

Chapter One - Ancient Lore

The metallic clack of a footfall vanished beneath the thunder that chased streaks of green and purple lightning across the sky. A hooded traveler in rusted scale armor and tattered clothes halted on the trail, scanning the dark woods.

Another bolt lit the night, briefly catching what little sheen remained on the corroded plates. Warnings had been given repeatedly. Not to interfere. Not to play with the lesser beings of this land. Those warnings were ignored, and now there was chaos and its consequences.

The hooded traveler pressed forward, his pace hindered by an old injury that left a slight limp. The incline ahead would have been effortless once, but time and battle had taken their toll, and the repairs he'd forced onto himself were never meant to last.

An hour passed before a sharp crack split the night. A snapped branch. The hooded traveler stopped and turned. From deep within the cowl, a faint red glow pulsed, steady and cold.

"Foolish to follow me." His voice rasped like metal scraping stone. "You have this one chance to stay hidden and live. I have no time for this."

A jagged streak of lightning split the sky, lingering long enough to reveal two masked men on the trail behind him. Their studded clubs caught the brief flicker of light.

One of the masked men stepped forward, club lowering to point at the hooded traveler. "It's him. The metal man with the limp." His eyes narrowed. "Big talk from a cripple with no weapons. We heard the rumors of your hidden treasures. Now turn around and take us to them, and maybe you walk away breathing."

A brief chuckle escaped the second man as he tightened his grip on his club.

The red glow from the hood brightened. "You inferior creatures and your obsession with shiny metal scraps. A new rumor, a new story, and new fools. There is no treasure." He raised a gloved hand and made a small dismissive motion. "Leave me."

The masked men exchanged a glance and set themselves. When the traveler turned uphill again, they surged in from both sides, clubs raised.

As the traveler spun, his eyes flared red beneath the cowl. A panel on his right leg snapped open, and a las-pistol slid into his hand. He brought the weapon up as the men closed, clubs already in motion.

Two shots flashed in the darkness.

The masked men crumpled before their clubs could swing. The las-pistol let out a screeching hiss, its frame glowing from the heat before rapidly cooling. It would be another day before it could fire again. Age, damage, and makeshift repairs had seen to that.

The traveler stared at the fallen bodies, taking in the shock frozen in their eyes before they ceased to exist. It was always the same. The egos of mortals kept them from running when they should.

As he slid the las-pistol back into its compartment, sparks flared from the damaged leg panel. With a frustrated grunt, the traveler banged on the misaligned panel until it snapped shut, concealing the weapon once more.

Looking up at more colorful lightning dancing across the sky, he shook his head and continued uphill.

Hours later, he emerged into an open expanse littered with skeletal remains of humanoids and animals alike. He scanned the field for movement, then fixed his gaze on an opening in the rock wall ahead. Ten feet from the entrance, he stopped. A thin orange beam shot from the cowl, sweeping across the mouth of the cave and the surrounding stone.

The scan confirmed what he already suspected. The life-form he sought was inside. Entering the dark cave, he followed the winding path deeper until finally emerging into a cavern. The stench of fresh death clung to the space. A massive cave bear lay motionless near the center, broken in a way that made its size look useless. Beside it, slumped against the wall, was the battered and bloodied form of the Night Stalker.

A sigh of disgust escaped from beneath the traveler's hood.

The Night Stalker stirred, her clawed fingers twitching as she attempted to push herself up. A mangled wing jerked once and failed. She slid back down against the stone, exhausted.

Kneeling, the hooded traveler tapped a few areas on the device embedded in the Night Stalker's clawed arm. In an instant, the monstrous form shifted, revealing her true form: a woman with violet skin smeared with blood and grime, dark red eyes slanted at a sharp angle, and a smoky crystal embedded atop her head.

"There we go, Velara," the hooded traveler said. "I warned you not to get tangled with the carbon scum of this world."

Velara coughed, her lips curling into a faint, pained smirk. "I did not think you would come, Exirn."

"Considering my subroutines dictate I cannot disobey a ruling council member, I had no choice. Besides, I need repairs. Getting you back to the ship solves both our problems."

Velara narrowed her eyes.

"Save the look," Exirn said. "Your last order, centuries ago, was to find a power supply to get us off this world or not to come back at all."

