



The Black Night Manuscript

Exalted Discord
Short Story Contest
Winning Entries



Foreword

In this booklet you will find the three winners of a short-story contest launched on the Exalted Gaming Discord server in October 2018 under the theme of “spooky stories set in Creation”.

The contest was the original idea of Momo, one of our mods, and led to it’s conclusion by me (MadLetter) with the help of the moderation team at large. It was a short time, a fair bit of effort and a sudden interest to do something for the community that drove us, and I think that the end result is awesome enough.

I would like to take a moment to thank all the contest participants, the test-readers and the community at large for making this minor contest a fun and interesting experience.

Judge Panel

Praxis Cat, ManusDomine, Sani
all of the members of our Community Helper team.

Placements

1st Place – Katherine “screaminghellthing” Popple

2nd Place – Aaron “Kuroi” Kolder

3rd Place – Eric “Kenzo” Lord

First Place Winner

Katherine
“screaming hellthing”
Popple

with the story titled

Of the Dark
and the Dead

The scratching of a quill barely broke over the dying of the fire and the near inaudible beat of rain. At the room's impressive desk sat a young man, writing on a sheet of parchment the light shed by the candle beside him. He lay the quill down and gently blew upon the drying ink, then cast a critical eye over his penmanship. A knock at his door broke his contemplation.

"Enter," he called, not turning from his inspection.

A boy no older than sixteen slipped into the room, closing the door behind him and bowing. He clutched a decorated scroll case in one hand. "Good evening, Lord Nellens. I apologize for bothering you so late."

"Not at all, Sparrow. I was about to call for you." With a practiced movement, Nellens Leomas rolled the parchment and slid it into a waiting scroll case. He opened one of the desk's many drawers, revealing a neat array of sealing wax. Selecting a jewel-toned green, he held it above the candle. "I want you to have this letter sent on its way to Ledaal Caera by daybreak.

Impress upon the courier its importance this time, Sparrow. The marriage is in a few months, and I would be most displeased if my correspondance is misplaced a second time." The wax dripped from Leomas' grip and onto the scroll case. Sliding a ring off his finger, he pressed it into the soft wax, leaving an indentation of the Nellens crest.

"Yes, Lord Nellens." Sparrow stepped forward, taking the scroll case from Leomas. "I have a letter for you. It arrived just now."

"Leave it on the desk." Leomas absently picked up his quill once more, spinning it between his fingers as he stared pensively at the candle. "Close the door as you go."

Bowing as he stepped away, Sparrow did as he was bid. The door clicked shut, and Leomas was alone. He savored the quiet.

Things were going well. All due to his own hard work, of course; it had taken years of secret rendezvous, saccharine love letters, personal sacrifice, well-timed bribes, and brilliance nothing short of exquisite. As predicted, Caera had been pathetically exploitable; all he had to do was pretend to care about her. She was unbearably weepy, but her bloodline was strong. All he did, he did for House Nellens. For the future.

Smiling, he placed the now-cool sealing wax back into the drawer and shut it. This final letter, then to bed. He deserved the rest.

The scroll case's red wax seal was unmarked. Odd. Leomas sighed and opened another drawer, lifting out a letter opener. The bright blade pried away the wax, and the blank seal dropped to the carpet as he emptied the case onto the rosewood surface.

These were his letters—the ones that had been lost days ago—anger rising in his breast, he snatched them up, scanning them. Yes, word for word, and on the second page the ink was smeared in places, as though water had dripped upon the parchment. Theft and damage of property. More spots on page three. Page four was unreadable. Page five—his letter had been only four—was near blank. He had to tilt the page closer to the candle to read the tiny, curving handwriting in the center.

Leomas: your wife returns tonight.

His grip tightened. Could it be? Surely not; that hand he recalled was long dead. This was some foolish prank, some bid by an enemy of the house to unnerve him from his engagement to Caera. With one sharp movement, he balled the letters up and threw them into the dying embers. Snatching up extra wood from the firebox, he fed the fire until it roared. The acrid smell of burning parchment stung as the flames snapped them up eagerly.

He had worked too hard to let some contemptible effort at frightening him chase him off now. Once he discovered the culprit, his revenge would be merciless; a smile tugged at his lips and he pinched the candle out, imagining all the ways in which he could make that fool suffer.

