

Chapter I

Mirthful Beginnings

At the end of the winding Old Road which cuts through the long-corrupted forest, an estate hangs eerily in its half-strewn wreckage atop a sheer, 200-foot cliff. To the handful of adventurers and unlucky travelers that have wandered their way through the suffocating forest and glimpsed the cliff-face manor, it is simply known as *the Estate*. To all who have taken heed of the various warnings and murmurings which populate the wooded grounds along the Old Road, it is also known the Estate is best viewed from a distance.

In a rare clearing, just off the Old Road and a few miles due east, where the stagnant mists hang lower than the foliage which normally thwarts ever-prying eyes, one can stand and see the extent of the wreckage and decay dripping from the Estate's once proud facade. For twenty gold, and a bit of luck, a local (and by most accounts, insane) hunter might be persuaded to provide passage to the secret clearing offering its unobstructed view.

It was here that Pascale, weary with extended travel, now laid eyes on the imposing grounds of the Estate for the first time. Even from this distance, aided by the waxing mid-morning sun, she could see that years of excavations had riddled its surface with pockmarked tunnels and other foundational scars. Years of abandonment—and if the stories were true, years of something far worse—seemingly inflicted the rest of the Estate's crumbling structure and surrounds. At the base of the sheer cliff, far below the castled manor, water lapped relentlessly against a rock-lined ridge, churning grayish sea foam.

Pascale was suddenly aware again of her guide. A brightly-clad hunter stood staring at the same distant ruination from just beyond the threshold of the clearing, as though seeking shelter below the canopied forest. Staring still, the hunter spoke plainly.

"As promised, tall one." His words hung with expectancy.

"Yes, as promised in return." Pascale rummaged in a well-protected satchel to produce the wagered toll. She turned back, again eyeing the colors of the hunter's quilted cloak; from his neck hung a hooded, ankle-length abomination spattered in cloths of bright blue, purple, orange, and pink. She extended her closed fist, laden with payment. "Thank you again."

The hunter remained at the clearing's edge. He did not move. Neither, Pascale thought, had she seen him yet blink during their short walk off the Old

Road. Bending to the hunter's peculiar stubbornness, Pascale closed the clearing gap in short stride and again raised her offering arm. The hunter now accepted his payment, rooted in place, and muttered.

"Tall, tall. Tall in this place." He counted his profits. "Taller than is good. Too tall." He shook his head, in what Pascale assumed was disappointment. "Too tall."

Taking the hunter's remarks as an opening, Pascale let loose her nagging curiosity. Not on the hunter's fixations, though, which Pascale brushed aside with little thought. "Why do you wear that?"

"Would you expect me stripped bare?"

"No. Why do you wear those colors? The dyes must be difficult to maintain in these parts. Expensive, at least."

A grin widened on the hunter's otherwise plain face. "There are always travelers who are willing to pay." He paused, thoughtfully. "And those who have lost their way, with treasures in hand." Pascale caught the hunter's gaze, which followed the length of the large glaive affixed to her back.

"Nevermind the cost," Pascale mustered evenly through growing impatience, "Why the colors?"

"Why have you chosen yours?"

Pascale took stock of her clothing. Beneath a black traveler's cloak, she wore a simple collection of brown leathers, including matching leather hand and footwraps, with tufts of gray furs lining her collar, wrists, ankle, and waist belt. Lightweight and durable, a dual layer of tattered moss-green and deep purple cloth covered her legs beneath and beyond the knee-length leather skirt padding her sides.

"To blend, of course, with the colors I'm likely to find on my travels. Like those of these woods."

The lines of the hunter's prior grin re-traced before he turned away from her with a muffled sound which Pascale caught as a stifled laugh. Still rooted in place, but now at a half-turn from the clearing, the hunter's form contracted into a forward hunch, where the muffled sounds intermittently broke with errant titters. His arched back began to quiet, before suddenly re-doubling, convulsing with unfettered laughter.

