

Chapter II

Cove and Coven

“Well don’t look so *dour*, stripeface, this’ll be fun!”

Pascale concentrated on the familiar road beneath her feet, disregarding the jester’s voice to her side. It had been almost a month since her last adventure on the Old Road, one that left her beaten, bruised, and semi-conscious in a swirling cloud of caustic green vapor. Her cheekbone ached, in remembrance, the mending scars covered now by a single streak of black warpaint stretching vertically across the right side of her face, from her hairline down to her chin.

Dismas had later recounted how Ecklund poisoned the hulking brigand that held her against death’s door, and how, as the brute choked through the bitter cloud, Ecklund dispatched of him with a hidden blade, before dragging Pascale to safety. Dismas himself underplayed his own efforts, but Pascale gathered he was able to overcome the two other cutthroats with ingenuity, gunpowder, and at least a few lasting scars. Pistres, the first wounded, survived also, surprisingly no worse for wear; Pascale had since suspected, in their last month together, that dark magics clung to Pistres like the persistent threads of his tattered robe. It did not bother her, though.

And so, the four had found their way to the Proper. After a few days in the sanitarium, recovering then from not only the brutish beatdown, but also the nagging blight sustained in the crossfire of Ecklund’s special concoction, Pascale had a chance to tour the hamlet in all of its makeshift splendor. The repurposed grounds held several smaller living quarters, slowly inhabited in the last few weeks with tepid adventurers. Five sturdier buildings surrounded the main square: the Proper Drunk tavern, the sanitarium, the abbey (with a small graveyard in front), Stan’s smithy, and the guild hall. In the center of the Proper square stood a statue of the “ancestor”—a crude carving of a plain-looking nobleman in erudite robes cradling a polished marble orb in his right hand, an untitled tome tucked beneath his left. Pascale had heard that the chiseled subject was the great grandfather of the mysterious sponsor, the same Dismas talked of before the ambush on the Old Road.

In the weeks of Pascale’s recovery, Dismas and his cousin, Reynauld, were hard at work both on the hamlet and the fulfillment of an aggressive recruitment effort, directed carefully through caretaker Rennes. Pascale herself was pleasantly surprised by the weekly gold stipend that found its way into her, at first,

bed-ridden hands. Coupled with free lodging, and taking into account the discounted meals and passable sustenance offered through the Proper Drunk, Pascale found more than enough funds leftover to persuade continued employment. In fact, at this near one-month mark, a total of twelve adventurers (including Reynauld and Dismas) now inhabited the Proper; each generally satisfied with the terms of reclamation set forth by the unnamed sponsor.

Upon word from Rennes, expeditions into the Estate first began nearly two weeks ago. The sponsor, informed through Dismas and Reynauld of the hamlet's growing roster, and the respective skills of those they managed to hire, divided the Proper's denizens in carefully selected groups of four. And so, every few days, a new group of adventurers set foot on the Old Road, completing the half-mile trek north, to face some unknown horror lurking there. In that short time, a team led by Reynauld, Dismas among them, had already completed five successful expeditions, each more lucrative than the last. While others returned bloodied, exhausted, oft-empty-handed, Reynauld's band returned each time, relatively unscathed, packs laden with scavenged weapons, trinkets, and other valuables. These spoils ran through Rennes, the bulk of the profit pouring back into the construction of the hamlet, although a small portion did find its way directly back to the procuring party. It was odd to Pascale that the unnamed sponsor encouraged the ransacking of their ancestral property, but even so, their patron seemed content to grow the hamlet and fund the tools necessary to drive out the beasts and bandits encroaching there.

The scheduled assaults focused on four branching areas within and around the expansive grounds of the Estate. First, the ruins of the clifftop castle itself. Second, the warrens underneath; the maze of cellars and sewers settled below the castle. Third, the overgrown weald just outside the castle grounds, favored by brigands and other abominations hiding within the sickened trees. Lastly, the seaside cove opening well below the castle, at the base of the large cliff, itself a portal to the twisting, waterlogged caverns embedded therein.

