

EXALTED



Sample file

A DAY DARK AS NIGHT™

BY
CARL
BOWEN

“Bowen gets [his] characters and plot just right...”

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A Beautiful Killer

Harmonious Jade is one of the deadliest women in the legendary time that is the Second Age of Man. Chosen by the Unconquered Sun himself, she has been remade into a demigod whose bow can fell whole companies of men. With that exaltation, however, have come echoes of ancient memories and a sense that she must use her gifts for some greater purpose. Chasing these phantasms of a past life and the trail of the demonic cultists who raised and betrayed her, she comes to the trading city of Nexus.

There, she meets others of her kind. But are they long-lost companions, deadly enemies or, worse yet, both? And what do the hellish masters of her family have in store for her?

Exalted: A Day Dark As Night is the first in a new, unlimited series of novels based on the hugely successful **Exalted** property.



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“Ready?” the Disciple asked Jade, grimacing and favoring his right leg. “Go.”

Harmonious Jade drew her final arrow, sprinted to the roof's edge and hurled herself toward the next nearest safe vantage. The Disciple started firing immediately to knock down the climbing ghosts who had made it closest to where Jade intended to land, and the arrows whizzed all around her, dangerously close. Jade ignored these distractions, however, and focused all of her concentration on twisting just so, taking instant aim and drawing her final arrow back to her cheek. Power surged in her as she did so, and as the arrow left her bow, it roared and flashed. The dazzling flare flew faster and straighter than any normal arrow, and it went straight for her enemy's heart. The priestess flinched and tried to raise her hands in terror, but all she managed to do was lift her glowing censer into the arrow's path. The blazing bolt hit it, and both objects exploded with a thunderclap that sent the priestess flying backward into the mausoleum. At the same time, Harmonious Jade finished her slow roll through the air and landed in a three-point crouch.

As soon as Jade landed, the Disciple leapt into the air after her. The leering deathknight threw another long needle at him and missed, but the Disciple didn't even bother to return fire. He focused solely on clearing the distance, even sacrificing grace in his landing. His knees and forearms hit the roof first, and he slid to a rough halt well beyond where Jade had touched down. Jade rushed over to him and helped him laboriously to his feet.

Blood was running down his forehead and between his eyes.



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IT IS THE SECOND AGE OF MAN



Long ago, in the First Age, mortals became Exalted by the Unconquered Sun and other celestial gods. These demi-gods were Princes of the Earth and presided over a golden age of unparalleled wonder. But like all utopias, the age ended in tears and bloodshed.

The official histories say that the Solar Exalted went mad and had to be put down lest they destroy all Creation. Those who had been enlightened rulers became despots and anathema. Some whisper the Sun-Children were betrayed by the very companions and lieutenants they had loved: the less powerful Exalts who joined their lineage to the Five Elemental Dragons. Either way, the First Age ended and gave way to an era of chaos and warfare, when the civilized world faced invasion by the mad Fair Folk and the devastation of the Great Contagion. This harsh time only ended with the rise of the Scarlet Empress, a powerful Dragon-Blood who fought back all enemies and founded a great empire.

For a time, all was well—at least for those who toed the Empress's line.

But times are changing again. The Scarlet Empress has either gone missing or retreated into seclusion. The dark forces of the undead and the Fair Folk are stirring again. And, most cataclysmic of all, the Solar Exalted have returned. Across Creation, men and women find themselves imbued with the power of the Unconquered Sun and awakened to memories from a long-ago golden age.

The Sun-Children, the Anathema, have been reborn. This is their story.





Sample file



PROLOGUE

One night's ride outside the city of Nexus, two old soldiers rode side by side through the mounting chill of early night. The land around them was quiet in hushed anticipation, disturbed only by the occasional trill of a cricket or screech of a bat taking wing. Before them, the solemn, hard-packed road was empty. Behind them, yeddim muttered, the wheels of wooden carts creaked, and fifty booted, lightly armored mercenaries marched in uneasy silence. Beyond that, came the metallic four-beat rhythm of a small unit of light cavalry. The soldiers surrounded a Guild caravan heading northeast from a trade outpost near the city of Mishaka, and they had been on the march for weeks. The caravan had been on the move most of this day already with little rest. The Guildsmen and soldiers weren't overly tired just yet, but the danger they had been promised on this trip had not yet appeared, and that made them edgy.