Moving towards the bed, he let himself savor them, for sleep was all the sweeter when lulled by revenge.



The sheets sighed as someone lay beside him. He snapped from his drowsing, feeling a pang of dim apprehension in his chest; he hadn't heard the door open. He should arise from bed and demand whomever it is to leave, but his limbs—by the Five Dragons, he couldn't move.

Even his gaze was fixed, wide-eyed on the single glint of moonlight reflecting off the doorknob.

“What—“ his voice escaped in wisps of vapor. Had the fire burnt out? It was so damn cold—“What do you think you're doing?”

A hand crept along his side, sliding to rest upon his chest in an embrace. The hand was chilling, biting through his shirt, making the skin beneath tingle. Glacial lips pressed to his neck in a kiss, tracing a rivulet of ice to his ear. The familiar voice, cold and clear as a mountain stream, breathed along his cheek. “Fix this.”

“No.” Leomas' heart quickened, battering itself against her hand. “Nekane?”

“Bring me a body, Leomas.”

The hand grew colder, and Leomas' chest numbed.

"You're dead and gone—"

"A body!"

"Fine, fine!" The words burst unbidden from his lips. "I'll do anything, anything you ask, I swear, just please, Nekane, please, leave me be—"

Lips of ice brushed his cheek and the hand lifted as Nekane shifted on the mattress. And then she was between him and the door, dark hair tumbling down her back, striking beside her white dress. She drifted, soundless, and paused; one stark pale hand rested against the dark wood, vivid even in the weak light spilling from the fireplace.

Seized by a sudden surety she would turn to face him—he could bear anything, anything but her eyes—Leomas pressed his own eyes shut, a wail leaping from his lips.

For what felt like hours he lay rigid, silent, shivering, afeared that were he to dare a glimpse she would still be there; a knock on the door and a worried voice broke his vigil.

"Lord Nellens?"

Leomas slowly sat up, his body stiff and protesting. "Yes, Sparrow?" The door-knob turned. "Do not enter!"

"Yes, Lord Nellens. Sorry, Lord Nellens." Frightened, Sparrow snatched his hand back from the knob. "Someone said they heard a scream, sir, so I came up to check on you."

Leomas forced his hands to release their stranglehold on the sheets. He rubbed his eyes. "Yes. All is well." He paused. "Sparrow, have someone bring up a drink. You are dismissed."

Pressing his palms to his eyes, he hunched over, struggling to keep himself together. Surely that was some night terror, some hallucination; but his chest throbbed in dissent, his silk shirt rough when he shifted. He stood, and approached the full-length mirror standing in its corner.

The person in the mirror was a stranger. Tangled hair bunched around the man's face, stuck in thin strands to his hollowed cheeks. His eyes pushed into his skull, oddly bright, almost fevered. Something dark on his olive skin peeked over the hem of the cream silk shirt; moving slowly, the reflection lifted the shirt over his head, leaving it crumpled on the floor. Upon his chest was a blackened handprint, each finger stark in dead flesh, outlined by red and white blisters.

Leomas stood, captivated, a steady dread distending behind that mark. Whatever it was, whatever spirit lay in his bed, caressed him, whether it was her or

some horrible lie—it was real.

And he had sworn to it. A sudden shudder racked him and he snatched up his shirt, desperately covering that sign with clean silk.

A body.

Turning from the mirror, he stalked to the desk, then to the fireplace, and back to the bed, hands clasped to his stomach and his brow furrowed. He could order a slave from the family; but that would take time for delivery, and he could not survive another night knowing that creature might return. There was a graveyard nearby, but he could not recall—did these people burn their dead, or bury them—and where would he get a shovel, anyway? Would it accept a rotted corpse?

There was a knock at the door.

Leomas whirled from his position before the mirror. “Enter.”

The door creaked open. Thick, wine-red hair bunched around the girl’s face, framing her wide eyes as she peered in, clutching a thick glass bottle. “Your drink, Lord Nellens.” She spoke in a daunted hush.

“Place it on the desk.” He watched her move across the room. She was small, thin, but seemed healthy. The blush of life was in bloom upon her cheek. “Tell me, child, what is your name?”

“Er, Anemone, Lord Nellens.”

