

Chapter III

Sooted Roots

Tirielle watched the hopeful flames sprouting from the dried twigs packed beneath carefully placed logs, its nascent heat licking the sides of the knotted wood and reflecting, comfortably, on the side of her face. She yawned, shifting the kindling—not for the sake of the fire, though—nevertheless satisfying her usual distaste for the idle. Beyond the growing campfire, a large mass of furs and blankets began to stir within an open-faced leather tent.

“I’ll give you a choice, but choose wisely. Do you want some eggs, or do you want to sleep another hour?” Tirielle asked the stirring lump.

“Eggs, please,” the mass responded.

“Well that’s settled, you’re getting up then.”

“And the eggs?”

“You ate them all yesterday.”

“Damn. I’d like to revisit our earlier conversation.”

“I did tell you to choose wisely.”

“Trickery,” Pascale sighed, sitting up within the tent, shaking off a pile of blankets, “Rogue trickery! I’d have you properly tried, and hanged, most likely.”

“You’d have to get up first,” Tirielle replied, laughing.

“I am up!” Pascale protested, stretching to the edges of the tent.

“And we are all the more blessed for it. I think we need some more kindling. Pass, my newly-born lass, you are needed for a stick hunt! Dry leaves too.”

Pascale stepped out of her shelter, towering over the struggling campfire. “Is this really necessary, Till? Three days of the same morning ritual, not to mention afternoon, and night. We’d be halfway there by now if you took out all the stubborn fires and used your fingertips instead.”

“No we would not!” Tirielle scoffed, pulling out a black, leather-bound book. She consulted its pages, brushing Pascale’s complaints aside. “I’m sorry I’m not a natural, recognizing the inconvenience is so unbearable.”

“But you *are* a natural.”

“You know what I mean, Pass.”

“I know what you mean, I just don’t like it.”

Tirielle flipped the pages of her black journal, stopping to read, punctuating each word, “No magic until we hit cobblestone.”

“I know, I know.”

"The instructions were very clear."

"Just a little snap, Tilly. I know you've been itching for it."

"If you're not going to be helpful you could at least stop hovering over the poor thing. You're making it nervous."

"You're impossible," Pascale exhaled, taking a seat next to Tirielle. The two watched the flames flicker at the center of a rock-laid circle, the fire touching but not yet burning the surrounding logs. Pascale grabbed a nearby stick, joining Tirielle in her aimless prodding.

"How much longer do you think it'll be, Till? I mean to this place, the state."

"The Estate. I'd wager just under two weeks left of travel."

"And how much would you be willing to wager?"

"Well, I'd wager your breakfast to start." Tirielle lifted a smoking twig with her stick, setting it back on top of the small burning pile.

"Very daring, so unlike you," said Pascale. Tirielle answered with a half smile, flattening the creases of her black cloak. The cloak covered a collection of fur-lined leathers, a near matching set to that of her traveling companion.

"I hope it's worth it, all of this," said Pascale.

"I think it's a new start for us. A new adventure. There's mystery there, grand intrigue. Ancestral nonsense and terrifying creatures. Plus it's far away from home. Far, far away, thank the stars. And the gold, lots of gold. Have I mentioned that?"

"Once or twice," Pascale laughed.

"And then once we're done, we can build a new home. Away from it all. You and me," Tirielle stared beyond the dwindling flames, lost in thought, "You and me, and a pile of gold."

Pascale followed Tirielle's gaze, noting the hopeful glint from Tirielle's blue eyes, and the masked sorrow hidden poorly beneath it. Pascale stood, waving her stick in front of Tirielle's face, breaking her stare.

"I'm off," said Pascale.

"Is that so?"

"There's talk of a stick hunt, just some chatter from the leaves. I think I'll join it." Pascale struck a stately pose, resting her prodding stick on her shoulder like a blade at ease. Tirielle smiled, her eyes waking with it, returning from a far off place.

