

Once, centuries ago, Chiaroscuro was a jewel of the Old Realm, and they say that 20 million souls had lived within its dazzling towers of glass. Then the Contagion came, and the city was humbled. The brilliant towers were toppled, and the population was cut down by the twin scythes of war and disease.

After the plague, the streets were choked with rubble, bones and broken glass. The ruins proved an irresistible target for looting, and for centuries, the city was a nest of tiny bandit kingdoms. The brigands lived by picking through the rubble for the wonders of a bygone age and using weapons whose power they could no longer comprehend to annihilate their rivals for control of this block or that building.

But eventually, the weapons were exhausted. Without the danger of First Age magic to keep their armies at bay, the city's beautiful harbor and imperishable glass breakwater had drawn conquerors as surely as it had drawn looters 200 years before. Four centuries ago, the Tri-Khan of the Delzan nomads led his armies into the city and put the bandit-kings and their people to the sword. He then bowed his head to the Realm and declared the city open for settlement. Any who would live in peace might settle there and be exempt from taxes for 10 years.

A great migration occurred, and Chiaroscuro was reborn. In a few generations, it grew as mighty as the other southern metropoli of Paragon and the Lap. The Tri-Khan commissioned the casting and erection of great brass firedust cannons to guard his city's harbor. These titanic weapons were the mark of prosperity in the South and made the city the dream and envy of much of the world. Yet, even now, less than a million people live within Chiaroscuro. Though some neighborhoods had escaped destruction or been cleared of debris, most of the city's dwellers dwell in shanties, crouching beneath the indestructible ruins of the vanished Golden Age.

Aesha raced through the ruined streets of the city, and the imperial infantry's hobnailed boots hammered on the cobbles behind her. She was giddily aware of the world around her, laughing inside that she should notice how the air that rushed past her smelled of jasmine and desert sand. The breeze blew from inland tonight and carried the stink of Chiaroscuro out to sea with it. Such winds were thought lucky by the people of the city — the sirocco could blow ceaselessly for weeks, shortening tempers and bringing sand and spirits of madness with it from the southern deserts. Sometimes, it even brought sandstorms, ruining crops and choking the air with grit.

But whatever sort of luck this wind brought Chiaroscuro as a whole, it was the favor of the gods for Aesha — it was a beautiful night for running. The stiff, dry breeze carried the sweat away from her skin, and the cool air added to her endurance, rather than sapping it. Behind her, the armored infantry crashed and labored, cut off from the cooling wind by their protective gear.

The infantry were nothing compared to her power, but they were spreading systematically through the streets. Aesha could defeat any one of the detachments with almost casual ease, but the troops were merely the hounds of the Wyld Hunt. The Dragon-Bloods of the Hunt trailed behind the foot soldiers — resplendent in their jade armor and bearing wicked daiklaves, they stood ready to converge on any sign of the fleeing Solar. The Dynasts wanted her to fight, wanted her to burn Essence until she could no longer conceal the divinity within her. Or to run, flying heedless and instinctive through the night, until she fell into some ambush they had laid.

Minutes later, Aesha stopped her flight, and sweat instantly coated her body. She looked behind her and heard the distant clatter of the imperial troops. She had drawn up short before one of the city's haunted districts. Even centuries after the Contagion, the streets were still strewn with shattered glass and thick with hungry ghosts and wicked spirits bred by the horrors of the plague. She walked forward, until her toes almost touched the place where the Tri-Khan had ordered a groove cut into the cobbles and filled with cake salt, to contain the evil of the place.

There were several such districts in the city, and the barriers around them were inspected daily for breaks by the city's Immaculate priests. Even with the safety of the city at stake, that much salt would have attracted thieves, except that Grandmother

Bright and the other spirits of the city were as concerned with Chiaroscuro's safety as its mortal inhabitants.

Twice in living memory, salt had been stolen from the wards, and twice, Grandmother Bright had left her plaza and walked up and down the streets, sniffing for the thieves. One thief had been a beggar, who had stolen the salt to feed his wife and children. He and his family were driven mad as punishment. After running through the streets, they had plunged heedless into the same neighborhood the beggar had stolen the salt wards from. Those who lived near the area reported that the family's ghosts could be seen stalking the streets at night. The other thief had been a greedy merchant, who sought to evade the city's wrath by sailing away in a fast galley. Grandmother Bright had spoken with the spirit of the city's waters, and the ship had been drawn instantly to the bottom of the harbor.

Aesha had been a teenager then and had seen the ship go down. She had watched the crew attempt to escape, swimming desperately for the shore. And one by one, whatever force had destroyed the ship pulled them down as well. Grandmother Bright claimed that the souls of the drowned were given to the Fair Folk to use as playthings, and Aesha knew in her heart that the spirit's words were true.