“Anemone,” he said slowly. His hands tightened around themselves. “I would like you to strip the bed and take the sheets down for cleaning.” His heart threw itself against the dead mark; blood rushed in his ears.

She nodded, her hair bouncing with the abruptness of it. “Yes, Lord Nellens.” She hurried towards the bed, tugging at the oversheet to loosen it, bent almost double.

He took a step towards her. Then another.

She gathered the sheet in a bundle, arms wrapped around it.

He was behind her.

She turned, and he wrapped his hands around her neck. Her mouth opened to scream, but he squeezed the cry shut in her throat. The sheets fell and tangled around his feet as she pushed at his face, nails scraping his cheek as he stumbled, sending the two of them tumbling down, her back striking the mattress, his knees cracking against the frame. Her feet kicked out, doing nothing.

This was taking too long. She kept flailing—weakly, yes, but still—and her eyes kept leaking—Leomas closed his eyes, hearing only his ragged breath and the rustle of fabric. And the click of the door.

Wild-eyed, he spun, releasing her throat. Sparrow stood there, a wine glass in hand and horror in his face.

Their gaze met and Sparrow turned to flee, but Leomas threw himself across the room, his hands bunching in Sparrow's shirt. He dragged him back in. "Don't—" was all the boy gasped out before Leomas slammed his face into the corner of the desk. Sparrow let out a cry of pain and, afraid, Leomas slammed his head down again, then again, leaving hair and blood caught on the corner. Sparrow's body thumped when it hit the floor.

Leomas wiped his hands down his shirt. He turned back onto Anemone. She was struggling to hide herself beneath the bed; Leomas grabbed her by the ankles and ruthlessly dragged her out. Snatching a pillow, he pressed it over her face, pressed until she stopped clawing at his arms and fell limp. He stood.

"I did it," he said. "I did it." He whispered it to himself as he hurried to the door to lock it. Drawing the latch, he leaned his forehead against the door and closed his eyes. "I did it, Nekane."

"So you did." A cold hand touched his neck and he whirled, coming face to face with her. A choked whimper escaped; her eyes were wide and so very awfully blue, bluer than he remembered and closer than he liked. "What a good job you did, Leomas."

"I did what you wanted. Take it and go!"

"Did you know that I was with child when you drowned me, Leomas? I was given a second chance; I came back. But I lost our child." Her left hand took his chin, turning his face from side to side. Appraising him. "So now we're making one. Together, as a husband and wife should."

"I won't—"

"You already did." Her fingers tightened as he tried to pull away. "I can no longer conceive. We have already created something new, together, here tonight; but she needs something from both parents, don't you think? I was considering giving her your eyes."

"I don't understand."

"No, you were always a little dull." Sighing, she pulled from a pocket what looked like a spoon. Leomas twisted the doorknob, trying and failing to open the door.

She raised the spoon up to his face. "Please," he breathed. It was sharpened. "Please, don't. I did what you asked."

"Eyes wide," she said, then with one deft movement slipped the tool into his eye socket. He heard a sickening pop somewhere inside his skull. The feeling of

his eyelid depressing as he screwed his eyes shut rose bile in his throat. She let go of his chin and forced his right eye open with cold precision, bringing that thing up and he heard that pop again and then—

He couldn't see anything.

“Minimal bleeding,” he heard her say above him as he slumped to the floor, pressing himself back. “Not bad. Oh, stop whimpering; I need to concentrate. Stay there a moment.”

There was the rustling of fabric, then humming. “Before I start, I want to reassure you—” her voice was further away—beside the bed? “I will let you live. It's a luxury you didn't give me, but you did do exactly as I asked.”

His fingers hovered around where his eyes used to be, afraid to touch. Half-delirious, he mumbled a prayer, repeating the words again and again. He could still hear her talking, somewhere in front of him, sometimes singing, but the meaning swam past him. His throat grew sore and his tongue grew dry as the hours slipped by but still he spoke, trying to ignore the sounds of ripping flesh and the chill that rose through the floor.

He heard a wheezing from the bed, and a terrified voice—Nekane? No, younger—asking a question. Anemone. Nekane answered.

Two sets of feet walked towards him, and he crawled away, the stone floor numbing his fingertips. The latch clicked open, then shut, and he was alone.