"Pass," Tirielle started. Pascale lifted her stick-sword off her shoulder and struck another pose, stretching the stick forward, putting together an exaggerated training sequence. She continued the flowing movements, slashing the stick-sword

downward. The stick snapped, down near its imaginary hilt, the rest of it now dangling by a piece of bark. Pascale brought it up to her face, looking at it longingly, noting Tirielle's widening smirk. She re-assumed her third pose in serious concentration, swinging across her body for a fourth, the dangling stick-piece flinging off its imaginary hilt and into the forest. Tirielle's smirk broke into bright laughter as Pascale moved her nubbed stick-sword into a fifth pose, the tiny stick clutched ridiculously against Pascale's strong frame.

"Pass," Tirielle started again, "I know how hard this is. But if you'd just trust me, give me a chance. I think you'll find—we'll find—everything has a way of falling into place. If we just take a step back, drop what we're holding on to so dearly, let it all go, we'll be there in a—" Tirielle finished her sentence with a sharp snap of her fingers. The tip of Pascale's broken stick burst into a blue-white flame.

"Gods, Till!" Pascale dropped it into the campfire. The blue flames enveloped the stacked logs. "A little warning next time?"

Tirielle laughed, "I did warn you! But you were right. I was itching for it."

"It's glorious," said Pascale.

"Stick hunt's off, but we'll need more logs. It's burning hot. I'll get us started on breakfast."

"Perfect, already on it," said Pascale, stepping around the tent and into the canopied forest.

* * *

A glowing blue fog seeped from the scaled shaman's staff, cascading down the edges of the inner-cavern cliff, settling gently in the space where Pascale and company stood newly rooted in tentacle-turned-rock encasements. The smell of brine and rotted fish wafted through the cavern offshoots to their sides, preceding the growing drum of feet fast-approaching.

"Ecklund, the skull. Can you reach it?" asked Pistres, his eyes trained on the skull resting at the base of Ecklund's rock stump. Ecklund bent forward, reaching down. As he bent, the rock around his legs cracked to his movements, before suddenly spreading up his legs, extending from his mid-thigh to his mid-waist like carved vines. Ecklund's arms dangled, inches short of the candle-topped skull, his expanded casing keeping him locked at the hip. He looked to Pistres, apologetically, his beaked mask both lit and half-obscured by the swirling blue fog.

Pascale heard the crumbling of rock to her left and turned to find Belle struggling against her own restraints. The fallen stones melted into her covered feet, feeding back into itself, extending up to the waist, traveling further now, the full casing inching towards Belle's neck as she continued her resistant squirming.

"You're making it worse. Keep still," said Pascale.

"Keep still? Are you deaf? Or are we ignoring the horde of fins coming to greet us, you know, just in case they're friendly?"

"Pascale," Pistres interrupted, "Your glaive. Can you reach my skull?"

"I can try." Pascale extended her glaive, reaching out her arms slowly. The length of her glaive fell just short of the skull. Pascale leaned even further, carefully, her arms straining, but the glaive still hovered just above the skull, barely out of reach. The beating footfalls grew louder, uncomfortably close, but still somewhere beyond the clouds of blue surrounding her.

"We're running out of time!" yelled Belle, the rock now stabilizing her neck, with still-growing striations extending out and down her arms. Shadows grew within the shrouded light, darting around them haphazardly, their sources hopelessly refracted but close. Pascale recognized it too; they were running out of time.

Pascale abandoned caution and drove her full body forward, rock crumbling and re-forming at her sides, growing up her spine. The maneuver worked, successfully closing the inches-wide gap between glaive and skull, though Pascale worried where the climbing rock would stop, if at all. Pascale moved her glaive under the skull, balancing it with effort, while the tightening rock wrapped around her chest, forcing the air from her lungs. The skull toppled, rolling further away from Ecklund's bent frame, but still in reach of Pascale's glaive.

Flashes of fin and fang peppered the clouded cavern. Belle yelped as three fishman skirmishers emerged from the haze and lunged at her exposed neck. With the last mobility afforded by her growing encasements, she slid a knife between the scales of the first's neck, ducking the other two. The rock tightened, restricting hope of any further defense.