Exirn extended his hand. After a moment's hesitation, Velara took it, wincing as she tried to stand. She barely made it to her feet before her strength failed, and she crumpled back down.

"Finally met your match," Exirn said, shaking his head. "Before you black out, do I have permission to contact the ship for assistance?"

Velara gave a weak nod.

"Excellent. Now rest. As always, I will take care of everything."

Firelight flickered against the back wall, throwing thin shadows that did little to push back the dark. Outside, the storm howled. Green and purple lightning cracked over the ruins of the watchtower, and wind slammed against the buildings, ripping apart anything left untethered.

The village was in chaos. Somewhere beyond the shaking door, an animal cried out. Men shouted over one another, hands scrambling for rope and timber, for anything that could be

braced or weighted before the next gust tore it loose.

Aylith sat with the youngest children huddled near the fire. Their eyes kept drifting to the window every time the sky flared. One clutched a blanket to their chest with both fists as if it could keep the thunder out.

“And so,” Aylith said, letting her voice drop to a whisper, “when the storms rise, and the sky burns with colors that shouldn’t be, the land stirs. But not all that wakes should be welcomed.” She held their attention for a beat, letting the crackle of the fire fill the space. “It is said—”

“Are we doomed?” a small voice asked.

Aylith brushed soot from her hands and managed a thin smile. “Let me finish.” She leaned in, as if the story were a secret meant only for them. “An outsider will come. Not of this land. Someone who walks between light and shadow, bringing change.”

“Is that true?” another child asked.

Lightning flashed, illuminating the entire room for an instant, making the children jump and press against her. Aylith drew a steady breath, closed her eyes, and whispered a prayer to a goddess who had never answered.

“We must always have faith in our ancient stories, little one,” she said. “Even when nothing else is left.”

Aylith let out a slow breath and looked toward the window. Faith had failed her long ago.

A distant rumble rolled across the sky. Beyond the forests, through the valley, past the skeletal remains of a battlefield, two figures emerged from a shimmering light.

Ryan stumbled out of the portal, barely keeping his balance as Davyx crashed into the skiff in front of him. The small hoverskiff slammed into the far wall, dumping the supplies.

Head spinning, Ryan braced himself against the nearest surface, but his grip faltered, and he collapsed to his hands and knees. He barely had enough time to turn his head before he got sick. Groaning, he flopped onto his back, eyes shut, focusing on his breathing.

For twenty minutes, neither man spoke.

Davyx finally stirred in the dark chamber, rummaging through their gear. He put a hovering light in the air, then retrieved two injectors, tossing one to Ryan before pressing the other to his own neck. Ryan squinted from the light and injected himself. Within moments, the nausea faded, leaving only exhaustion in its place. Forcing himself to sit up, Ryan clasped his head, which throbbed like it wanted to fall off and roll away.

“Do portals always do that?” Davyx asked.

“Not usually,” Ryan said. “It felt like the time I went through a black hole.”

Davyx’s eyebrow went up.

Ryan sighed. “Long story.”

“At least I kept my stomach, puny man.” Davyx kicked at the broken skiff. “Space travel must be fun with you.”

“Yeah, well... not my strong suit.”

Davyx’s expression shifted somewhere between amusement and annoyance. “Skiff’s totaled. We carry everything from here. Get the mags loaded.”

Ryan nodded, grabbing the ammo and the mags. Looking around the room, his eyes narrowed. “Didn’t that area over there have less moss?” He wiped the sweat from his brow. “And it’s way more humid now.”

Davyx grunted. “What are you carrying on about, and do we need to worry about anything coming through that other portal or the blasted opening in the wall?”

Ryan shook his head. “That portal should be dormant, and the opening leads down a tunnel to an old temple and our way out.”

Davyx dragged the broken skiff in front of the blown-out opening and began sorting the equipment.

Ryan looked around the room. Only a few hours ago he, Kat, Vicki, and the professor had stood in this very room before stepping through the portal to get back to the real estate planet Davyx had his office on.

His thoughts went to Nora, who was clinging to life back on the Florarien homeworld. He could only pray the professor made it there in time to save her. With no communications, he had no way of knowing.

Their quest to this remake of a Dungeon and Dice adventure land was nothing short of amazing. A world and its people created by a geneticist from an ancient race on a bet. Its people had been living and dying in a world based on a game, believing in magical items and magic-wielding people.