Pascale, confused, felt the boiling heat of rage rising through travel-worn feet and up through her stiffened spine. The hunter's laughter continued to cut through the once quiet forest.

“Very well, that’s enough,” Pascale growled. The hunter answered without word, but in continued laughter, which Pascale swore grew even louder now. Alarmed, she scanned the lines of the wooded clearing. A sense of unknown danger flooded Pascale’s peripherals, where every shadow grew menacingly. She planted her feet and assumed a stable, practiced stance. “What is the meaning of this? Stop, now!”

Enraptured, the hunter fell to hands and knees, where his fit resumed in a violent cackling that wracked his body—this time undoubtedly louder than before. Coins scattered from his open hand, portions of the payment which had not yet made home in his purse. Pascale, gripping the ash haft of her glaive, unsheathed her weapon and deftly twirled it in a half turn, jamming the blunted, iron-studded butt of the polearm firmly into the hunter’s exposed side. The hunter doubled over, laying helpless, in continued fits. Pascale stepped over him, straddling the writhing mass, and brandished her weapon’s chipped steel blade inches from his neck, speaking with unsettled intensity.

“Answer me.”

The hunter turned to face her. Calming with great efforts, his words sputtered between gasps and streams of tears which pooled on the forest floor and against the scattered gold, finally escaping through the teeth of his still widened grin.

“Don’t you...see? Yours are the colors they’re looking for.”

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With a sigh of relief, Pascale’s foot fell on cobblestone for the first time in nearly two days’ travel, from back when the Old Road had dissolved into nothing more than a dirt suggestion cutting aimlessly through the grassy woods. Checking a black, leather-bound book, Pascale confirmed that the revived cobblestone meant her journey was nearing its end. She took a moment to re-read her notes, reviewing not out of uncertainty, but for comfort’s sake: passing words, both reliable and unreliable, told tale of a small hamlet rebuilding a half-mile south of the Estate—itsself the old servants’ grounds—called *the Estate Proper*, or more simply, *the Proper*.

Stowing her notes, Pascale surveyed the surrounding woods. Echoes of laughter, not entirely true to form, instead merely groans and creaks emanating from the shifts of the cedars and pines, reminded her of this morning’s ordeal.

Pascale shuddered and continued, gladly, down the Old Road, leaving disquieted memories far behind, even as the woods darkened steadily, unnaturally.

Just past another bend in the Old Road's serpentine route, Pascale happened upon a resting caravan. One of its members hailed her from a distance; two others continued on with their midday meal.

"Hullo! Headed for the Proper?" As Pascale proceeded down the cobbled path, the speaker came in full view; a slim, unimposing man, resting easily against a covered wagon. Pascale answered his question with an affirmative nod. Beneath a short, tattered overcoat, she noted the crossguard of a sheathed dagger on one hip, and the weathered wood of a small flintlock peaking through on the other. A red bandana hung easily from his neck, out of place against the muted grays, browns, and blacks which filled the rest of his outfit. His otherwise lithe face was hardened with deep, inset lines—not of age, Pascale wagered, but of trying circumstance—and topped with short black hair. The corners of his eyes, though, wrinkled in perpetual amusement.

"Well," the speaker replied cheerfully, "you're welcome to finish your journey with us. I'm Dismas." He extended a hand. Pascale shook guardedly, eyeing his armaments. Dismas was equally perceptive.

"No need to worry. We're as eager to reach the Proper as I'm sure you are, you'll only find quick company with us. No use for these —" he patted his sides, "not until someone's paying us, at least." Dismas smiled, comfortably. One of the other caravaneers, partially obscured behind the wagon cover, chuckled in assent. "But it's no matter to us, you can continue if you'd like and we'll follow behind. Not too closely, of course. But from the looks of that big axe of yours, we're bound to meet again. I didn't catch your name, friend."