Leomas kept fumbling forward. His fingers met cloth, with something yielding beneath—Sparrow?—and he kept going until he felt smooth wood grain, then metal handles.

The drawer slid open easily, and he felt inside; pain flashed across his palm. The letter opener. He gripped the handle, cut throbbing, and pressed the tip to his chest. His heartbeat trembled behind the handprint.

What he'd done was unforgivable. What would he do when they discovered him? He had no explanation for what happened. He'd helped an Anathema. He was disfigured.

He took a breath, sat back on his heels, and drove the letter opener in.

It hurt. He pulled, but it wouldn't come out. Something warm welled through his fingers. He didn't want to die, not really, but he didn't want to be found, either, not when the finding meant his family—oh, by the Dragons, his family—they would have let him go to the Immaculates in a heartbeat. On his hands and knees, he crawled away from the desk, only making it a few feet until his joints weakened and he collapsed.

His chest ached. But his arms tingled pleasantly, and he felt light-headed. Even

the cold was abating; a voice, distant but warm, spread through his chest.

“I can shield you from death. Would you like revenge, Leomas?”

And he answered: “Yes.”

Second Place Winner

Aaron “Kuroi” Kolder

with the story titled

A Fairy Tale

It was the dead of night. Lightning struck.

Even though fatigue was weighing my eyelids down, I forced myself to look. Lightning shouldn't strike in an ocean, but these are Wyld waters. And anything could happen in the domain of the Fair Folk. Still, I looked, hoping for the promise of land or anything that can get me out of this blasted storm.

It shouldn't have happened. I have been sailing these waters for nearly 2 decades. I can predict where the schools of fish move throughout the seasons, or how many whale pods pass through these waters, or where I can best harvest clams every year. My father taught me, and his father taught him. Salt water flows through our veins and our legs are as steady on a ship as they would be on land.

So how did I get stuck in this storm?

There were no signs of it coming, it suddenly appeared with an almighty power and blew me straight into the sea belonging to the Fae. How? Or better, why me? Was this some form of divine punishment? I make my prayers to the gods of waves, winds and storms every day.

Every year, I contribute to our driftwood temple with fish, oil and proper nets. The old, blind priest always prays for me when I visit and make the sacrifices. This doesn't make sense. None at all. Have the gods forsaken me?

But I've been drifting for 3 days straight and water is running out. The wild winds and boisterous waves prevent me from gathering the rain. At least I kept my wits and didn't drink the sea water. I'm not daft... yet. I won't drink the briny water. Never in my life will I stoop so low.

The thought hit me. *Never in my life.*

I am going to die like this, dried up like shriveling seaweed. Food for the gulls or the sharks or whatever monstrous things prowl these waters. No prayers will save me.

Lightning struck again. This time, I barely looked. But I'm glad I did.

Right before me, a massive galleon cut through the waves. I'm saved! The gods have blessed me after all! Or maybe this was a different deity?

I quickly suppressed that blasphemous thought. On the salty waters, the ocean gods were king, I remind myself.

That thought, together with the pounding rain, cooled me down enough to actually look at the massive ship. The lanterns are on, swinging steadily, the hinges making that familiar sound of squeaking metal. On the prow, one of the lanterns was missing. But there is nothing else. None at all. A ship like this should always have some sound. The creaking of timber, the whipping of sails, the shouting of crew, captain or first mate. But there is nothing. Except the lanterns. They look

more menacing than they did before. Filled with rage.

The ship slowly drifted closer. This feels wrong. *Wrong. Wrong. Wrong.*

But do I even have a choice? I need water. I need provisions. #

I will die without them.

Tying my cog to the ship, I steeled myself. I swallowed deeply, before climbing up. It was a massive ship, beautifully crafted from a dark and dense wood that I don't recognize. It looks out of place. This style of shipbuilding isn't used back home.

As I am climbing, I notice myself slowing down. I'm scared. What was waiting for me on the deck? Just a few more steps before I crest the railing.

Three more steps. My heart is pounding in my ears whilst my stomach is doing gymnastics around my liver.

Two more steps. Cold sweat is slowly starting to cover my back.

One more step. All my muscles tense up. Here it comes...

Boom.