Then again, there were some odd occurrences that made Ryan think magic might be real, but he wanted more proof before he could jump up and down and tell Kat he was right. However, this mission wasn’t for sightseeing. They were here to hunt an ancient being from a race that fed on the life essence of people.

This being was highly intelligent and incredibly evil, able to change her appearance into what the locals called the Night Stalker when she hunted. Though the land was no longer under the Night Stalker’s control, she had survived, and there was no way its people would stop her once she regained her strength.

Ignoring Kat’s protests, Ryan had come back to hunt the Night Stalker with help from Davyx, a retired mercenary.

Davyx, oddly enough, was a real estate agent along with his partner, Te’riyla, and their retired mercenary group. They refurbished destroyed worlds and sold the land. Some of which Ryan had to purchase in exchange for the information on the portal’s location to get to this world.

Ryan looked at the opening in the wall that Kat had blown out with frag grenades Vicki had brought with her. At the time, Vicki had been cured of her vampiric affliction and had become a normal mortal. He had thought she was killed when an arrow from a nanotech undead soldier struck her, and she was swept away in a raging river. But somehow she became a

vampire again and helped him defeat the Night Stalker. Wounded, she went off with Kat, the professor, and Te'riyla to help save Nora.

“Davyx, incoming mags.”

Davyx looked up and caught the five mags Ryan tossed to him in succession.

Having used all the mags for the las-pistols to assist with powering the portal the first time they came through, Ryan was relying on his XP-pistol. The pistol had the ability to channel the mystical blue flame he wielded into the pistol rounds. When a round impacted with an evil or demonic creature, the creature would burst into flame or disintegrate in the blue fire.

He knew there was more to the pistol. Fredrick LaRue, his nemesis, had tried to kill him with it, but the pistol had released a surge of energy that severely wounded Fredrick. If Ryan were following his Dungeon and Dice rules for magic items, he would guess the pistol might have an alignment restriction on it.

“Why are you giggling to yourself?”

Ryan went straight-faced. “Sorry, just reminiscing about something.”

“Not the time.” Davyx pointed to a pile of gear. “I placed your armor and supplies over there. I split the medi-injectors between us, and you have one power cube. You never know. Load up that pack of yours and gear up. We should get moving. Too confined in this place. Feels like a tomb.”

Ryan nodded and geared up.

Chapter Two - Warden Hunt

Ryan and Davyx exited the portal chamber through the opening in the wall. Davyx moved ahead, rifle at the ready, following the dim glow of a hovering light deeper into the passage.

Davyx had given Ryan lightweight combat armor that covered him from head to toe like a thin suit, with tactical plates in strategic locations. It wasn't all-encompassing, but it made him feel like a superhero. It was just missing a helmet and jetpack. Ryan had left off the left forearm piece since the bracer he'd found could project a blue energy shield.

Needless to say, his adventurers backpack fit fine, and he wore a small chest rig to hold his XP-pistol mags.

Ryan promised to return the combat armor when they got back, but Davyx only grunted. He had no idea what the grunt meant but didn't press the subject.

Davyx, on the other hand, wore only upper-body armor and tactical clothing. Ryan's gut told him the old merc had other tech stashed somewhere, but he didn't pry. Davyx was not one for small talk.

Outside light lit the area ahead where the old pulley still lay at the tunnel's end.

"Before we leave, let me verify if my internal comm can connect to that antiquated hand comm of yours," Davyx said.

Ryan waited a few seconds. "Did you send anything?"

"Yeah, and it did not work. Your comm is too old or not compatible. Get an updated head one."

"Not going to happen. Too much tech to add to your brain. Don't trust it."

Davyx shook his head. "Get over here and let me give you a boost."

Ryan placed his foot in Davyx's hands and was launched upward with ease. Catching the edge of the temple floor, he pulled himself up. He turned to assist Davyx, but he had somehow jumped the distance and was already exiting the shaft.

"Impressive," Ryan mumbled to himself and turned to scan the area.

Thunder rumbled in the distance, and he glanced up at the roof before checking the rest of the rotting building. Nothing much had changed. It was still dusty, and they were behind an altar.

Ryan drew his XP-pistol and took watch from behind the altar while Davyx unslung his rifle, swept the area, then tapped Ryan on the shoulder and pointed toward the nearest pew.