"Pascale," she replied. Moving to a nearby stump, Pascale unloaded her heavy backpack for a moment's reprieve, undecided on Dismas's proposition. She unloaded her weapon as well, leaning it against the base of the stump. "It's a glaive."

"Well met, Pascale. Of course, a glaive! Much less brutish. Ah—let me introduce you to these fine fellows." The two companions turned to Pascale with full attention now, stepping from behind the wagon cover. Dismas read from an unfurled scroll. "This is *Piss-trees*. Am I saying that right? I've only got it spelled here."

"*Pistres*, good sir, *Pis-tur*. But another good try," he replied, turning to Pascale, bowing his head deferentially. "Charmed." Pascale nodded politely in return. *Pistres* wore a light tattered robe, a pale tannish yellow, with large open

sleeves and intricate but faded embroidery suggesting scholarly roots. A simple cloth turban, matching the pale robe, covered his head. Pistres's angular face was accented with a well-kept but disconnected goatee, his sharp mustache tweaking upwards, away from his pointed chin. On his left, secured against a semicircular strap loop that hung from his belt and across his thigh, parchment scrolls overflowed from a small attached satchel; a curved dagger hung just above it, housed within an ornate cover. Pascale caught an additional hanging pouch, also attached to Pistres's belt but guarded behind his right arm, a rounded sack of black leather which seemed to darken the robe around it. Pascale wondered what might lay inside.

"And this," Dismas continued, "is Ecklund." Ecklund regarded Pascale, speaking haltingly in a low, raspy whisper, breathing with effort between his words.

"Hello...traveler."

He wore a hooded black robe, longer and heavier than Pistres's in comparison, with leather gloves and boots covering his hands and feet. In fact, Ecklund was well-covered in general; only his face remained exposed, itself half-covered in twisting, pocked scars, which Pascale thought likely continued down the left side of his neck. Beneath Ecklund's cowl, which partially obscured his injuries and imperfections, vibrant green eyes studied her curiously. A wide belt covered his waist, housing a number of curios, including two apothecary satchels, a sizable black mask with a large, pointed beak, and a lineup of glass baubles clouded with unknown liquids.

"Well met," Pascale replied, staring awkwardly.

"Yes, well—" Dismas started, clearing his throat, "in our short travels together, we've gathered he doesn't speak much—on account of the...mishap? Mishaps, maybe?" Dismas gestured playfully to Ecklund's hooded face, referencing its general appearance. Ecklund, unbothered, nodded graciously.

"Ah, good. Very mysterious! I like that. Well, Pascale? Would you like to join our merry caravan? We wouldn't say no to the added numbers; these woods are tricky."

In total, viewing the three before her, Pascale found particular comfort in the group's eclecticism. She rose from her stump, responding, "Certainly, if you'll have me. Shall we?"

“Shall we indeed! Are you two ready? Only a short walk now. Come, ol’ bonny horse,” Dismas turned to the wagon’s driving horse and patted her side, “lead us to salvation.” The wagon started forward.

Pistres and Ecklund assumed positions at the wagon’s rear, strolling leisurely in pace. Pascale walked near its front, next to Dismas.

“You can stow your bag in the back, if you’d like,” said Dismas.

“Thanks.” Pascale obliged, much to her shoulders’ delight, and regained step with Dismas. “Are you familiar with this stretch of the Old Road?” she asked.

“Not entirely, but this’ll mark my fourth time ferrying recruits between here and the Proper. I suppose you’re wondering, then, who would choose to frequent these parts, and rightfully so. I arrived at the Proper about a month ago, traveling with my cousin Reynauld, who you’ll meet soon enough. A capable man-of-arms; not dissimilar to yourself, I assume. We traveled initially upon the promise of an acquaintance of his—I’m unsure how they first met, but Reynauld seemed to hold them in high regard. Or at least, decent regard, enough to convince me to join along.”

“Promise?”