Thunder roared through the sky. A gasp escapes me and I nearly lose my hold on the railing. *Guts 'n' arse, bloody thunder!*

I shoot up the final steps, tumbling onto the deck, eyes closed out of sheer terror.

When I finally open them, I quickly sweep my gaze over the deck.

Nothing.

It was deserted.

Relief washes over me. After a three day storm in the Wyld I fully expected the worst to happen here. Dead silent Raksha on the deck, sailing the seas to enslave humans and drag them to their underwater palaces to become playthings, food or worse. Something like that. I have an iron cutlass on me, but I don't think that would make any difference to them.

The empty deck did not comfort me for long though. I had to find supplies.

I moved towards the captain's cabin. Light shone within but the windows were stained so it was impossible to look inside. I tried the door. The beautiful door handle did not make a sound when I tried to open it. But it does not open. Locked without a proper lock, somehow. I can't help but sigh.

I turn around. Only one way to go in. Down the stairs on the deck, into pitch black. My stomach dropped once more. Clutching my trusty iron cutlass, I prowl towards the hole. I have a few matches with me, a lantern would be much better.

But I did not want to disturb the squeaking, swinging lanterns. They belong where they are. Far away from me.

Bah, salt 'n' shit. No use in waiting 'til I starve.

I strike a match and creep my way down the ornate stairs. Slowly, I reach the middle deck. The corridors here are far wider, and higher, than normal and the wood has been exquisitely carved. That was odd. This isn't exactly the part of the ship that has to woo or impress visitors. So why is it so luxuriously decorated?

I shake my head. No matter. I have to stay sharp and not drool over the majestic sights before me. Water and food, that's my goal. Continuing onwards throughout the hallway I find beautiful room after room, but no provisions.

After a while, my match is starting to fizzle. I don't have many, so I should use them sparingly. More importantly, I've been walking through this corridor for half an hour and I haven't reached the end yet. This ship is huge, but not this huge. I didn't take side passages either.

What is this trickery? The uneasy feeling that I had when climbing the ship returns. This has to be Fae magic, right? I need to find what I need and leave. Now.

I speed up my search. I just need to find something. Anything. The frantic pace is wreaking havoc on my nerves, but I have no choice. In the dark, my boot suddenly gives way and I nearly tumble down another flight of stairs. The lower deck. My mind races. This has to be the hold then, so this is what I am looking for. My eyes have adjusted a little to the dark, but trying to peer down this staircase is like trying to peer down the deepest abyss in the Great Western Ocean. That eerie feeling becomes stronger. My neck hairs straighten. Why am I hesitating so close to my goal? I was never a coward, why now? My heart is pounding so hard, I can hear it. I need to keep breathing. I need to beseech the ocean gods for courage. One step at a time.

Slowly... gently... my heart stills and my breath returns to normal. The eerie feeling stays, but it's a bit farther now. I can do this. I descend the stairs. One step at a time.

The area around the base of the stairs is even darker. I didn't think that was possible. Walking around, I feel the surroundings. This is the hold alright. With my knife, I silently open a barrel and immediately recoil. Grog. Strong grog. Too strong to use, but I might be close. The next barrel contains brandy. Then rum. Oil. But no water! Eventually, I end up quite a distance from the stairs and my hope is faltering.

The final barrel. If this isn't water, I'm doomed. I quickly mutter another prayer. Pry open the lid and inhale.

My knees buckle. My hands still clutch the barrel and I start sobbing. The most

beautiful smell. Fresh water. Clear as the morning sun. I waste no time drinking my fill and filling my canteens with more. I must have been trembling, because by the time I'm done the floor is soaked. When I'm done stowing away the precious water, calmness returns to me. And with that stillness, something new. The smell of iron. The malicious atmosphere that I forgot for a moment returns in full force. I was trembling before, but that is nothing compared to now. Reaching for my matches, I start to whimper. I can feel it.

There is something in here.

I strike the match, and the spark takes ages to catch on fire. But when it does, I wish it never did. My stomach, now full with water, nearly empties itself at the sight. Blood. So much blood. And at that moment, something grabs hold of my ankle.

I scream.