"Do something!" yelled Belle.

"Quickly Pascale, the skull," answered Pistres.

"Ecklund, catch!" Pascale repositioned her glaive under the skull with a slight angle and jerked upward, springing the skull towards Ecklund. Contorting against his rock-set hips, Ecklund tracked the skull into his hands, avoiding the candle top, and tossed it seamlessly into Pistres's waiting arms. Pistres quickly lit

the candle with a primed match and began to speak in rhythm as Pascale weakly jabbed her glaive to her left, her mobility waning, in a strained attempt to ward off Belle's assailants. Pistres's chanting dissolved into the chaos of sound and movement around them, as more armed fishmen simultaneously emerged and receded into the clouded air. A dull red-orange halo covered Pistres hand, the yellow-flame candle shifting colors to match, the skull's eye sockets flashing suddenly, scattering into the haze. The tentacle-turned-rock encasements washed away, saltwater flooding down and out from the soaked legs of the four freed prisoners.

Pascale drove her glaive through a charging skirmisher, skewering him in front of Belle. She slid her weapon free with little effort, aided by the thick red blood now coating the chipped blade. "On me, hurry! Back-to-back."

Pascale's right shoulder was met with the corner of a hooded robe, Ecklund pressing his back partially against her with a small blade primed. Pistres joined the group, pressing against Ecklund's right, with a curved dagger drawn. Belle was crouched low, a few paces off the other three, tracking shadows in front of her with daggers fanned.

"Belle, on us!" yelled Pascale. Belle huffed wordlessly in response, reluctantly backstepping until her shoulders aligned with Pascale on her right, Pistres on her left.

"Happy? Any bright ideas now?" Belle asked.

"Yes...", responded Ecklund. Three skirmishers darted forward, materializing in front of the group. Pascale jabbed her glaive forward but remained in lock with the others. The front most fishman jumped back, avoiding the blade, and began to rotate in a wide circle with his followers around the group. Two more skirmishers appeared, joining their brothers in a growing rotation around them. Pascale and company matched rotation, blades bared.

"Now would be a good time, then!" pressed Belle. Ecklund released an orb from his belt, swirling the liquid with a quick turn of the wrist before tossing it in front of the circling fishmen. The glass shattered, spreading liquid at their scaled feet. The fishmen stopped their circling, wary of the unknown liquid in front of them. Pascale held her breath, waiting for a spectacular display. None came. Another moment passed before the fishmen disregarded the broken glass altogether, its dormant liquid dripping uneventfully. They continued with their circling.

“Perfect. Thanks for that, Ecklund. Oh—he’s fiddling with his beak now. That’ll fix it,” said Belle. Ecklund tightened the straps of his beaked mask, settling it firmly beneath the cowl of his robe, and pulled out the group’s final torch from his pack. As they turned away from the broken orb, matching steps with the threatening fishmen, Ecklund dipped the torch into the center of Pistres’s burning candle, catching its oil-soaked rag in eager flame. Ecklund held the torch at his side, waiting, as they continued turning, slowly, in tandem.

Belle snapped her wrist forward, loosing a dagger at the rotating wall of fishmen, dropping one with a well-placed throw to the skull. The other skirmishers rushed forward. Pascale slid her glaive across the thigh of the nearest fishman, but the blade glanced harmlessly off his scales, adding little resistance to his path bearing on Belle and her stinging daggers. Belle retreated, breaking formation, darting between Ecklund and Pistres, vanishing into the blue cloud with two fishmen on her heel, the others halting at the combined dissuasion of Pascale’s glaive and Ecklund’s torch. Pascale sidestepped to close Belle’s now vacant spot, poking her weapon outward, still rotating in step with Ecklund and Pistres, a group of strained fish eyes still staring back.