Ryan looked at him for a moment, then understood. Moving cautiously, he advanced to the closest pew, while Davyx broke toward the opposite side.

Unlike last time, there were no robed remains sitting in the pews. They had all fallen to dust. What stood out now were the vines growing through the walls with fresh leaves on them and the Night Mist Roses traversing them.

Ryan had heard about the prophecy tied to those roses more than once, but could only recall the first part, which went something like "The Night Mist Rose blooms again when wanderers born beneath alien skies breach the ancient bounds, something, something..." He

assumed the wanderers meant him, Kat, and Vicki.

But things felt different now. The land felt alive.

Davyx prodded an old cloak in a pew with the end of his rifle. “What happened to them?”

“Night Stalker is what happened. It comes from a race that pretty much eats the life force of living beings.”

Davyx’s head snapped up. His grin spread wide, showing sharp teeth. “You left that part out. I have heard tales of such creatures in my travels. Thought they were drunken stories. Never thought I would end up hunting one. This will be a good fight.”

Ryan cringed. “Glad you’re eager. The thing almost killed me twice, and I would prefer not to die again so soon.”

“Small human, I did not think you had that fight in you, or the chance to even live against such a creature, but—” Davyx paused. “What do you mean, die again?”

“Forgot you’re new to the club. I’ll explain when we have a long rest. I’m sure you’ll have questions. And thanks for what I think was a compliment on my toughness. Now, before we exit this place, this world is a bit different.”

“Different how?”

“At a high level, the most advanced weapon I’ve seen was a one-shot powder pistol. Most people are using archaic weapons, such as swords, maces, and spears.”

Davyx narrowed his eyes. “That explains how this creature dominated them.”

“Also, they’re capable of wielding a type of magic.”

“That word is not translating.”

“Let’s see. They can harness balls of flame and throw them, raise the dead with technology to do their bidding, and perform other mystical feats. For us, more advanced types, it’s just nanotech interfacing with large power sources somewhere in the land.”

Davyx slowly nodded, then grinned. “I understand now. Similar to a group of beings called Psi-Smiths. They possess similar abilities based on technology hidden within them, unlike the C-Tecs, who do not hide their tech.”

Ryan perked up. “You’re familiar with C-Tecs.”

Davyx nodded. “I have had dealings with them. Great explorers and archivists of technology. One had unique vision. I think his name was Eyeball.”

“Guy gets around. We—”

The sound of a woman humming outside the temple drew their attention.

“We’ll talk later about Eyeball,” Ryan said, “but I think we have company.”

They moved to an opening in the wall. Dark clouds in the distance put on a spectacular show of multicolored lightning in the late afternoon. Everything looked similar to what Ryan had recalled seeing not too long ago. The cobbled path was lined with large trees bearing beautiful pale pink blossoms, but the grass had grown waist-high, thick with elegant flowers.

A glistening statue stood near the path. A robed woman holding out her hand, the other grasping a staff. Beside her, a large wolf stood vigilant.

Ryan’s attention shifted from the statue to the living woman sitting nearby with her hood

down, and a large wolf lying on the ground beside her. Her skin appeared as smooth as silk, and her teal dress was adorned with living flowers. A beautiful staff carved with woodland creatures at both ends lay across her lap.

She was humming a tune as two women and a man tended to the flowers around the statue that resembled her. She looked over at Ryan and Davyx and smiled.

Ryan holstered his pistol. "Trust me on this one. I recognize the wolf."

Davyx looked at the scene before him, then back at Ryan. "I hope you are right. If you are wrong, remember I am faster than you."

"Noted." Ryan smirked, then exited the temple through the hole in the wall.

The wolf's head perked up, and it bared its teeth until the woman gave it a look. It yawned and settled down.

Ryan kept his hand on his pistol and stopped about ten feet from the woman. Davyx moved left, rifle at the ready, watching the wolf track his movement.

The people tending the flowers stood, smiled at Ryan, bowed, and moved to the larger trees.

Ryan looked around, breaking the quiet stare. Something was different, but he couldn't put his finger on it.

"My Arch Druid returns," the woman said. "The first new Warden of the Wood. I had a feeling you would return to finish your quest, but your trip was long, and I see you brought a friend."

He grinned. "Yeah, I did, and I guess I have you to thank for sending that wolf to aid me."