It was the thought of the last of these, the cove, that rattled unpleasantly in Pascale's head as she stepped back on to the Old Road. It was, after all, the target of her first expedition. She had learned the night before of her assigned adventuring party, full of familiar faces: herself, selected to lead, Ecklund, Pistres, and a fourth named Belle. The latter had joined the hamlet shortly after Pascale and the others, with a group hailing somewhere further north, well beyond the Estate. At the moment, it was Belle who continued her fruitless pesterings at Pascale's expense.

“Come on now, Stripey. You can’t just ignore me! Don’t you think this will be fun?” Belle prodded, bumping Pascale playfully at the hip. She wore a decadent, regal blue tailcoat, perhaps one size too large, with puffed shoulders caressing the tips of her short blonde hair. Golden buttons dotted the sides of the coat, offering curious complement to her torn-and-patched trousers, which were covered knee-down by a pair of heeled brown leather boots and held in place by a thick black belt with a large square buckle. Two similar buckles, much smaller in size, adorned a tall, brimmed leather witch’s hat, which Belle wore at a slope to shield her eyes from the morning sun. A line of throwing daggers swayed in unison as she walked, and a rusted pickaxe dangled from her right hip. The rolled sleeves of her tailcoat revealed fingerless gloves extending down her forearms.

“What? What were you saying?” replied Pascale, snapping out of her pensive trance.

“Pay no mind, Pascale, the knave is as her knives, prickly but much more harmless.” Dismas, speaking in good humor, joined Pascale’s side. He and the rest of Reynauld’s band were accompanying Pascale’s team on the Old Road to the grounds of the Estate, at least until their shared paths diverged, as they had been given separate orders to continue explorations in the warrens. Reynauld was leading a few strides ahead, clad in full plate armor. To his left walked Esteney, the houndmaster, his four-legged companion Blitz glued attentively to his side. Azora, a talented healer and the last member of Reynauld’s group, trailed behind, reading from her holy book. Pistres and Ecklund walked silently among them all.

“Harmless! Is that what they’re saying about me? Well I’ll hardly be of any use against these fishpeople, then,” quipped Belle.

“Ah, nonsense,” Dismas replied.

“Fishpeople?” asked Pascale. “Nonsense that she’ll be of no use, or of fishpeople altogether?”

“Well, of fishpeople, naturally. I wager she’s underplaying the sharpness of those daggers, anyways.”

“I’ve made no mention of my daggers,” defended Belle. “It matters more who’s throwing. But of fishpeople, I’ve heard, we’ll be joining for breakfast.” Belle half-skipped to Pascale’s other side, “Do you reckon they’ll set the table for guests?” Pascale looked to Dismas, quizzically.

“Oh sure. I heard of Osmond’s ramblings too, and of the duck-feathered dove that calmed his heart when the four-eyed helmsman stole his hammer from the red-scaled maiden,” Dismas answered. Osmond’s team was the first and only team

to journey into the seaside cove thus far, one week past. They were tasked with investigating the whereabouts of a lost shipment of arms and supplies, intended for the hamlet, that had been last seen along the jagged coasts below the Estate. Unfortunately, Osmond's team likely did not make it far beyond the cove opening. Although each returned, life and limbs intact, their minds were clouded with dark, conflicted thoughts, with only piecemeal recollection of their time in the sodden grotto. Some did not remember the encounter at all.

Osmond, their leader, appeared to have fared the worst among them. He remained still in the care of the abbey, who had taken it upon themselves to mend his broken mind. The shipment, meanwhile, remained sorely missed; not only for its contents, but for easing the distrusting minds of the cross-sea shippers otherwise interested in the rumored rebuilding of the Proper, and the lining of their pockets. And so Pascale, herself now patched and rested, received the charge of her first expedition: return to the cove, and succeed where Osmond and his team had failed.

"I haven't heard talk of fishpeople," said Pascale. "Or ducks or doves or helmsman's hammers."

"Well of course not, I haven't seen you within a stone's throw of the abbey," Belle retorted.

"I don't see why that matters."