“Hold...breath,” urged Ecklund. Returning again to the liquid scattered a full rotation prior, Ecklund dropped the torch in the center of the broken glass, the torch blanketing the soaked floor in swift, violent flames. The guttural screeching of nearby fishmen assaulted Pascale’s ears as she watched the flames leap from the cavern floor to the surrounding haze, the bluish fog burning up and away like flash paper, leaving a fine silt swirling in its place.

Both the light and obscurity provided by the now-dissipated fog left the cavern instead dimly lit by the instigating torch a few yards in front of Ecklund, revealing at least twenty skirmishers surrounding the three of them. Belle also stood a few feet away, doubled over, coughing, herself surrounded by a grouping of six fishmen.

The blue-scaled shaman, now seen faintly again as an outlined suggestion on the ridge of the inner-cavern cliff, screeched unhappily, raising her urchin-topped staff with a shout to the fishmen below, “MNAHN’T GOF’NN.”

* * *

Pascale craned her neck around the ambitious stack of foraged firewood delicately balanced in her arms, ears piqued by the sound of unfamiliar voices

drifting from camp as she approached about thirty yards off. While the unfamiliar voices were worrying, the responding tone of the lone recognizable voice of Tirielle sent a quick chill of panic through Pascale. She instinctively crouched low, quietly setting aside the gathered firewood, finding cover in the surrounding brush.

"I'm just a simple traveler. Nothing of interest to you, I'm sure," Tirielle insisted to the unwelcome group in front of her. Pascale settled in her low crouch, counting ten heavily-armed figures arranged in a rough crescent around Tirielle, the campfire in front of her providing a small buffer between them.

"Magic's a peculiar thing in these woods," a shorter one spoke in front of the others, pacing behind the fire, directly across from Tirielle, "Well, the magic's neither here nor there, not peculiar in itself. But there's something odd we've found; wherever there's magic, there's money. You see, we've made a living making it our interest." The crescent formation tightened with practiced uniformity. "And we rarely leave empty-handed."

Pascale rotated quietly behind the backs of the highwaymen, moving awkwardly in her crouch, before connecting with Tirielle's blue eyes through the leafy brush. Tirielle reciprocated with a flash of recognition despite Pascale's cover a hundred feet off. Tirielle addressed the frontman again, her voice lined with sudden confidence, stepping closer to the fire in front of her.

"I'm sorry to disappoint you and your fine gentlemen, but we've nothing of worth."

"We?"

Pascale's eyes shifted nervously to her glaive still buried within the furs of her morning bed. Tirielle clocked Pascale's hesitation and paused, recalculating.

The frontman continued, "Well then, good news boys. It's a short negotiation. Wouldn't want to waste the numbers advantage," taking a measured step back. "Kill her."

"Till!" Pascale shouted, leaping forward.

"Run, Pass!" Tirielle's voice cracked in desperation, a foregone futility tempering its weight. Pascale continued barrelling forward while four sets of crossbows unloaded in unison from the edges of the crescent line, the bolts dissecting leather and skin with a percussive scatter of thuds across Tirielle's chest and stomach. Pascale roared, shaking uncontrollably, running faster.

“Please, Pass...” Tirielle stumbled forward, towards the campfire, looking down at the fletching-lined shafts lodged below her chin, her words weakening, “...away.”

The frontman dismissed Tirielle as she teetered near the fire, turning away to find Pascale fast approaching, unarmed and still several yards off. He raised an open hand before twisting his palm into a tight fist, directing the others to their new target. Pascale watched as the bandits flanking the frontman drew polished swords toward her, the outer guards reloading their empty crossbows. Beyond their steadied weapons, behind their backs, Pascale saw Tirielle step into the campfire with heavy feet, charcoaled wood kicking out, the blaze pulsating with renewed energy around her buckled frame .

A sudden blast of fire subsumed the brisk woodland air, blanketing the campsite in a superheated wave of rolling blue flame.