The fugitive stared down at the salt barrier glittering whitely in the pavement before her. She remembered a childhood playmate, Clove, who used to skip back and forth over the barrier. She would laugh at the other girls in the neighborhood and tease them from hiding places in the ruins. Eventually, Clove had stopped going home, and her mother had stood at the edge of the ward for days, calling out her daughter's name. The other mothers shook their heads and looked away, and even the other children knew that Clove belonged to the ghosts now.

Aesha had heard Clove's voice now and again in the years since, calling out from this ruin or that, chanting her name in childish chants. Such sounds were common in Chiaroscuro, and Aesha sometimes laid awake at night and wondered if each of the voices had once been a person like Clove or if some or even most of them were just sounds the place itself made, the way the ocean roared as the waves crashed into the beach.

There was only one way to find out. If the Dragon-Blooded wanted her, they could come find her in the belly of the beast. Aesha wiped a nagging bead of sweat from the tip of her nose and stepped deliberately across the warded line. She took a deep breath and then was gone, running deep into the ruins — her tread as light as a feather and as fleet as the wind.

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Aesha crouched in the darkness, peering down at the street below. She was almost 40 feet above the pavement, lurking in the darkness behind a half-pane of shattered glass, with the shadows pulled tight around her like a robe. Somewhere out in the night, the Wyld Hunt was paying for its pride. It must not have had a guide, or must have ignored her advice, to have pushed into this area without waiting for dawn. The shrieks and hisses of the hungry dead mixed with the shouts and screams of the hunters. The battle had been going on for minutes now. Aesha suspected that the dead couldn't triumph over the hunters, but every second of combat tired her foes.

There was a flash of light bright enough to show through even the panel of black glass she sheltered behind and a clap of thunder that brought momentary silence — one of the Dragon-Bloods must have used a Charm that called lightning, or perhaps, one had discharged some powerful First Age weapon. Whatever it was, it signaled the end of the battle. The laughter and wailing of the dead was suddenly gone, leaving only a single human scream, going on and on until it faded with the dying man's life. Another ghost for the ruins.

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It hadn't always been like this. Once, Aesha had been nothing more than a master criminal, a thief and kidnaper earning a fast fortune and looking for a path to legitimacy. As a successful criminal, she had been hunted as a matter of course — but only by the Tri-Khan's troops and a virtual army of bounty hunters, not by Dragon-



Blooded troops from the Blessed Isle. The Wyld Hunt came only for the Anathema, and Aesha had joined their ranks just a year ago.

And the hunters would be here soon. She could hear them, moving through the ruins outside — infantry — maybe as stalking horses for Dragon-Blooded killers, trying to spook her into moving where they could see. Aesha didn't spook — she waited. She waited and turned the memories of her Exaltation over in her mind again and again. The pounding pressure in her head from hanging upside down, the terrible joy of knowing that the rope around her ankles was too short but feeling the perfect rightness as she reached for the gem anyway. And then it was there, in her hand, and she was tugging for her assistant to pull the rope up.

Aesha had been able to feel the Caste Mark, then, burning on her forehead under the robber's hood. But when she had arrived home, it had already faded away. That day, as she slumbered, the dreams had come. Scattered fragments of the time before, of towers and lovers, intrigues and whirling battles. Awakening, she could remember nothing, but some part of her said that this was her inheritance, and she accepted it without question.

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The recruiter had come almost before the dreams subsided. Aesha's newfound senses had told her he was mortal, acting for some cult he fervently believed in. She couldn't tell if the beings who controlled him were others like herself or some other power, and she didn't want to know. Whatever they were, they had been able to sense her emergence and send a servant from the Lap almost before her powers had manifested. From the messenger, she learned a new name for herself, Solar, and had a fear confirmed — her kind were labeled Anathema by the Immaculates.

The Immaculate Order was the imperial cult of the Realm. It taught obedience to the social order and venerated the Dragon-Blooded as spiritually elevated over mere mortals. Those faithful to the Immaculate Philosophy did not pray to spirits or gods, instead delegating such matters to the priests of their faith. Here in Chiaroscuro, only expatriates and toadies paid it more than lip service, but on the Blessed Isle, its words were holy writ. And among that holy writ was an injunction to destroy the Anathema, the incarnate devils who had ruled the world centuries before the Contagion. The mightiest among the Dragon-Blooded faithful scoured Creation for Anathema like Aesha, banishing them to their next incarnation.

Doubtless, they would have arrived before even the messenger had, save for the disappearance of the Scarlet Empress. The immortal ruler of the Realm had vanished almost five years earlier, and the empire was preparing for its first civil war. Dragon-Blooded powerful enough to serve in the Hunt were important personages, and the affairs of house and nation preyed on them. Their political maneuvering left them little time for personal crusades, and so, Aesha had been given time to hone her powers. She had no illusions of her ability to defeat the Hunt, but it had brought her to bay, and she could only hope that a few casualties would send it in search of weaker prey.