The match falls, I try to unsheath my cutlass but my arm is caught against a wooden beam. I fall. Squirring on the ground, I manage to twist around and see what latched onto me before the match dies. A man. With large fangs. When nothing happens for a few moments, I carefully light another match. My last. My eyes need to adjust again, but then I see him. A man, or man-tiger, lying on the floor. Blood pools around him, coming from the thousands of small cuts he has on his body. An arm and leg have been cut off and his face hasn't been spared either. One eye is missing, his nose has been mutilated and he lacks ears. His remaining eye is fixed on me, filled with pure and undiluted terror. Was this a raksha?

"P-Please..." he manages to stammer "No sound..."

My answer catches in my throat. I just look at him. And my eyes wander to the surroundings. There I see an incredibly beautiful woman, similarly mutilated. She hangs from a wall, clad in iron chains. They leave burn marks on her entire body. She cries, but makes no sound. She must have been crying for hours...

Everywhere I look, the scene repeats. Some Fae more monstrous than I could ever have imagined, but all of them tortured, disfigured and broken. My mind is numb from all this, but eventually I realize. They're all Fair Folk. The stuff of nightmares. The Raiders from the Wyld. Tricksters and murderers. Killing, stealing, kidnapping. The Raksha do it all. And here they are.

The monsters have been caught by a bigger, badder monster.

I look back at the man - no, the Fae - holding my leg. There are tears in his eyes.

"Human... Kill us..." he mutters "Before HE returns... Please..."

The other Fair Folk join in, forming some bizarrely beautiful choir "Kill us..." They chant. "Make it stop... Have mercy..."

Boom.

Thunder roars again. The Fae fall silent. All eyes are fixated on a dark corridor. My eyes follow them. I blink in surprise. Then I blink again. Is that... light?

At the end of the hallway, a menacing light shines angrily. The source of the light is around the corner still, but I recognize it immediately. The light that seems to hate everything not from this ship. One of the lanterns on the deck. And with it came sound.

Thump. A step. **Thump.** A heavy footstep. **THUMP.** The light shone brighter now. And from the depths, a guttural laughter. There was no joy. There was only hate. And malice.

I didn't wait. I ran. The match dropped and while I was running to the stairs, I see the faces of the Fair Folk. Their mouths were agape, tears in their eyes. And they wailed. Oh gods, they wailed. I didn't stop. Flying up the stairs, the wails are turning more desperate, and the steps come closer. I burst into the middle deck and fled.

That's when the screaming started.

From seemingly all around me, voices were ringing out. They were beautiful voices, accustomed to singing and seduction. They were rough voices, meant for intimidation and command. But there is no singing or seduction now. No intimidating or leading. It chilled me to the bone. But I have to keep running. The monster is still laughing and the steps speed up. I don't look back. Tears streaming from my face, I recite all prayers I know, hoping that just one god hears me. Eventually, the steps grow more silent. So does the laughter. But I don't stop. I reach the stairs leading to the deck and sprint up. I don't look around, I just run to broadside, where my cog is waiting. I can't hear anything anymore. No screaming, no laughter. Nothing.

I don't care. I need to get off this ship. Stumbling at the railing, I look down. My ship is gone. No! Please no!

I fall to my knees. It's over. I'm going to die slow and horrible. My flesh will be flayed from my bones. My fingers will be broken and ripped off piece by piece. My stomach revolts at the thought and its contents spill all over the deck.

Salt 'n' shit 'n' guts!

I'm not going to wait for my death! The waves will have me, anything better than that monster. And so I jumped with a smile on my face. The cold sea swallowed me, but I fought back.

For hours I swam, until I saw a light piercing the stormy waves. A small boat, not unlike mine, with a lantern on its prow. Its captain saw me, and he rushed to fish me out of the water.

Heaving and struggling, I manage to climb aboard.

“What’s this then, lad? What are ye doing out here?” The captain asks. His voice is very deep.

“Caught in a storm, got swept into the Wyld.” I hesitate. “Found a ship with Fair Folk.” My voice is raspy from days of disuse.

“Woah, woah, I don’t want no dealing with them folks. I don’t wanna hear what ye gots to say ‘bout them.” He stood up and shuffled towards the prow, where he had hung the light. He had quite a limp.

Thump. Thump.

He took the lantern from the prow, turned towards me and smiled. I recognized the light. That hateful light. It shone brightly over the ship. A ship filled with blood, the dead and the dying.

“Not that I need to hear what ye gots to say.”

He laughed.

