembered handing the old man the whip, walking to the steps, retrieving his shield and sword and moving toward the hilltop. The movement actually cooled him off. His path was now unobstructed because the throng of people had followed the parade of dead men to their end. Taking a few back alleys and jumping one short stone fence, he

made it to the top of the hill as his men were lashing the cross member to the main pole before they stood the upright in the vertical position.

Without saying a word, he dropped the pouch and small scroll of parchment onto the ground next to the man who lay silently. The other two would only be lashed to the cross member with rope. For some reason, this poor bastard was to be tied and nailed to the wood. One of his men looked up at him and shrugged. He remembered dropping his wide handled short sword on the ground so the fool could use its broad flat butt as a hammer. Closing his eyes, he clearly remembered the stupidity of some of the men he had to work with; he took a deep breath and stepped away as the man screamed when the iron nail pierced his flesh.

Staring out over the city he thought about the screams of men from past battles. One man who was already hung on a cross yelled down to the man who was being pierced with iron. He could not understand the language, but it must have been derogatory because many of the onlookers pointed and laughed. A soldier had just unrolled the parchment and pinned it over the poor bastards head. He had no idea what the symbols meant. Slaves were never taught to read, neither were slaves turned soldiers. It was when his squad hefted the pole and dropped it into the hole that he began to take notice. The sky grew dark as if on command and lightning struck all round the area from sky to ground. Wind sprang up throwing dust in all directions. A few drops of rain hit the ground. Many of the spectators left the hilltop and moved back toward the city. Only a few stayed behind, covering their faces from the blowing dust as they sat or knelt on the sand. He remembered wondering why family stayed to watch their people die. It made no sense to him. Once on the cross; they were as good as dead, why stay behind and grieve? It was his job to see them dead and gone.

Nailed ones bleed out faster, this he knew. The poor bastards who hung by their arms from hemp would suffer much longer than the bleeder. Soon, he thought to himself, he will pass out from lack of blood, and then he will fall into the dreamless sleep of the dead. He had seen it many times on the field of battle; this man would be no different. A few of his men gathered in a small group and cast lots for the few rags the men wore and their sandals. They seemed oblivious to the men above them or the angry sky around them. Throw the knucklebones and laugh was all they did. He could have claimed first choice of course; he was after all a soldier of rank. They would let him take the best pair of sandals without question.

His mind jumped back further. Back to a time when he was captured as a young man, sold to a harsh taskmaster and then to the gladiator training camp after he had broken his leg, falling off the stone wall he was forced to build. He knew he was as good as dead if he did not fight with everything he had. He knew he had been sold as a dead man for sport. Somehow, he had survived and was granted a place in the ranks of the Legion. He never knew why, but even on the field of battle, he would only take a man's jewels or coin. Never would he take their weapons, clothes or sandals. He could not say the same for his comrades. Some men would take anything they could lay claim too. He marveled at their greed.

The sky grew darker and the wind blew a bit harsher. The blowing sand stung the back of his legs. While it had only been less than a quarter of a day, one man was already blue. His lips were grotesquely swollen and his tongue hung from his open mouth. He was the one who had yelled at the nailed one. He smirked. "How strong are you now little man?" he said to no one in particular. The long march, the beating from the crowd, and the heat had all taken their toll on the man. His heart no longer made sound in his chest. He knew the look of a dead man; he had seen it many times.

He walked over and touched the bottom of the man's foot with the point of his spear. Nothing. He poked harder and cut deeply into the flesh of the heel. Again nothing. He barked an order and his men moved to lift the post from the hole, untie the dead man from the cross member and turn the body over to anyone who wanted it, otherwise, they would leave the body on the far side of the hill for the birds. An old woman and a young boy-child took the body away.

He mused at the strange occurrence; the one that was bound and not nailed had died first. Out of all the times he had this duty, after seeing what he had seen, he would have bet all the sandals he never took that the iron pierced one would have died first. The wind still blew out of the East and the sky grew darker. He lifted a skin to his mouth and drank deeply of the wine within. Kicking at the now forgotten ropes on the ground, he thought it ironic that the one to yell at the iron pierced one was the first to die.

He sat then and looked over the city and thought of his son. He had just entered the Legion and had left on campaign to the North. Even today, he felt the pride in his chest for the lad. The boy had grown fast and learned faster. By the age of 10 he was a formidable fighter and a slinger that was second to none. At the age of puberty he had quickly enlisted and taken to military training right off. The memory of his son faded into the face, that face and those eyes.