Dismas intervened. "Peace Pascale, pay no mind still, my friend." Turning to Belle, he continued, "And be mindful, instead, of the difference between the ramblings of a broken man and the enemies who would see you join him."

"Experts of the cove, now, are we?" Belle huffed. "I'll prepare as I please."

"If I may—" a voice started from behind them. The three of them turned to Pistres, who faltered briefly at their collective attention. "Ah, excuse me. If I may, I would suggest we do consider the possibility of Osmond's recollection. There may be some truth beneath the brokenness. What he describes," Pistres spoke, nodding to Belle, "These 'fishpeople', they are not foreign to all. The studies of Eldridge peoples and practices are ones which I am..." Pistres withheld for a moment, flashing a practiced smile, "...well-versed."

"Yes, well, I suppose caution is wise regardless," said Dismas. Pistres did not respond, but instead bowed as he slowed pace, returning quietly to Ecklund's side in the middle of the traveling pack. Ahead of them all, Reynauld stopped and faced the rest.

“Pascale, we leave you here. Lead your team along this path off the road until you reach the cliff-edge. It is a short climb down to the cove, nearly impossible to miss. Travel safe and swing strong. As for the rest of you, come a little further now, for what fine vintage awaits us in the dusted cellars?” Reynauld’s band laughed heartily; all but Dismas stepped to continue down the Old Road.

“Before we part,” said Dismas, speaking quickly to Pascale, “take these. You’ll need them more than I.” Dismas pulled two extra torches from his pack, and a bundle of rations, passing them to Pascale.

“Do not fall behind, cousin,” called Reynauld from up the road, “Or you’ll be left nothing but the last drop.” Esteney and Azora chuckled in the distance. Dismas re-packed, pulled up his red bandana, and hurried to the group.

Pascale looked up from her arms full of supplies to a trio of expectant faces. She handed them off to Ecklund, who took to stashing the items in a travel pack, and without further hesitation, Pascale continued off the cobblestone road and onto the branching footpath. The damp soil felt especially foreign beneath her polished boots.

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Torch light danced along the slickened flowstone of the eastward cove. Pascale, neck craning, watched the persistent waters drip from overhanging stalactites, stepping slowly. They had passed through the mouth of the cove minutes before. To Reynauld’s credit, the path there was straightforward. But the cove opened to a deep inset cavern, and the morning light dimmed to blankets of humid darkness within just a few steps beyond its entrance. The group, thirty yards in, stood assessing its sloped walls.

“It looks endless. How are we supposed to find anything in here?” asked Belle.

“If we follow this wall back to the opening, we should get a sense of the perimeter. We’ll work through the middle from there,” answered Pascale. A low, guttural drone bounced between the chasmic chamber, almost as if in response, stopping as quickly as it started, replaced instead by the distant sounds of rushing water somewhere far deeper within.

Belle was first to break the silence. “Pistres, do you know what fishpeople sound like?”

“I’m afraid these books offer naught but the rustling of pages.”

“Well-versed, indeed,” Belle teased.

“Come, let’s not linger,” insisted Pascale, glaive drawn. She pushed ahead, guided by the wall to her left. Behind her, Ecklund, mask adorned, produced a charcoal rock from his travel pack, marking the wall at rough intervals. Two torches burned in time before Pascale noted the increasingly restless feet of her companions stirring behind her. By this point, they had passed a number of side openings, inviting them innocently, deeper into the branching caverns. Pascale made note of the various openings, constructing the outlines of a crude map on the pages of her black journal, though she continued, faithfully, along the main cavern wall.

Neither Pascale, nor Ecklund, nor Pistres had yet noticed Belle’s absence. Slipping away five charcoal marks ago, Belle’s trained eye had caught the faint fluorescent glow of a stalagmite cluster somewhere within the middle of the open cavern, a glow which had eluded the rest of her company, blinded as they were by their own torchlight. Belle, trusting her sure footing to traverse the darkness between, walked towards the glowing cluster, alone, enticed by the simple promise of something over nothing.