“Well, the promise of compensation, of course. And food, lodging, adventure, what have you. Reynauld seemed set on going. He said his mysterious contact sought to ‘reclaim’ the Estate, and was willing to pay to do so. Apparently, they are heir to that crumbling mess. And though we’ve all heard stories of those grounds, of its dangers, I guess you could say I’m easily persuaded...” Dismas trailed off in diverted concentration as he guided the wagon through a stretch of road littered with fallen branches and eroded cobble.

“Anyways, we’re not sure what we’re facing just yet. But Reynauld’s contact, the supposed heir, seems willing to provide a respectful wage for those willing to endure its...restoration. We’ve been communicating through another so far, the caretaker of the grounds. An old crusty sort, with perhaps a few humors misplaced. He’s called Rennes.”

Dismas noted Pascale’s even expression—if anything he had said came as a surprise to her, she had done well to hide it. It was no matter to him, either way, besides serving as an amusement to speed travel.

“We’ve been first tasked with recruitment. Rennes passed along a shortlist of sorts, on behalf of his master—” Dismas produced the scroll he read when introducing Ecklund and Pistres, waving it freely, “a list of recommended hires. Those strong with a sword, or an axe—or a glaive, pardon me. And those

practitioners of strange or abandoned magics, or better yet, strange *and* abandoned magics. Like our friends here.”

They both looked back to their traveling companions. Pistres, reviewing one of the many parchments from his satchel and muttering in a low, indiscernible voice, paid no mind to the others. Ecklund, who had been rearranging the glass orbs at his side, noted the pause in Dismas’s speech and briefly acknowledged their looks before returning to his sorting.

“I arranged to meet them at a rendezvous not too far from where you happened upon us. We have a few others already, of course. No Pascales on the list, not that it matters—you’re welcome to join if it suits you. Curious, though, how you heard of our call, if you don’t mind me asking.”

They walked in silence for a moment, the first in their small journey together. Pascale answered. “My journey to the Estate was led by another, Tirielle. She did not make it.” Dismas scanned the unfurled scroll.

“Ah, yes, Tirielle. A shame—I am sorry to hear it—”

A piercing thud, flesh against steel, a sudden cry of pain, and the spattering of blood stifled Dismas’s condolences. Protruding from Pistres’s chest, just below his collarbone, a heavy crossbow bolt disregarded his light robe and had nestled, painfully, into the sinews below. Another bolt, materializing from the adjacent trees, whizzed past his neck and tore through the wagon’s canvas cover. A flurry of action descended on the convoy.

“Brigands!” shouted Dismas. “Find cover, quick.”

Pascale readied her glaive, but an unusually flat opening on the Old Road offered little cover against the unseen assailants further within the treeline. Dismas, noting the same, connected eyes with Pascale before releasing the agitated driving horse. “Flip it!”

Pascale dutifully gripped the wagon’s underside and toppled it, its innards scattering across the Old Road. The four of them crouched against its wooden bottom for makeshift cover. Pistres breathed heavily, focusing on the consciousness that pulsed and faded in his peripheries. Ecklund reached within a side satchel and scattered a handful of small pouches towards the treeline, from which a thick smoke poured and enveloped the space between them.

“Ecklund, do what you can to stabilize him. That smoke might give you two enough time to slip away—if all else fails, we’ll meet back at the rendezvous,” directed Dismas. “Pascale, we don’t know how many there are yet. And I’m afraid you’re too big a target to retreat unnoticed. Steady yourself for a fight.”

Pascale hardly had the time to think, let alone steady. Two cutthroats emerged from the smoke, their dual-wielded daggers materializing in readied arms. Dismas engaged immediately, Pascale following in tow. He dodged and parried with practiced agility, holding a steadied defense against one of the cutthroat's harrying swipes, though his own dagger had not yet found purchase. Pascale pushed the other attacker further into the swirling haze, in a strong offensive, her glaive biting at the air around him, missing narrowly.