* * *

The shaman's screeching reverberated across the now clear-aired cavern until its last remnants scattered to an uneasy quietness, the waning torchlight accentuating the momentary standstill between sets of restless fins and fingers. Pascale surveyed the fishmen skirmishers in earnest, their large blinking eyes bearing back through slit pupils, their finned forearms raised with scaled hands extending rusted castaway steel clumsily affixed to broken hilts and wooden poles to resemble makeshift cutlasses and harpoons.

Ecklund was the first to move, surprising Pascale with flashes of green broken orbs in front of them, the fishmen skirmishers dodging glass and recoiling from the puffs of caustic green vapors threatening their space. With the momentary standstill crudely broken, Pascale found herself, once again, surrounded by a flurry of action; a half-concerted chaos descended on the cavern while the blue-scaled shaman perched further above watched intently through narrowed eyes.

Pistres slipped behind Pascale and Ecklund with his candle-topped skull extended, sending forth a pair of tentacles rising from the floor, peeling away two of the skirmishers closing in on Belle, the tentacles slamming the startled fishmen into the cavern wall.

“I’m guessing those were from you this time!” said Belle, acknowledging Pistres before sliding behind the four other skirmishers, releasing a handful of

daggers against them while catching a harpoon jab to her shoulder. Belle winced, stabilizing against a side wall, plotting her next dagger. The skirmishers charged. Belle, pickaxe now drawn, locked in to an ensuing dance of rusted steel with seemingly choreographed dips and dodges, Pistres aiding with eldritch interference of his own.

Pascale and Ecklund bandied with a considerably larger force of skirmishers than the select few still standing against Belle and Pistres, and yet the two of them quickly settled into an efficient scheme of judge and executioner. Ecklund doled out group sentences with a liberal spread of broken baubles unleashing blighted fumes, stunning flashes, and timely distractions. Pascale gracefully dispatched the incapacitated fishmen with wide sweeps of her lawful glaive, cutting through the accused with ease. Only a handful of fishmen remained before Ecklund's hip-fed stockpile dwindled to a few orbs emitting a dull red-orange glow.

"Pascale, the shaman!" Pistres's strained voice cracked, pleading to Pascale. Between swipes of her glaive, she watched Belle sidestep a blue tentacle anchored to a nearby wall. The tentacle dissipated into a familiar pool of saltwater, Pistres's doing, before another appeared, narrowly missing Belle's leg, disappearing into the floor behind her.

"Need a little help here!" yelled Belle, dispatching the last of the six fishmen on her side before backing against the wall, waiting for the retaliations of her unseen assailant.

"Can you reach the witch up there?" Pistres asked Pascale, careful not to divert his needed attention. Pascale strained her eyes through the dim torchlight in response, searching for the shaman's outline.

"I don't know!" Pascale replied.

"Left..." Ecklund butted in, pointing at the small remaining group of fishmen huddled behind Pascale's shoulder. Pascale turned to them with a quick half-turn and a thoroughly-wetted glaive, blood and ichor dripping from its curved blade. She managed one step before the fishmen fled, retreating back into the cavern offshoots.

"We should just go!" Belle started, "We didn't know what we were up against." Belle stepped away from the wall, towards the cavern opening faintly seen still a ways off, before another blue tentacle shot up, knocking her back against the wall. A second tentacle emerged from the wall and strapped against her chest, a third following in a flash, pinning her legs. Pistres shouted, rhythmically, dispelling the sucker-spotted onslaught into another pool of water dousing Belle's figure.

“More tentacles, more damn water. What does that hag have against me?” complained Belle. The four of them stood still, inconveniently spaced, unwilling to move for fear of inciting another attack from the unseen shaman looming somewhere on the inner-cavern cliff. Appreciating this brief recess, Pascale noted the labored breaths of her companions, altogether taxed but seemingly unobstructed. Uninjured.

Belle shivered, remembering her missing tailcoat as she traced the water dripping from the sleeves of her ruffled shirt down to the cavern floor. Waiting another moment for good measure, Belle took a step towards the blue coat still lying in a heap over glass shards several feet off the wall. The group tensed with collective anticipation, but no immediate retaliation came. Belle closed the gap and softly shook the glass shards off the tailcoat, brushing away beads of dormant white-gray liquid.