And so Belle continued away from the edge of the cavern wall, away from the torch light that pushed further along the perimeter wall. As she approached, Belle’s eyes focused on the distant rock cluster, revealing instead an elongated row of distinct stalagmites, each emitting a mix of muddy fluorescent greens, oranges, and reds. The line of rocklights extinguished, one by one, as she passed, but with each few steps, another flickered alive further ahead, extending the luminescent path. And as the lights beckoned even deeper, she followed.

Belle soon found herself in a sand bank, marked loosely by a circle of imposing columns. In the center of it all, under the dim phosphorescence, Belle discerned the curves of a large wooden hull; a lost ship, anchored in the sands of the seaside cove. She stepped to its side, intrigued by one of the nearby columns, which began pulsing a light blue. Facing the pillar now, Belle watched as the blue light cut through its center, outlining something within. She stepped closer.

A face, frozen in horror, stared back. The sailor’s body was contorted, unnaturally, his limbs angled sharply against the encasing rock, bones peaking through sun-leathered skin. Belle watched the blue light trace the form of his twisted body, starting at the heels of his bare feet, up his legs, and resting finally upon mangled fingers. The blue light dissolved then, melting into his fingertips. As the light dimmed, Belle heard a muffled moan from within. Then silence. She

stepped even closer, inspecting his listless eyes and slackened mouth. Again, undeniably, a lamenting moan escaped, long and low, pleading. In a flash of blue, the sailor's arms shot out through the rock column, groping wildly, scraping Belle's back, pulling at her limbs.

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"We're running low," Pascale commented, to no one in particular, as she sketched another series of tunnels under dying torch light. "How many more, now, Ecklund?"

"Four."

"We'd better pick it up."

A desperate scream, loud but faintly muffled at its peak, pierced the group from somewhere within the heart of the cavern. Pascale's head snapped to Pistres, Ecklund, and a missing third.

"Belle!"

Pascale abandoned the perimeter wall and jetted towards the cavern's center, her raised torchlight shedding the grasping darkness. Pistres and Ecklund followed, straining to match Pascale's wild dash, occasionally stumbling across the uneven grounds. Pascale pushed deeper still, calling out again to Belle, her plea reverberating into the damp nothingness. Pascale swore as she soon found herself lost between unending rows of water-warped rock pillars, slowing her sprint to a frantic walk. Pistres and Ecklund finally caught up, breathing heavily behind her.

"Did you know Belle had left?" she asked, turning to them. Pistres and Ecklund looked to each other, uneasily.

"No, I hadn't," replied Pistres.

"*Limited...sight*," Ecklund added, pointing to the slits of his beaked mask.

Pascale slumped against the nearest column, jarring bits of calcite to the floor and atop her boots. She kicked them off, angrily.

"Any ideas?" she ventured. "Without announcing ourselves to whatever's creeping here?"

"I gather they've already tracked our latest stroll," said Pistres, gasping slightly to stabilize his breathing.

"Maybe so."

Ecklund reached to his side, snapping free a glass ball filled with a grayish liquid. With a quick twirl, the liquid churned from gray to white, shining brilliantly beneath his cupped hands.

“*Light...?*” he offered.

“No, probably not. Not yet at least,” Pascale spoke, both alarmed and amused in equal measures. Ecklund pocketed the orb, deferentially, muffling its light behind the black folds of his robe.

“I may have an idea, but it’ll take some time,” said Pistres.

“If it helps,” Pascale wagered, bracing herself against the pillar to stand again.

Pistres nodded, clearing away the calcite in a wide circle at his feet.

“Ecklund, your charcoal please?” he asked. Ecklund obliged, passing over the blunted charcoal. “And then hold this for me,” Pistres offered Ecklund a weathered, red-scaled tome, holding a specific page open. Ecklund accepted and pulled his torch closer, the flickering light glistening over a strange diagrammatic pattern, complicated in its interweaving lines and markings.

