

# CHARACTER STORY: ACOLYTE

They call people like me the Tainted. Ever since the peril of the Great Calamity befell our lands more than a hundred years ago, some of the corrupt forces that brought it about seeped into the land, into the rivers, into the very air we breathe.



Imperceptible to human eye the foul remnants of that evil force manifest in deformities found in animals and, rarely, people. The two-headed goats and the like are harmless and make for morbid attractions for the travelling entertainers. But sometimes it is said that the Taint manifests itself in more nefarious ways. Dark thoughts and desires are said to cloud the mind of those who carry it and their appearance will often reflect that twisted nature. Those afflicted with it are said to welcome occult magic and violence, caring little for the fragile order springing out of the ashes of the old world.

The Templar will look for the Tainted and either execute them or condemn them to a life of imprisonment as the acolytes of the Infinite Mercy try, in vain, to purge the latent darkness through prayer and ritual.

Being persecuted, shunned and feared, always doubtful of whether your fate is truly your own – such is the existence of the Tainted.

Ever since early childhood me and my twin sister Anastasia excelled in our studies and devotion to the pure ideals of the All-Mother. This world, scarred and full of suffering, had a great need of her patience and mercy and we both committed ourselves to the studies that would one day allow us to join the other acolytes in the marble High Temple of Aulstrad.

We were both ready for the ceremony that would determine our worth the day the elderly portly man from the temple came into our settlement with his ornate robe and the sweet-smelling censer. Our eyes shone with excitement and determination as we answered the most obscure questions, demonstrating our commitment and readiness to serve. He seemed impressed as he started the final part of the ritual that would ascertain that our souls were pure enough to join the acolytes. Anastasia passed. I did not.

From a hushed conversation with my father I overheard the condemning verdict. Tainted. The slightest tinge of corruption, but enough to never be admitted as an acolyte. A pouch of coins exchanged hands as this information would not go past the old man, ensuring my freedom despite this new predicament.

Crushed as I was, I opted to accompany Anastasia on her journey to the capital. Our wagon was making good time along the old road circling the forest. We sat across from each other. My well-worn travelling dress was in a sharp contrast to the snowy whiteness of the acolyte robes she was wearing. She locked eyes with me – sorrow and a plea for forgiveness in hers. I turned away, swallowing tears. It was nobody's fault. There was nothing to forgive. We rode in silence.

The quiet would soon be broken by shouts of alarm and the cracking, snapping sound as crossbow bolts started hitting the wagon. We were under attack! Panicked screams of the driver, the splinters flying as the bolts protruded from the flimsy sides of the wagon, a jerking motion as the terrified horses set into a mad gallop, pulling the wagon away from danger. Even as the chaos subsided, the wagon did not stop – the driver wanted to put as much distance as possible between us and the brigands before he would let up.

Gasping for air I braced myself against the wall of the shaking wagon and looked around. A thin dark red line was crawling slowly down the white fabric of Anastasia's robe. Her head hung helplessly on her chest. A terrible realization dawned on me. The bloodied metal of the brigands' crossbow bolt was protruding out of her neck. Muffling my own terrified scream with my bloodied hand, I realized that my sister was gone.

What followed seemed like an eternity though the decision was made in a split second. It all flashed before me in a dizzying, blazing instant. My grief for my beloved sister, my horror at what just transpired, the realization of the opportunity that stood before and the risk that came with it. I swallowed and blinked. The decision was made. The temple was promised an acolyte and they would be getting one today. Completing the macabre dress exchange I smeared the blood across my old garment so that when the driver opened the door, he witnessed the new acolyte of the temple trying to tend to the deadly wound of her plain-clothed twin sister in vain.

The packed dirt of the country road gave way to the cobbles and the hum of the big city soon surrounded the wagon as we entered Aulstrad. I said my final, soul-crushing goodbyes. Anastasia was welcomed to the temple. Except there was no Anastasia anymore. Just me.

Years have passed as I have kept my secret safe, studying the ways of the All-Mother, becoming knowledgeable in the lore of the temple, learning the rituals and the rites. I could feel the light of my faith enveloping me, yet even as it did, I knew there was a seed of darkness hidden deep within. Late at night, studying the crumbling pages of an ancient tome by dwindling candlelight, I read of a secret place deep underground that contained the purifying power to cure any corruption – natural or otherwise. The underground sanctuary was located next to a tiny hamlet that sprung up on the edge of the Scarred Wastelands.

My path led there. A mission of mercy to console and inspire the populace, as far as my superiors were concerned. Finding and joining a group destined for these depths was easier than I thought – the presence of one such as myself is always welcome as it makes people calmer and more confident. For too long this corrupt part of me made me feel like a thief of another's fate. Soon it would be gone, and I would be myself again – Tainted no more.