

## Chapter 15

Ealyn wakes shivering and teeth chattering. A winter wind blow through the open window causing the shutters to bang against the wall. Ealyn drags herself to the window, and closes the shutters. The cold seeps to her bones, there is a small fireplace at the west wall of her room. She props herself up, the locks on her legs brace whining as they are forced into movement after being nearly frozen. She walks unsteadily to the fireplace, but there is no wood. Teeth still chattering she walks slowly to the door, her steps becoming more assured the closer she comes.

She walks through the door into the hallway beyond. Only at night is the hallway lit by the glowing orbs. She wanders to one on the wall, and cups her shaking hands around it. She curses the vile magic for not requiring flame, then walks down the hallway. She clutches her around about herself as tightly as she can. She happens an a window at the other end of the hallway. Through it she sees Bryden making one of his night retreats into the forest. She leaves the window to turn a corner leading to a staircase. She takes the staircase into a hallway, then she presses through a large pair of wooden double doors into the main hall.

The main hall is not much more than a ruin. The carpets are food for the mites, the long rotted drapes are barely more than rags attached to the rusted metal rods above. Much of the glass is cracked, allowing the light to pour in out of focus patterns with bright beaded edges. Ealyn walks through the hallway with nothing lighting it other than the moon.

Ealyn stumbles on the edge of a rotted carpet. She catches herself before she falls, but when she reaches full height she winces as a lance of pain passes up her right leg to her hip. Ealyn swallows the pain then walks forwards. She makes it to the great double doors of the hall leading outside. She tries pushing them open, but they do not budge. Ealyn turns her head to the left of the door. There is a small porthole that lets in a ray of moonlight. She pushes through the porthole, then rolls out the slope landing in a pile outside. She looks back at the porthole, and is completely invisible covered by rocks and foliage. Ealyn makes a mental note of the location, then walks into the forest.

Bryden is not hard to follow, the orange light of the torch standing out like the brightest star standing out in the hazy skies of the city of white. She follows the torch, her teeth still chattering with the cold. The torch passes into a small rock outcropping then disappears. Ealyn walks to the outcropping. There are five stones laid out somewhat intentionally, but not enough to draw notice. She pokes and prods at the rocks, they give no response.

Ealyn walks outside the circle, then walks in mimicking Bryden's stride. She steps in all the disturbed leaves and grasses he leaves. This leads her to the northmost side of the tallest rock. She scans the rock up and down. She presses her hand into the rock and nothing happens. Then it occurs to her that Bryden is much taller than she. She reaches up and presses on the stone. She only gets the edge, but a hidden button sinks deeper into the stone, and an imperceptible seam in the rock grows wider until it swings outwards revealing a staircase with the same glowing orbs leading deep into the earth.

As Ealyn travels down the staircase the air gets warmer. Ealyn's teeth stop chattering, and Ealyn sighs with relief, but the lower and lower she goes the thicker the air becomes. Along with the humidity is a subtle stinky smell. This smell grows with the

humidity, until it is almost enough to choke her. Ealyn steps on the landing at the bottom of the stairs choking, then pushes through the door in front of her. She lifts her head, then screams.

In the center of the room is a beast open from top to bottom, its organs splayed out over an upright table with all their veins and arteries connected. The organs are contracting and expanding delivering blood from one system to the other. Its eyes lazily pan about the room their glow dulled but still present. There is a bladder full of the silvery solution with a tube connected straight to the heart. Ealyn runs out of the room, but crashes head first into Bryden.

Ealyn stumbles back, then Bryden tries to grab at her. She dodges under him, then starts running up the stairs.

“Wait!” Bryden yells.

She scrambles up the stairs, but a lance of pain passes through her legs. She crumples onto the staircase. Bryden follows behind her slowly. She tries to get up, but the metal brace locks up. She pulls herself up a couple steps, but Bryden catches up to her easily. She forces the brace to move, but a part of it snaps and stabs into her leg. She screams in pain as the metal pierces muscle, then starts into bone. Someone’s footsteps echo down the stairs. Blades pop out from Bryden’s arms then a white sword meets them cutting them in half. The figure shoves Bryden down the stairs. He tumbles backwards landing on the bottom landing with a sickening crack.

The figure picks up Ealyn and runs up the stairs. His face is covered in shadow as he comes up the stairs. When they exit the rock the moonlight illuminates the face of Salum.