Pascale watched closely as Pistres reached for the mysterious leather pouch on his waistline, freeing from it a small white skull topped with a half-melted candle, the candle cemented on all sides by overlapping layers of its own hardened, yellow wax. Pistres cradled the skull neatly in his hand, avoiding its wax-draped slopes, and placed it, carefully, in the center of the brushed space beneath his feet. Referencing the open tome held courtesy of Ecklund, Pistres began scraping the charcoal along the rock floor, using the skull as centerpoint. Pascale watched Pistres’s slow, deliberate movements, making equally slow progress against the tangled web diagram on the page.

Leaving Pistres to his work, Pascale walked back to the pillar rows, peering between them. She spotted a circular clearing just beyond, and what appeared to be a wooden bowsprit jutting awkwardly, framed in its unique sheen against the encircling towers of wet rock.

“Pistres, wait. I see something ahead. On me, both.”

“Are you sure? This cannot be stopped and started so easily, not without retracing again from the beginning.”

“Yes, come.” Pistres ran his boot across the interweaved charcoal, smearing it unceremoniously, and caught up to Pascale. Pascale pushed forward, piecing together sections of the previously obstructed ship as she weaved between columns. The length of the exposed bowsprit gave way to its hull, intact but angled

sharply against the sands, its starboard halfway submerged. Pascale circled around to its shortened side, handing her torch to Ecklund. "Hold this a moment."

Pascale stretched her arms to meet the ship's starboard railing and hoisted herself, easily, rolling onto the sloped deck. She steadied herself to its creaking groans and stumbled towards the darkened cabin. Finding her footing, she reached back to the railing and retrieved her torch from Ecklund's outstretched arm. A flickering fire light blanketed the deck.

"Pistres, can you run the perimeter down there for signs of force? There's nothing to suggest an attack here. Not even a lifted nail, as far as I can tell."

"Curious," Pistres responded, "the hull is relatively unscathed too. Is this our mark?"

"I believe so. Wait a moment." Pascale stepped down into the hold, noting the rows of undisturbed cargo tightly secured there. With her free hand, she dug for her leather journal once again, skipping past the working cavern map to a detailed supply list.

Pascale emerged from the ship's hold. "It's all here. Hurry, let's get to unloading." Pascale's words were met with stagnant air. "Pistres? Ecklund?"

"Belle...", Ecklund's rasping voice drifted from somewhere further behind the ship.

"Yes, right, perhaps we should redouble efforts on Belle before doing so. Where are you?" said Pascale.

"Belle...Here."

Pascale dropped back over the shortened railing and walked to the rear of the ship, towards Ecklund's drifting declaration. Upon clearing its back corner, she found Ecklund and Pistres observing a large column a few paces off.

"There's measures of misfortune. And then there's something like this," Pistres commented, staring at the column with a wrinkle above his brow, an expression which Pascale regarded as concern, not knowing Pistres enough to gauge otherwise. "What is it?" Pascale asked, pushing ahead without wait for Pistres's answer. Pascale approached the column, circling around to match Ecklund's and Pistres's view.

"Oh." Belle stood frozen before them all, subsumed within the column; the contours of her assumedly lifeless body were accented by a faint blue light which pulsed weakly against the encompassing rock and faded eloquently into the seams of her blue tailcoat. Her eyes were wide, afraid, matching the terror etched across the rest of her suspended face. Her left arm was lifted, defensively, her elbow

raised at the shoulder and her forearm stretched across her body, keeping some unknown force at bay. In her right hand, she held a primed dagger, though gripped loosely, as if recently unsheathed.

“Was she attacked?” asked Pascale.

“Hard to say,” Pistres started, “though we might assume she did not enter this state willingly.”

“Can anything be done?”