Belle’s arm made it halfway through a sleeve before a massive tentacle emerged from the floor below Pistres, lifting him forty feet in an instant and slamming him into the ceiling above, unleashing a hailstorm of stalactite shards below. Pistres’s body fell limp in its grasp as the trunk-like limb retracted from the ceiling and hovered ten feet above Pascale’s head, Pistres still in its clutch. Pistres’s skull dropped from his hand and joined the raining calcite, shattering on the rock below, the candle snuffing on impact.

Belle darted for the cavern exit, but a second tentacle emerged from within the thick, undulating base of the first. It struggled to free itself from the surface of the tentacle base before tearing through a thin membrane, immediately focusing its efforts on the fleeing Belle. She managed to hurdle its first swipe but stumbled on the landing, the second tentacle capitalizing with a quick wrap around her ankles. Belle jammed her pickaxe into its fleshy underside, scraping away from her ankle in a deep cut. The tentacle held, unaffected.

Pascale and Ecklund watched as two more tentacle offshoots began to form along the base of the original. They looked to each other, wordlessly, before assuming a dead sprint away from the tentacle base, towards the inner-cavern cliff. The two tentacles pierced the last membranous layer and shot towards them, gaining ground.

Ecklund unhooked the first of three remaining orbs from his hip, shaking the red-orange liquid to life. Pascale gauged the approach of the tentacles and jabbed back with her glaive mid sprint, falling behind Ecklund. Her glaive caught flesh, but

the tentacle pushed ahead, sinking the glaive further by its own movement. Pascale retracted her weapon, running hard but braced for impact.

Ecklund threw an orb at the fast-approaching tentacles in Pascale's defense. The shattered glass gave way to a liquid lava that violently hissed against the wet cavern floor, but Ecklund's frantic aim pulled his throw too far right. The adjacent spray of the unknown liquid froze the tentacles for a moment, though, buying the two escapees some needed space.

Ecklund reached the inner-cavern cliff, squatting down with cupped hands readied, and looked back to Pascale with his head motioning to the top of the twenty-foot rockface. Pascale quickly sheathed her glaive before leaping off Ecklund's hand mid stride, Ecklund simultaneously driving his legs up to boost Pascale's jump. Pascale scrambled against the face of the cliff, searching for handholds. She slid against the rock before finally gaining grip, dangling halfway between the ground and the cliff's upper edge.

Pascale looked away from the wall to see the tentacles approaching again. Ecklund tossed an orb in a more rounded trajectory, the bundle of molten liquid seemingly suspending in midair before careening back down near the rushing tentacles. One of the tentacles lashed out, instinctively, crushing the orb midair, draping itself in the lava-like substance. The liquid quickly etched through the tentacle's outer skin and sunk deeper into its striated muscles, creating large, noticeable pockmarks of dissolved flesh. The tentacle thrashed about wildly before retreating away from Ecklund, back to the large tentacle base.

Pascale continued up the cliff face, seeking handholds and contorting with effort to reach them. Meanwhile, Ecklund stood off against the last remaining tentacle offshoot at the base of the inner-cavern cliff, his last orb in hand. To his dismay, Ecklund noticed Pascale's climb stall only a half-body length off the cliff edge. Pascale struggled against the rocks, unable to find a viable route forward.

The tentacle finally shot past Ecklund, targeting the scaling Pascale, but it fell just short, its form stretched to capacity from its long-off base. The tentacle shifted efforts to the bottom of the cliff instead, slamming against it repeatedly, threatening Pascale's ascent as she strained to maintain her grip, her already tired muscles contending with the now vibrating rock. A glass orb shattered against the rock to Pascale's right, a foot above her head, its liquid spraying dangerously close.