The two riders out in front of the caravan and company consisted of a man and a woman who were better armed and armored than most of the other mercenaries. The man was tall and grim, wearing fine lamellar armor that creaked as he moved. His mustache and beard were flecked with white, and his eyes had the determined set of a veteran of countless battles, but those were the only clues to his age. His body was hard and powerful, in the prime of health. If he bothered to mention it, his actual age would have come as a surprise.



One might have been even more surprised by the woman beside him. She rode on his right side, and she looked much younger than her captain. Her skin was smooth and flawless, with a vibrant green tint that was only apparent in direct sunlight. Thick auburn hair was woven into a ponytail and pinned into a bun at the base of her neck. She wore lighter armor than her captain, though just as fine, and she rode with a thick, black, jade-tipped spear at the ready by her side. At first glance, she appeared every bit the officer-sophisticate with little bloody experience, flanked by a tough, savvy sergeant at arms.

Such an impression was only an illusion, though, for the woman was actually a Terrestrial Exalt. She had been elevated above her peers into the rank of the divine nobility of Creation by the blessings of the Elemental Dragons. Her name was Risa, and she had been chosen by the Elemental Dragon of Wood to carry the standard of the Realm into the untamed places and shed on them the light of civilization. At least that was what her family had always tried to impress upon her. She recognized the power in her blood, but she had grown up feeling unworthy of it. Therefore, she had left the Imperial City of her birth and set out into the Threshold to grow into her power and responsibility. Since then, she had joined up with a mercenary company in the city of Nexus and risen high in its ranks.

The man to her left, Dace, was her commander. He respected Risa's Exalted station, but he still allowed her no authority in his company that did not originate with him. Where she had earned high marks in military theory and tactics in school, he had already been a leader of soldiers for fifteen years before she had joined her first company. Where she was a proud and capable soldier, he was a nigh-unbeaten veteran with decades of campaigns to his name. Where she inspired confidence in the mercenaries, he made them love him. And where Risa was Dragon-Blooded and Exalted above the masses, Dace was one of the Chosen of the Unconquered Sun.



The dogma of the Realm proclaimed that ones such as Dace were Anathema—power-mad blasphemies against nature, who would destroy civilization and break the whole of Creation to pieces—but Risa knew better. She knew Dace as well as any lieutenant knows her captain, and she had seen in him power and nobility and courage that defied any blandishment. She loved him as much as any of the mercenaries under his command did. She would follow him into the Yozi hell of Malfeas if he commanded her to, and she'd stay behind to cover his escape if he asked her to. She trusted him, and above all else, she respected him.

"So, are we almost home yet?" he groaned, breaking the silence between them at last. "How much longer?"

Dace just shook his head. "Damn it, Risa," he grumbled, "that wasn't funny on the way to Mishaka, and it's not funny now."

"Oh, how would you know, you gruff old bastard?" She never spoke to him thus around the men, but Dace tolerated it when they were alone.

"I'd say it's probably less funny now than it wasn't before," Dace continued. "The only thing worse than your bad jokes are your old bad jokes. Nothing gets funnier with age."

"Says the rule to the exception."

"What's that?"

"Nothing, sir." Risa looked away up the road. "It looks like the scouts are on their way back."

She nodded toward the road, and Dace looked ahead. Low mist occluded the distance, and shadows stretched up the path in their direction, but he could see that, indeed, a horse was coming toward them. On it rode Chassom Kestrel, one of the company's younger scouts. He wore a light buff jacket over his uniform, with a quiver of arrows sticking up over his right shoulder. He clung to the reins and rode hunched over, and his face was pale. Dace and Risa had ridden out ahead to hear their scouts' scheduled report, and from the look in Kestrel's dancing eyes, it was



not going to be a good one. The fact that he was alone, although he'd been sent ahead with two others, didn't bode well either. Kestrel stopped short, and his horse danced in a nervous circle before he could bring it fully under control.