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And so, Aesha waited as the sounds of the Hunt grew closer. She flexed her hands, shifted her position and listened to the sounds of the spirits as they roamed the ruins. They were attacking the hunters again, and there were more of the hungry ghosts this time. She smiled in the darkness as the ghosts shrieked and howled and the thunder and fire blossomed. Let the hunters waste their power in the dark, she thought. I will be here afterward.

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Aesha saw the Wyld Hunt approaching long before it came into view. The Dragon-Blooded had spent far too much Essence fighting their way through the ruins to conceal their animas. There were only two of them, but they were impressive enough for that. One was clad in red-jade armor and carried a jade-tipped spear. His anima roared red and orange, billowing around him like a bonfire. The other's armor was of green jade, and he carried a double-bitted axe with a black jade head. His anima was the vibrant green



of growing things in spring, and it flowed like a field of grass in a stormwind. From the sheer power of their auras, it was clear why the Dragon-Blooded did not fight mounted — no horse could have survived the displays that whirled around the two Exalted.

Their escorting infantry had been thinned out considerably — most showed signs of injury, and they all looked skittish and haggard. They shied away even from their Dragon-Blooded leaders, and peering into their hearts, Aesha could see nothing but terror. In the shadows, Aesha smiled and tensed into a crouch. She waited, as the hunters passed below her, and now was the time to strike. She slowly drew her throwing knives from her belt and sprang upon the hunters like a cornered lion.

Aesha fell from the darkness like a star, streaming golden fire as she burnt Essence to fuel her combat magic. Her anima was a blazing sunset fading into night, all gold and purple and full of dying-fire reds and flickers of black. She released her knives in midair, and her magic multiplied them so they fell like rain upon the soldiers below. The armor of the Dragon-Blooded would surely turn her blades, and so, she aimed her fury at the soldiers who accompanied them. If her enemies were hunters, then let them hunt her without hounds.

Six soldiers died instantly, torn to pieces by the hail of blades. Aesha's knees flexed slightly as she landed, and the Dragon-Blooded looked at her through narrowed eyes. The street was wet with blood and day-bright with the glare of the Exalted's animas. She assumed the fluid postures of the snake stance, and then, the Dragon-Bloods were on her. The fiery one struck her with his spear, but Aesha turned from the blow, and her skin of iron deflected the lethal jade. The other swept his axe at her knees, but she leapt above it. She kicked off from the wood-dragon's axeblade and struck him with fingers like a serpent's sting. Her blow slipped between the plates of his jade armor and bit him deeply. Blood welled up through his body armor, and he stumbled backward with the shock of the blow.

The Fire Dragon-Blooded's spear struck Aesha in her shoulder, biting deep and drawing streams of blood. The stab threw her backward, and she smashed through a ruined window with crushing force. The bottom floor of the ruins burned gold and sunset with the brilliance of her anima. She shook, and the shards of glass scattered from her shoulders like great flakes of snow. The fire-wrapped Exalted plunged toward her, spear ready to impale, but she twisted, ducked and used the lance as leverage to leap backward. Her feet struck the unyielding surface of an unbroken window, and she bent her legs. For a moment, it seemed as if she was standing on the horizontal surface, then she sprang forward, tumbling. In midair, she straightened and plunged like a burning golden javelin toward the Wood-pected Dragon-Blood. Fingers extended, she struck him in the chest, and her hands plunged through his armor and ribcage alike. She pushed herself off of the still-upright corpse and twisted in midair to land facing her remaining opponent.

In the purple-golden light above Aesha towered a great burning lion, and her fire-wrapped foe's eyes glittered hatefully at her in the sunset radiance. He tensed and sprang backward several dozen yards. He struck the ground running, and as Aesha laughed in victory, the lion above her roared its triumph.

She did not pursue him — there were sure to be other Dragon-Bloods about, to say nothing of the hungry ghosts, and she had no desire to fall into an ambush like the one that she had executed. Better to go to ground until her anima faded, then slip quietly from the city while the hunters turned the ruins upside-down in search of her.

Aesha willed it, and the bleeding from her shoulder wound became a trickle and then stopped. She dropped her hand and grabbed the jade-headed axe that lay on the pavement, near the Dragon-Blooded corpse's feet. Even if she had little use for it, such a weapon would surely command a high price from interested buyers — perhaps from the cultists who had attempted to recruit her? Whatever may have come from the evening, it was clear her life in Chiaroscuro was over. Having something to pad her bankroll wouldn't hurt a thief on the run.

And then, Aesha was gone into the ruins, fleet as a doe, silent as an owl.



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