“Yes and no,” Pistres said, “I can free her, but whether she still lives is already cast in stone, if you’ll excuse the phrase,” he added, smiling. Reaching again for his hip, Pistres pulled forth the candle-topped skull and stepped a few strides back. Both Pascale and Ecklund instinctively followed, retreating in similar fashion, the three of them settling in a wide arc around Belle’s column. Pistres struck a match, lit the waxen skull, and extended it forward until it burned comfortably at arm’s length. Raising it just above his shoulder now, Pistres angled his body at a half turn from the column-face and raised his free hand, tucking it close to his upper chest with a relaxed, open palm. He uttered a few short phrases, in a tongue foreign to Pascale, before the same palm began emanating a dull red-orange, which grew into a large halo of red-orange energy surrounding his free hand. The extended candle light flickered, quickly changing from its yellowed flame to a matching red-orange, and with a flash of the skull’s emptied eye sockets, the column before Pistres’s concentrated stance collapsed suddenly into a pool of water, which fell and flooded outward, soaking Pascale’s and Ecklund’s idle feet.

From the center of the receding waters, Belle collapsed to her hands and knees, coughing spouts of liquid, her half-primed dagger clattering to the rock floor. Ecklund rushed to her side, offering a hand. Belle accepted, taking to her feet, uneasily. “It had to be saltwater?” she asked, holding back spouts of her morning breakfast.

“You’re welcome,” Pistres answered, with a grin and a slow, impish curtsy.

“What happened here?” Pascale asked.

“It’s hard to remember. But it’s not safe, obviously. Let’s return, before we’re Osmond’s bedfellows.” Pistres and Ecklund looked from Belle back to Pascale, who still stood a few paces off under a fading torchlight.

“We knew of the danger, Belle. That’s the point. That’s why there are four of us. How did you come to this place alone?”

“Does it matter? I just told you I can’t remember. We need to move from this place now.” Belle holstered her fallen dagger to her back, wicking water off her sleeves.

“Look, just there,” Pascale pointed to the beached ship to Belle’s left, “we’ve found it. We just need to unload and be on our way.”

“Unload and then carry with what? Was there ever a plan? Let’s leave while we still have our heads.”

Pistres broke in, “The torchlight, Pascale. We are running low. Perhaps it’s best to map our exit and come back.”

“No. We’ve got enough if we hurry. At the very least, we carry the important bits and return for the rest. No need to return empty handed. Come.” Pascale motioned to the three, moving towards the hull.

“Are you listening, Stripeface? I’m not stepping foot on that thing,” Belle spat, “There’s something lurking here. I’m not a twice-made fool.” Belle pulled at Ecklund’s back, freeing a torch from his pack.

“Drop it. We move as one.” Pascale felt a familiar heat rising from her feet, settling at the base of her neck.

Belle laughed, lighting the torch. “You’re free to follow, then.” Belle walked forward, away from the ship. Pascale stepped to her left, blocking Belle’s path.

“Move, brute.”

“Make me,” Pascale snarled, slapping Belle’s torch out of her hand. It fell to the ground, extinguishing with a hiss in the pool of saltwater at their feet. Belle faltered, ever so slightly, sizing up Pascale’s imposing frame. Ecklund, standing a few paces behind Belle now, watched Belle’s hand creep to the recently sheathed dagger behind her back, just beyond Pascale’s view.

“Hold, you two,” Pistres said, “we can be quick, Belle. You needn’t step foot on the ship. Ecklund and I will retrieve just the key items and we’ll be on our way. Pascale, if you wouldn’t mind sharing your list.”

“Certainly.” Pascale’s eyes remained trained on Belle as she reached for her journal. Finding it blindly, she offered it to Pistres, arm outstretched. Pistres stepped forward to take it. For a brief moment, Pascale’s eyes instinctively glanced at Pistres as he took the book from her outstretched arm. Belle’s hand flashed forward. Ecklund lunged toward her, not nearly quick enough to stop Belle’s swinging blade.

Pascale sidestepped the dagger, gracefully, Belle’s blade catching a harmless tuft of Pascale’s fur-lined collar. Pascale responded with a strong shove, her

unarmed hands driving into Belle's chest with a resounding thud. Belle stumbled back, crashing hard into Ecklund. A blinding white light suddenly filled the entirety of the cavern space, to the sound of shattered glass.

Blinking heavily, uncomfortably, Pascale saw beams of light shooting from the folds of Ecklund's robe. Ecklund swore and pushed Belle away, shaking the remnants of a shattered glass ball out from his robe, the four of them shielding themselves from the continued onslaught of the bright white light.