"Captain, Lieutenant," Kestrel gasped. "Something's wrong."

Risa stilled her mount as the scout's horse excited it. "Where are the others?"

"I'm not sure," the scout huffed. "I think... Ikari Village is up ahead... You know that, of course."

"Of course," Risa said. "Look, calm down, Kestrel. Catch your breath."

"Get it together, soldier," Dace said, glaring back the way Kestrel had come. "Report."

"Yes, sir," the scout said, taking a few quick deep breaths to calm himself. "Yes, sir. Sorry." Dace's eyes narrowed, and he motioned for the scout to continue. "Brand, Dust Fox and I rode ahead like you ordered, sir, to let the mayor know we were coming and to make arrangements for the caravan to set up there for the night. But no one came out to greet us as we arrived. We knocked on a couple of doors at some outlying houses, but no one answered. The same was true the closer we went to the town square. The place was quiet as a tomb. That's where we looked in the temple to the village's harvest spirit."

The scout paused and swallowed hard, as if to fight back nausea.

"What did you see?" Risa prompted.

"It was the villagers. They were in the temple. Dead. It looked like they'd all been hacked apart. Or chewed, maybe. I don't know. It was... I've seen worse in battle, but these were women and children too. And they'd been *arranged*. They were laid out like they were worshipping. I've never seen anything like that."

Risa looked at Dace. "Have you?"

"Similar things," Dace said. "How long had they been there like that?"



Kestrel shook his head. “The blood I saw was black and dried, and the stench was pretty powerful. I didn’t see any wild dogs or other scavengers in the streets, though.”

“So, probably not very long,” Risa said. “Late last night possibly. Maybe even some time today.”

Kestrel nodded. “Brand and Fox sent me back to report while they tried to put together what happened. I tried to get them to come back with me, but they told me they’d be right behind me as soon as they figured it all out.”

“So you left them there?” Dace said.

“They ordered me to, sir,” Kestrel answered. “I would have gone back, but the sun was almost down, and I started hearing...”

“What?”

The scout moaned, unable to look either officer in the eye. “First I heard the sound of wagons, then some kind of wailing, then the sounds of Fox’s and Brand’s horses galloping behind me. Then I heard them screaming... I couldn’t go back then, Captain, I’m sorry. Not by myself.”

“No,” Dace said. “None of the three of you should have been there after nightfall in the first place.”

“So, what do you think, happened, Captain?” Risa asked.

“Could be something wrong with the harvest spirit,” Dace said. “It’s getting close to Calibration, and that always makes the little gods kind of crazy. Could be another spirit got jealous and tried to move in. Could be Wyld barbarians. Might just be something in the water made the people go crazy and kill each other. Don’t know.”

“So what do we do?”

“First, I want you to get back to the others and stop the caravan where it is. We’ll make camp right here. With the sun down and the villagers murdered, that place is probably crawling with hungry ghosts by now. I doubt our caravan master would enjoy spending the night there very much.”

“Nelis will like losing his little trade outlet even less, I bet,” Risa smirked. The Guildsman in charge of the caravan, Ourang Nelis, had paid Dace’s company very well not to talk



to any of his peers about this impractical detour from the beaten Mishaka-Nexus trade route.

“Next,” Dace said to Kestrel, “I want you to get back to the cavalry and get me a detachment of good men on fresh horses. Then, get them back here double-time.”

Kestrel nodded once and spurred his horse back toward the caravan. Risa turned her horse to follow the scout but hesitated a moment before leaving.

“Anything else, sir?” she asked.

“Yeah,” Dace said. “Double the guard around the wagons tonight. This isn’t a very tenable place to have to make camp.”

“We’ll see it suits.”