A deep guttural laugh.



≈ A Fairy Tale ≈

Third Place Winner

Eric “Kenzo” Lord

with the story titled

Golden Light Casts
Deeper Shadows

Misho's clothes were soaked with blood when he regained control. He hoped that at least some of it was his.

Panting from the exertion of battle, the Exalted took stock of his surroundings. It was still nighttime. The crescent moon was hidden behind the late-autumn clouds, leaving the village almost entirely in darkness. Misho's golden Caste mark provided a cone of illumination, the only light he had to work with as he searched through the carnage.

Ten dead, at least. Misho himself was unharmed.

All Realm soldiers, which was some small comfort. No civilians this time, as far as he could see. Their corpses lay strewn about the village square in broken heaps. Most of their heads had been entirely caved in by Misho's mace, and those whose faces were still partially intact stared lifelessly back up at him in terror and helplessness.

Grimly, he started to pile the bodies in the center of the square. The corpses were light as a feather to his Essence-charged strength, and he kept his Caste mark glowing brightly enough to light his work.

He labored silently, carrying his victims back and forth across the square, until he lifted one and found a young village boy hiding underneath.

The lad was around ten, and he looked up at Misho from his hiding place, squinting against the golden glow of Misho's mark. His face was streaked with dirt and the blood of the corpse he'd taken cover under. He must have hidden during the fighting, and Misho had been so blind with rage and bloodlust that he'd entirely failed to notice.

"What are you doing?" the boy asked levelly, still lying on the ground. He was expressionless, with no hint of fear or revulsion. He was in shock, Misho decided.

"I have to burn these men, or they could rise up again as hungry ghosts."

The boy nodded, thoughtfully, and stood. He barely came up to Misho's waist. He considered for a moment more, then, "Are you an Anathema?"

"I have been called that before." A memory, still too fresh. A Dynast hunter, screaming that word at his circle-mate like an epithet before running her through with a jade sword. He looked away.

The boy nodded in satisfaction, as if he'd just had a theory confirmed. "You killed all the soldiers. The priest says that Anathema are our enemies, that they live to burn the Realm and bring chaos."

Misho tossed the corpse he was carrying onto the pile. "It looks like the priest was right."

The boy sat cross-legged next to the mound of bodies. He still didn't look afraid – if anything, the information seemed to have made him more curious. His voice was almost conversational. “Why do Anathema want to tear down the Realm?”

Misha crossed the square again, toward another set of corpses. His light flashed across the buildings, leaving the boy in darkness. “Do you remember what happened today, before the fight?”

The boy nodded. “The soldiers came and asked for their taxes. My daddy said the magistrate had been afraid they'd come for months.”

“And was he right to be afraid?”

The boy nodded, barely visible in the pitch darkness. “The soldiers dragged the magistrate out into the square here and started to beat him. They said if he couldn't afford to pay them in jade, they'd take what he owed out of his daughter. They tied him up and started whipping him. That's when you attacked them.”

Another memory jarred loose in Misha's mind. The man, kneeling, pleading, as the Fanglord's whip shredded his back. Even the thought of it set his blood racing again, set something primal stirring deep within the part of him that shone with golden power, and he had to take a deep breath to steady himself.

What was wrong with him?

He tossed the last Realm soldier onto the top of the heap. The poor man's leg had been crushed, and draped down at an impossible angle down across his former companions. It was a trick Misha used often in combat. Most people were so concerned with defending their heads from a mace-wielder that they forgot what blunt trauma could do to a knee. Seeing the results of his handiwork here in front of him made his role in the slaughter more real. It was easy to disassociate from the blood and gore when he couldn't remember what he'd done in his rage.

The boy spoke again. “So you were protecting us?”

Misha shook his head. “I honestly don't know what I was doing. Even if this place doesn't become a Shadowland, the Realm will eventually come looking for its tax collectors. Your people can never return here and be safe. They'll probably be hunted. I saved the magistrate, but I've damned this whole town.”

“Being an Anathema sounds complicated,” the boy said.

Misha reached down and touched the body on top of the pyre, channeling some ambient Essence into the corpses. His Caste mark glowed brighter as he drew on his power. The bodies burst immediately into golden flame, lighting the square brilliantly for a moment and setting insane shadows dancing around the edges.