"Cover it!" Pascale yelled. Belle hurriedly took off her coat, throwing it over the glass remnants. The light seeped to the edges of the coat, shining just as bright, altogether unbothered.

"Can't..." said Ecklund. The light continued.

"How much longer?" asked Pascale.

"Seconds," responded Ecklund.

Shielding her eyes from the ground, Pascale looked up and around the cavern space, now shed of its masked darkness. The ceiling was high, much higher than Pascale initially gauged; the surrounding columns extended nearly forty feet to meet it. Beyond the rings of haphazard columns encompassing them, their left and right sides were flanked by the outer cavern wall, itself dotted with shaded openings to caverns further within. Behind them, Pascale noted the initial opening from where they came, which was only a few hundred feet off. Belle noted the same.

"Seems we could have saved a lot of time had we started forward instead of traveling half a mile up those damned walls." Belle started to the exit. Pascale again cut her off, wordlessly, drawing the glaive from her back.

"Put your toy away, Stripes," Belle fanned a set of throwing daggers in her right hand, displaying them under a slightly fading white light.

"Stop, look!" Pistres pointed ahead, turning the two of them away from the opening, to a jutting cliff forty yards deeper within the cave. The cliff rose twenty feet from the floor, and five figures adorned the top of it, looking down on the group in a circle, blinking slowly. The front-most figure was red-scaled with large, wide-set fish eyes. She stood upon two webbed feet, clutching a makeshift staff with four-fingered hands, the staff topped with a dried sea urchin sprouting from a cracked conch, the shell affixed to the staff with lashes of hempen rope. Bright red, fin-like projections framed the left and right sides of her face, the same lining the lengths of her forearms. A crown of gold outlined her large fish head, and the four other figures standing behind displayed similar crowns and staffs, though their

individual scale colors composed a unique set of green, blue, orange and purple in complement to the red-scaled leader.

"Pistres, what are they?" asked Pascale.

"Shamans, it seems. Eldritch witches."

"What do they want?"

"*Breakfast...*?" chimed Ecklund.

"Let's see," said Pistres. The red-scaled shaman turned to face the four behind her, raising a staff under the now receding white light, speaking in a gargled tongue. She stopped, lowered her staff, and walked past the four others, herself receding into darkness beyond view of Pascale and the group. Under the last wisps of waning light, Pascale watched three of the four other shamans follow the red-scaled leader out of view, while the blue-scaled shaman stepped forward, perched now on the edge of the overlooking cliff.

"What's happening?" Belle asked.

"I don't know," Pistres responded. The cliff fell out of view with the liquid-borne light now fully extinguished. The four adventurers stood in silent darkness, their previously lit torches burned.

"Ecklund...how many more torches?" asked Pascale.

"One."

A cold draft swept between the four of them, chilling the air, while a faint blue light emanated from the rock below them. The soft light persisted at their feet as the cold chill passed.

"How convenient," said Pistres.

"We need to leave, *now!*" yelled Belle, stepping towards the cavern exit. The blue light flashed beneath her feet, shooting forth a large, sucker-spotted tentacle that quickly wrapped around her legs, holding her in place while its outer flesh melted into a hardened stone, cementing her to the cavern floor.

"Damn it. Do something!"

Pistres reached to relight his wax-lined skull before three identical flashes peppered the adjacent ground, shooting forth grasping tentacles. Pascale swung her glaive, instinctively, missing wide, her legs momentarily tangled and then hardened in place. Pistres lurched forward, accidentally dropping the skull, his legs similarly swallowed and binded in rock. Ecklund did not move, accepting his fate, Pistres's skull rolling to the base of his tentacle-then-rock-encased feet.

To their sides they heard a growing drum of several fish feet slapping against wet rock, approaching quickly from within the cavern offshoots lining both

their left and right. Above them, faintly lit in an aura of blue light, the blue-scaled shaman stood on the inner cliff with staff raised and sharp, pointed teeth bared.

“Breakfast...” Ecklund repeated.

“Breakfast,” nodded Pascale.