“Good. Now, one more thing. I’m taking these riders to get Brand and Fox out, but we won’t be coming right back. It’s possible we won’t actually get back here before dawn. Don’t send anyone in looking for us until the sun’s up.”

“Yes, sir. Is that it?”

“Yeah. Head back and hustle up Kestrel and that detachment I ordered. We’ll come back after dawn, and when we do, we’re going to have to break camp and push on to Nexus fast. Make sure everyone’s ready.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll take care of it.” Risa then nudged her horse’s flanks, snatched the reins and trotted back to carry out her orders.



When Dace and his detachment of cavalry entered the village, they found it every bit as eerie and deserted as Kestrel had made it sound. A waxy yellow fingernail moon shone in an ebony firmament set with diamonds, casting an unhealthy light over the empty place. No dog barked, no livestock made any noise, and even the rats and raitons seemed to have abandoned the place. The only sound around them was the unwholesome whispering of the wind, which carried a faint hint of decay and rot.

From the greasy dark grass lining the road to the skeletal emptiness of the buildings to the chalky ash mixed



into the dirt of the market square, all the evidence pointed to the fact that something very bad had happened here. Many people had died here, likely all at once. Sometimes, when things like this happened, the shroud between the worlds of the living and the dead thinned, blending the two worlds together into a place called a shadowland. There the living could interact with the dead and even travel into the Underworld like a restless ghost. In fact, if someone tried to leave a shadowland before the sun came up, that very thing would happen. Dace didn't know if what had happened here was bad enough to breach the Shroud, but it certainly looked it.

"All right," he said, "spread out and start checking houses. Don't get out of earshot of each other, and whatever you do, don't leave town. I don't think I have to tell you why." The soldiers shook their heads and scanned the area warily. "Good. Whistle if you find Brand or Dust Fox. Keep an eye out for hungry ghosts too. This place should probably be crawling with them, and I don't like that it isn't."

The men grunted assent and spread out to search. They checked both sides of the small village's main street and worked toward the center of town. Dace rode out ahead of them with one hand on his reins and the other hefting his sword—a reaver daiklave forged of purest orichalcum—which gleamed strangely in the faint moonlight. It did not surprise him when the search failed to turn up any immediate clues as to what had happened here. It was not until the riders drew close to the modest temple of the village's patron harvest god that they found anything. They saw a great many tracks and the whorls and divots of what could only have been a mounted man fighting for his life against foes on foot. A largish impression in the center was smeared with drying blood, and a deep set of parallel tracks showed where something heavy had been dragged away. The surrounding area, however, was a chaos of boot and hoof prints, so it was impossible to tell if one or both scouts had died there. Dace just hoped that, if either one



of them had survived, they'd had to sense not to bolt off in a random direction out of this place.

"Captain, look," one of the men said, trotting up beside him as he tried to read the past in the turned earth. "By the temple."

Dace glanced up and saw something coming from around behind the mean stone building slowly and with obvious effort. It was a horse, Dace realized as the thing left the shadow of the temple, and it was in bad shape. Blood gleamed on its flanks, and it was favoring its back right leg. Its tail hung limp behind it, and the horse seemed to be dragging a heavy burden. Upon a moment's inspection, it was obvious that the burden was a limp body, dangling by one leg from the stirrup of a ripped and bloody saddle.

"Dust Fox," Dace growled, recognizing his mercenary company's brand on the horse's flank before he recognized the ruined scout's features. "Damn it."

The soldier beside him turned and whistled over his shoulder to the other cavalrymen, all of whom hurried to join their captain. While Dace was turning to tell them what he wanted done, though, the soldier beside him—Lugan—took it upon himself to ride over to Dust Fox's horse. The wounded animal snorted politely and cocked its head to gauge the soldier's approach. By the time Dace realized that Lugan had gone, it was too late to call him back. He cursed and spurred his horse ahead as well.

"Lugan, get back here," he called, but the soldier's fate was already inevitable.