Ecklund looked down at his patient, who sat slumped uncomfortably against the wagon's bed, though not yet unconscious. He watched as Pistres, with effort, began chanting in a low rhythmic whisper. Over their shoulders, steel deflections, shifting feet, and the grunts of exertion filled the shrouded area. Pistres's chanting subsided. Amazed, Ecklund watched as the crossbow bolt pushed out of Pistres's chest, clattering onto the cobblestone road, the wound itself slowly closing, contracting under Pistres's influence; but then, fresh blood suddenly darkened the length of Pistres's torso as writhing teeth-like protrusions encircled the pierced flesh, widening the wound again. Ecklund, alarmed, looked to Pistres for guidance, who only smiled weakly in response, before succumbing to the swirling darkness of faded consciousness. Ecklund scrambled to stem the still-flowing blood.

Meanwhile, Pascale and Dismas remained in lockstep with their opponents. Trading glancing blows, both pairs failed to find an upper hand. It was then that a deafening crackling of wood demanded their attention. Through the dissipating smoke, Pascale saw a third assailant enter the mix; at least twice the size of the other two cutthroats, the hulking mass of a man had sundered the flipped wagon in two with a loose tree trunk. Amongst the splintered wreckage, Pascale saw the makeshift weapon had narrowly missed Ecklund and Pistres, but the massive bandit was now bearing hard on them, eager to consummate his reckless assault.

Pascale deftly feinted the blade of her spinning glaive, striking her foe's legs with its iron pommel instead. In the cutthroat's momentary stumbling, Pascale disengaged and charged, recklessly, into the larger bandit. Pascale slammed into his side; the man absorbed the blow, budging ever so slightly, and turned eagerly to his new prey. Behind Pascale, Dismas calculated the chances of his newfound disadvantage, battling both cutthroats now. He did not like them.

Pascale unleashed a series of swings and stabs, but the bandit, using large metal wristguards, showcased an impressive display of matching blocks. Dismas struggled against the renewed pressure of his dual assailants. Ecklund remained committed to the tending of the crimson flow, now puddling at Pistres's side.

Dismas was the first to err. Slipping on the uneven cobblestone, his now shortened sidestep caught a sliding blade on his left side. Panicking, Dismas revealed his hidden flintlock, fired, and miraculously incapacitated one of the two cutthroats. He did not know where the shot had struck, only that its recipient crumpled unceremoniously to the ground. Covering his wounded side, he shifted then into a burst of desperate attacks on the remaining daggerman.

Pascale's arms burned in fury and frustration. The bandit deflected another strike, this time following with a quick punch landing squarely on Pascale's jaw. As she collected herself, the bandit unfurled a knotted cat o'nine tails whip, and with a quick flash, struck Pascale's side and back. Shock clouded reflex. Pascale, recoiling, failed to evade the bandit's follow-on strike; the whip wrapped around her glaive, and with a flick of the bandit's arm, tore it from her hands. She watched as it scattered away. Roaring, Pascale latched onto the bandit's arm and managed to wrench the whip free; but it was a costly move. The massive man pummeled Pascale with a left hook and drove her hard into the ground.

Dismas watched in horror between his own swiping blows. He watched as the bandit struck Pascale's face, once, twice. Again. Again. He watched her struggle against his weight, kneeling his side unsuccessfully, desperately. Again the bandit struck.

It was the mountain of suffocating pressure on her chest that occupied Pascale's failing thoughts, even as the brutal blows continued. An encroaching darkness replaced them. Then, through swollen, blood-soaked eyes, she connected with Ecklund's piercing green gaze as he sat a few yards away in a nest of splintered wood. Yet another blow cracked across her face. She saw Ecklund reach for his side, shaking a clouded liquid within its glass container, which suddenly altered to emit a vibrant green glow. She heard the shattering of glass at her feet. A blinding flash.

Later, faintly, while her body dragged across the Old Road, battered but alive, she remembered looking up through a thick green mist, a large black beak hovering above her.