"What are you doing?!" Pascale mustered, annoyed and exhausted, looking back down to Ecklund. Ecklund pantomimed a tomahawk-like stabbing motion

above his head, pointing to the rockface, before being swiftly wrapped and pinned by the now re-engaged tentacle. Of the four, only Pascale still remained free.

Pascale looked above at the now molten rock, the liquid churning through the once-smooth surface. The liquid started funneling down, towards her right hand. Pascale panicked, looking for another hold, to no avail. She looked back to the molten spot, picturing Ecklund's motion, before unsheathing her glaive and grasping it at the back of the haft.

Pascale cocked her arm back and drove the head of her glaive into the pocket of the molten rock above her. The thick, superheated rock sludge gave way to the steel glaive, the glaive nestling somewhere within the rockface, its haft jutting about a foot out of the wall. Pascale immediately re-gripped the haft with her right arm, palm facing the ground, and drove it down in an effort to vault herself up to the cliff edge. The haft slid sideways, its inner anchor already half-melted, before snapping altogether from the force of Pascale's push. Pascale extended her free arm, grasping wildly. She found purchase on the cliff edge, hoisting herself up with her left arm, collapsing on its peak while the broken haft clattered on the ground twenty feet below.

Finding her breath, Pascale lifted her head to find near darkness, as the lone remaining torch burned weakly below her, over a hundred feet away. Still, the shimmering outline of the blue-scaled shaman could be faintly seen ahead. So, too, Pascale saw her arms lift, extending into darkness.

Pillars of rock lining the edges of the upper cave floor collectively burst into blinding white beams of light, basking the cavern in an unnatural glow. Pascale witnessed the shaman's raised staff emanating the same light, its seeming source, before shutting her pained eyes, the light seeping through her eyelids.

Pascale heard the thud of Pistres's unconscious body greeting the cold cavern floor, the tentacle trunk evidently washing away from the shaman's redirected efforts. Ecklund and Belle recovered from their dissipated bindings and ran to his side. Pascale kept her eyes shut, shielding still from the overwhelming light.

Then, a foreign darkness entered her mind, though the light outside persisted. A cloud of pain and anguish, disappointment. Feelings of home, feelings of loss, of Tirielle. Black despair, thick and palpable, spreading across her mind's eye, clouding everything, pressing defeat. The weight of death balanced on a teetering scale of chance. The weights tipped by her own hand.

Pascale screamed in blind agony.

* * *

The smell of burnt flesh greeted Pascale's dazed consciousness. Pascale peeled herself off the ground, unable to remember how she found herself there. She rose to the faint crackling of fire eating away at the edges of a decimated campsite, a fitting backdrop to the charred bodies that littered the rest of the forest clearing. The bodies were individually contorted and unidentifiable, roughly strewn in a half-moon formation. She remembered now.

"Gods, Tilly, are you—" Pascale choked on her words, running to the smoldering remains of their campfire, where she last saw Tirielle. She found her collapsed behind the campfire with blood pooled around her frame, painting the singed edges of her fur-lined armor. But Pascale also saw the slightest movement, the nearly imperceptible rise and fall of her chest. Pascale knelt by her, turning her body carefully, and cradled her head.

Tirielle's pained blue eyes met Pascale's, softening with overwhelming relief at the sight of her, tears glistening. Tirielle's mouth opened, but only a few rattling breaths escaped. She smiled, shaking her head slightly in Pascale's hands, resigned to look and listen. Pascale scanned the bolts protruding from Tirielle's chest and stomach.

"What do I do? How do I fix this?"

Tirielle shook her head again. She nudged her chin down, towards her chest.

"Don't leave me, I can't. I can't do it," Pascale pleaded. Tirielle insisted, nudging down again. Pascale slid a little closer, gently moving Tirielle's head to her lap, freeing her hands. Pascale followed Tirielle's left arm, where Tirielle's weakened hand clutched something against her side. Peeling it away, she found Tirielle's black leather book hidden beneath.