He shook his head and looked at the now full up sun. It was warm on his face and chest. The sound of wood on wood sent him back to his day-dreams. The wind was now blowing so hard it threatened to topple the top heavy crosses. He turned to see one fall slightly to the side just a few inches. The man's feet slipped off the block. That was all it took. He watched as the man suffocated. His body convulsed. He too turned a deep reddish-blue color. After only a few minutes, he was lowered and rolled to the ground. No one seemed to want the body. He nodded and the body was dragged to the slope of the hill, facing away from the city.

The iron pinned one had not moved for a long time. He hefted his spear and poked at the man's exposed ribs. Any other man would have cringed or jumped in horror, but he was a hardened combat veteran. The man, whom he had scourged only a few hours before, now opened his eyes and stared directly into his own. The parchment that was pinned to the wood over his head flew free at that moment in a gust of wind. Someone had placed what looked to be a wreath of thorns on the man's head as some cruel joke.

Blood tricked down his face, both dried and fresh. Blood and water poured from the cut in the man's chest. Not uncommon for a lung wound he thought to himself.

Yet the man's eyes bore into him like no other man he had ever pieced with a weapon in his long illustrious career of dealing death. Their eyes were locked, he knew only for a very short time, but to him, it felt like an eternity. The look in his eyes was not that of malice, anger, rage or pain. He had seen all of these emotions and more pass behind men's eyes in their final moments. What he saw in this man's eyes was, if anything, the exact opposite of those things. It was terrifying and yet, fascinating. Never before had one looked at him so deeply and with such...forgiveness. Those eyes, that face, that look, burned itself into his minds eye as sure as the brand marked his skin as a slave. That look, those eyes, would haunt him for the rest of his days.

It was only then that the iron nailed man looked to the sky, almost silently called out to someone, and was gone. His head rolled and his chin slumped to his chest. The muscles in his arms gave way and he sagged on the wooden beam. Thunder sounded loudly and lightening struck close. Knowing the man to be dead, he barked an order barely audible over the howling wind. The man with the eyes, the man nailed and tied who had lived so long on the wood, was also removed from his cross and turned over to a group of women. He remembered thinking that it was strange that no man was in the group to carry him. He even thought of offering...but he stepped back and gave way to the strong yet gentle hands of the group of women who wrapped the body in linen and then slowly carried him away, almost...reverently.

Never really understanding why, he had returned to the garrison Commander that evening and resigned his position. He was still strong, well trained and of vast experience. His military career was most promising considering his background. Yet, without remorse, without regard to pay or life after the military; he handed over his cloak and his sword. Both had been issued to him at time of enlistment and at time of promotion. On his slow walk home, a young man approached him asking if he would sell his breast plate and shin guards. The life long professional soldier took only a fraction of the coin his armor was worth. He said nothing to the wide-eyed boy who wore the now oversized armor. Walking home, with nothing but his spear in his hand as a walking stick and his clothing, he came home and handed the coin to his wife and told her she was free to stay or go as she pleased.

Never before had he shown her any amount of respect or kindness, even after she had given him a strong healthy son. She was a prize, a piece of property acquired in war. The man handed her the coins and simply said, "You are free to go." The woman ran from the home clenching the coins to her breast, crying. He never understood the female because they cried when they were mad and when they were happy. He dared not hazard a guess at what the tears on her cheeks meant.

Three months later he received word of his son's fate while on the Northern Campaign. He reported to the garrison as ordered, received the coin due his son's family, and was given the traditional thanks of the city-state. Not a man in the garrison asked him to

return. Not a single officer approached him and inquired about his health, his estate or offered their condolences.

It was as if he were a specter that walked among the living. He felt as if he were invisible to all those around him, with the exception of course; to the pair of eyes that haunted him and continued to look into the center of his being...both night and day, all day and all night, everyday.

The End

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About the Author



Michael is a combat veteran. He led his squad to the first ever placement of the US Navy shooting team in the National Infantry Trophy Match (Bronze). While in the US Navy he was the first sailor to ever win two gold medals. One for the Navy Cup and Members Trophy matches at the National Matches Camp Perry, Ohio. He also holds the NRA Distinguished Expert Award in small-bore rifle. While serving in the US Navy earned the Navy Expert Rifleman Award as well as the Armed Forces Expeditionary Service medal. After a tour of the world, he achieved his bachelor's degree in Business Administration. Michael is a Master Mason and a member of George Washington's Mother Lodge.

He lives in the foothills, somewhere in Virginia and continues to write and self publish his works as a hobby. *Pallor to Color* is by far his most personal work to date. Michael enjoys traveling, archery, fishing and the great outdoors.

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Contact DPebooks

Michael Meisberger, author of *Those Eyes...*, may be contacted via the following e-mail address:

[Michael c/o DPebooks.com](mailto:Michael@DPebooks.com)

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