Lugan gained the wounded mount's side and was reaching down to cut the stirrup that entangled his comrade's foot when he heard Dace's shout. He looked up just in time to see Fox's horse bow its head with a malicious gleam in its eyes and buck up on its front legs. It snapped out a kick that caught Lugan in the mouth and broke his neck. He flew backward out of the saddle to land beside Dust Fox, and his own horse bolted. It ran straight back toward Dace, who had to stem his own charge to keep the beast from plowing into

him. He heard curses behind him as the rest of his men also had to break stride and formation to get out of the way.

Taking advantage of the momentary distraction, Dust Fox's horse turned toward Dace and bowed low as if it were mocking him. Its gesture proved purely practical, however, when Dust Fox himself sat up and grabbed its mane. The horse then scrambled back upright and Fox pulled himself into the saddle. Or, rather, what looked like Dust Fox did so. Considering the mortal wounds on its neck and chest, what looked like Dust Fox was actually a nemissary—a clever, immaterial ghost animating someone else's body. Another such ghost was animating the horse. With a wicked, unearthly laugh, the pair charged at Dace.

Howling a battle cry, Dace leveled straight at the oncoming nemissary duo, expecting a rational warrior's reaction. A mortal horseman would have flinched and turned aside at the last second, giving Dace an opportunity for a broadside chop. That was not what happened. Instead, the Fox nemissary sprang up to a crouch in his saddle and the second nemissary fled its stolen equine body. The dead horse staggered and fell immediately, and the remaining nemissary leapt clear, flying toward Dace, knife in hand. Dace's horse collided with the stumbling dead one, and Dace had just enough time to grab his daiklave in front of him before Dust Fox slammed into him. The four bodies spun and sprawled and crashed to the earth as the rest of Dace's cavalry detachment parted around him and thundered past to keep from trampling their captain. The nemissary that had fled Dust Fox's horse headed for Lugan's body.

Dace's head swam, and he saw stars, but the pain of being stabbed in the side brought him around instantly. The Fox nemissary had worked his knife under the edge of Dace's armor and scored a weak gash, and now, its free hand closed around his throat. The thing leered and hissed at him, dribbling Dust Fox's blood in his face. It grinned evilly, supremely confident that its trap had netted another handful of hapless victims. Dace almost smiled back





at it through the pain of his wounds, for he knew something the nemissary didn't.

He sucked in a deep breath, and the power of the Unconquered Sun bloomed deep within him. A sunburst mark of energy began to glow on his forehead, and his eyes blazed with rage. His blade glowed too, and he hurled the nemissary back. He then kicked up to his feet to meet the nemissary's second rush. His weapon swept up from a low guard position trailing a fan of incandescent energy and caught the nemissary under its outstretched knife arm. Dust Fox's body spun sideways through the air and split cleanly in half, blinding Dace with a spray of blood. It hit the ground in two heaps, and the nemissary fled it.

Dace wiped blood out of his eyes with the back of his hand and felt a rush of icy air as the nemissary ghost brushed past him to take up another body. It settled in the tangled corpse of Dace's heavy war horse, which lay nearby, and lurched forward to bite the back of Dace's leg. Hearing the animal moving behind him, Dace twisted around awkwardly and bashed the horse in the side of the head with a downward hilt strike. Then, he twisted all the way around the other way, surrounding himself in blazing contrails of energy, and chopped the animal's head off. The horse's body collapsed, and the ghost fled again. It fainted toward Dust Fox's horse then snatched back and simply bolted, deciding not to take its chances.

Dace almost charged after it to finish it off, but it suddenly occurred to him to wonder why his men hadn't tried to help out at all. He didn't especially need their help to deal with one nemissary, but they were trained better than to just make assumptions about one another in dangerous unfamiliar territory. Dace turning back toward the temple and saw that Lukan's body was up on its feet once again, keeping a pair of cavalymen at bay with his long spear. What's more, he was calling out in an old, almost-forgotten language, giving orders. At his command, the village temple's doors swung open, and the fully materialized hungry ghosts of the slain villagers