"This?" Pascale asked. Tirielle slowly closed her eyes, opening them again with the faintest nod. Pascale flipped through the journal until she found the latest entry, where blood streaks marred the sides of the white page. She read the hastily-written note left in the center.

"I will," Pascale responded with tears. "I promise."

Pascale held Tirielle's hand, keeping her head in her lap. The two of them sat in silence, listening to the sounds of the woods, and the melodies of the birds still welcoming a new day. Together they listened, until the last imperceptible rise and fall of Tirielle's chest, and the quiet dulling of her brilliant blue eyes.

Later, Pascale laid Tirielle on a raft of freshly-cut logs lashed together tightly, covering her body in the furs of her morning bed. With a gentle push, she watched the raft drift down the small river they'd crossed just last night, the waters slowly winding its path to some far-off place. Pascale watched until the raft drifted out of sight, lingering a little longer, dusting off soot and tears from the cover of Tirielle's black, leather-bound book.

* * *

Rage, strong and caustic, bubbled within the forced darkness of Pascale's mind. Pascale sunk deeper to reach it, embracing its heat, armoring in its corruption. The seams of oppressive darkness strained against it, holding together but thinning rapidly. She sensed its weakness.

Pascale burst through the shaman's blackened shroud in a fury, her consciousness returning to the blinding lights of the pillars lining the inner-cavern cliff, Belle yelling somewhere below and behind her.

"For gods' sake Pascale, you're just sitting there, we need to leave!" Belle looked up at the edge of the cliff with shielded eyes. She watched Pascale's outlined form shake awake and dash forward, deeper, out of sight. Belle let out an exaggerated sigh and turned to Ecklund, Pistres's unconscious body between them.

"You can do what you want, but I'm getting out of here, *alive*." Belle spun towards the exit. Ecklund grabbed the tail of her billowing coat, pulling her back. Belle slapped his hand away.

"Don't pull me down with you, beakface." Belle flattened the folds of her blue tailcoat.

"Debt...owed," said Ecklund, looking down to Pistres's body.

"Me? I don't owe him a damn thing," deflected Belle.

Above them, on the cliff, Pascale charged straight at the shaman. The shaman raised her staff even further, the lights intensifying, doubling the midday sun in comparison. Pascale's eyes seared but remained fixated, obsessed, as she barrelled forward. The shaman panicked, cowering back a step.

Pascale tackled her to the ground, the shaman's staff skidding away, its white light still projecting across the floor and through the lines of pillars. The shaman wrested free of Pascale's grip with unexpected ease, darting across the floor towards her staff. Pascale snatched her leg, the shaman snarling in displeasure, bearing rows of jagged teeth.

Pascale whipped the shaman to the ground, dashing past her towards the discarded staff. The shaman caught her thigh with a dagger, thin and ceremonial in its dress, unhooked from a hidden side clasp. Pascale limped, roaring, and turned back to the shaman with doubled fury. She punched the dagger from the shaman's hand and lifted her from the floor, raising the shaman above her head. She threw her towards the edge of the cliff, the shaman's body skidding against the ground, shedding bluish scales in a line.

Pascale immediately pursued her prey. The eldritch witch clawed the ground for traction against the approaching cliff edge, stopping just before the twenty-foot drop. Pascale pounced on her, pinning her thrashing body. After a brief, hopeless struggle, the shaman calmed to a whimper, her neck dangling over the edge of the cliff.

Her blinded rage subsiding, Pascale caught the vertical slits of the shaman's clear blue eyes for the first time. Familiar, brilliant blue eyes. Pascale shook her head, confused, staring at her again. The shaman stared back, unblinking. Pascale loosened her grip.

"Tilly?"

A flash of steel sunk into the shaman's skull, her bright blue eyes extinguishing, the fitted hilt of Belle's throwing knife poking out from the side of her head. Belle followed with another, a deadeye from twenty feet below, though the first proved enough. The blinding white glow was already fading from the lighted pillars, the blue-scaled shaman already limp in Pascale's arms.