Dawn was breaking by the time the first group of villagers returned. Misha watched them come, sitting cross-legged in front of the guttering pyre, watching

the golden flames alongside the boy. They'd been quiet since the fire had started. The stink of burnt flesh clung to everything.

The villagers looked at him with horror, of course. He was the Anathema of their most zealous nightmares, come to end the natural order by drowning it in the Realm's blood. His caste mark's shine had quieted to a faint gleam, but it was still clearly visible on his brow, if you were looking for it. They were all looking for it.

One of the women rushed forward and gathered the boy to herself. The boy had inherited her straight dark hair. She glared at him with tearful eyes as she retreated, too terrified to scold the lad. The villagers gave him and the pyre a wide berth as they made their way into their homes, already gathering what they could carry as they prepared to leave their lives behind. It went without saying that they wouldn't be able to stay, and so few people spoke.

The magistrate and the priest returned with the second group, as the sun was cresting the horizon.

The magistrate's torso was bare, aside from the wrap of bloody bandages that held together his flayed back. It was remarkable that he was able to walk at all, damaged as he was. Misho had been clinging to the thought that he'd saved the man's life, but perhaps this hardened soul hadn't needed his intervention after all.

The priest spotted Misho and strode forward. The Exalted had expected a zealous tirade – had almost hoped for it. Instead, the man's voice was frightened and trembling, but he somehow pitched it to carry in spite of his terror.

"You are Anathema," he said. It wasn't a question.

Misho nodded.

"Then you have damned us by your presence alone, and doubly so by slaying the representatives of the Immaculate Dragons. We are doomed if we stay here, and doomed if we flee."

"I know," said Misho. He was very tired. "I'm sorry."

"But the Anathema was just trying to help!"

The voice rang clear as a bell across the square. The priest whirled to stare at the boy, who was straining against his mother's grip.

The boy wilted under the sudden scrutiny. "He saved Magistrate Shen," he managed stubbornly, then retreated back into his mother's arms. She held him gingerly, as if she were suddenly afraid he would burst into flames.

The priest stared at him in open shock. "Lila, where was your son all night?"

"We..." She hesitated. "We found him here when we returned. He was with... with him."

The priest sighed and turned back to Misho. “Then you have corrupted him as well. What more would you have of us, Blasphemer?”

“No.” Misha rose to his feet. “I haven’t touched him. He’s in shock, he’s afraid. You can do what you want with me, but – ”

“Enough!” The magistrate’s voice was ragged as he spoke for the first time. “Lila, I’m sorry, but you know what we have to do. We can’t kill this foul creature, but we can make him watch while we end his corruption.”

Lila, the boy’s mother, was weeping openly, now. She nodded wordlessly, and pushed her son. The boy looked up at her, his eyes still blank, and didn’t understand. The magistrate strode forward, and in his hand was a knife.

Something snapped inside Misho again.

His mace was in his hand before he understood what was happening. Regret and panic welled up inside of him, then blurred to nothing as his vision went red. He surged forward, his Anima flashing instantly into a bonfire around him, a harsh golden radiance that shone in stark contrast to the quiet scarlet of the sun rising behind the clouds. The magistrate was dead before he turned around, his chest cavity completely pulverized by the force of Misho’s strike. Lila screamed, and the Exalt rounded on her.

“Please don’t!” A young voice slid, unheeded, across his consciousness. “She’s my mother!”

Misho caved in her head with a single blow, and then he remembered no more.



≈ Golden Light Casts Deeper Shadows ≈

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DISCORD

»Seized by a sudden surety she would turn to face him—he could bear anything, anything but her eyes—Leomas pressed his own eyes shut, a wail leaping from his lips.«

*– from “Of the Dark and the Dead”
First Place*

»The thought hit me. Never in my life. I am going to die like this, dried up like shriveling seaweed. Food for the gulls or the sharks or whatever monstrous things prowl these waters. No prayers will save me...«

*– from “A Fairy Tale”
Second Place*

»That jarred a memory loose in Misho’s mind. The man, kneeling, pleading, as the Fanglord’s whip shredded his back. Even the thought of it set his blood racing again, set something primal stirring deep within the part of him that shone with golden power, and he had to take a deep breath to steady himself. What was wrong with him?«

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