"You do."

He removed his hand from his pistol. "What are you, and what did you mean about the trip? Looking around, I have a sneaky suspicion, but I'm not sure."

"Warden Hunt, you have been traveling portals. To you, it has only been a few hours since you were gone, but in reality, it has been two weeks."

Ryan's eyebrows shot up. "Excuse me?"

"Portal travel is not a constant. You entered a portal that powered down as you entered it. That sort of distortion can cause significant issues. In your case, it took two weeks to complete your journey."

Davyx wandered closer, rifle lowered but ready. "If what the woman says is true, while we were traveling between worlds, my people should have been turning on the power to the portal. That would have sped up our journey. Something is wrong."

Ryan looked at Davyx. "Huh?"

Davyx gave a frustrated growl. "I told Te'riyla to have our team get a few fusion drives and energy couplers. Hook them to the portal, and in three days, turn them on twice a day for an hour."

"Ah, I recall now," Ryan said. "The last time we traveled, it was a blink of an eye. Two weeks... Maybe there's a delay or an issue with the Space Gate, and that's why Kat isn't right

behind us.”

“Positive believer, Warden Hunt,” the woman said.

Ryan sighed. “Please, I’m not a Druid, and call me Ryan. Now, who are you? One of those magic wielders or something? The statue kind of looks like you.”

The woman bobbed her head. “No, I like Warden Hunt, and you are close. Here, I am more of a goddess. Your actions brought me out of my slumber. Already, many have flocked to me, recalling the olden days.”

“Okay, so I guess you’re on the side of good, but when you’re not here, who are you?”

“I will not go into details, but not all angels like being angels. Some, in your archaic knowledge of things, branch out after what you would call ‘falling.’”

“Oh boy. Not another one.” Ryan held up a hand. “Please, let’s skip the religious stuff. Can you help us or not?”

The goddess eyed him. “Blunt. Few mortals would talk to a supreme being like that. However, the Night Stalker is alive, and her lair lies south of here.”

Davyx stepped forward, rifle rising slightly. “I have neither the time nor the patience for this nonsense. If you are that supreme, why not stop her yourself or pop us there?”

The goddess stood and straightened her robe. “There are rules, even for the nonmortals. I help as much as I can, but it is up to the mortals to figure things out. I can supply powers and information. As of now, I can only supply information.”

Ryan smirked. “Let me guess. Without the right quantity of worshipers, your powers are limited. A little trade-off for no longer being an angel. You now have to work for it.”

The goddess gave a slight nod. “All wishes come at a cost. You are correct. To be what I am, I must earn that status. My poor choice in worlds. Nevertheless, here is my guidance. Find someone to guide you south, but be warned. Other nonmortal entities are beginning to wake. Some are not friendly. I sense a powerful being is already being summoned by its followers, and it is paid with blood.”

Davyx looked at Ryan. “I said I would help you, little human, but you left out a few things.”

Ryan shrugged. “Welcome to my world, where nothing is easy, and the GPS leads you right into oncoming traffic or a cornfield.”

“What?”

“Never mind, just old talk.” Ryan turned back to the goddess. “So, that’s it?”

“Pretty much.” The goddess stepped away and turned back. “Some things you should be aware of, Warden Hunt. You are a Warden in a land that has not had one in a very long time. Be careful whom you trust, and since you rebooted this integrated world, the land is still in a chaotic flux, as you can tell by the odd storms. Until it settles down, magics may not work as intended, or things of old might be awakened.”

“Joy. Thanks for the heads-up.”

“And one more thing?” She pointed at Davyx.

A small glowing ball of light shot toward him. Davyx brought his rifle up, tracking it, but

the orb curved midflight and slammed into his face. He stumbled back, shaking his head, and surged forward, rifle coming up. A deep, chesty growl rumbled from the wolf, stopping him cold.

“What was that for?” Davyx asked.

“Now you can understand the common tongue of this world, or what Ryan would consider his English human language. Consider it a gift. You are on your own with the other languages.” She smiled, moved to her wolf, and disappeared.

Davyx growled. “Meddling goddess.”

“Now say that in my native English language,” Ryan asked.

Davyx thought for a moment, his mouth moved a few times, making odd sounds like a baby learning to speak, and finally said in English, “Meddling goddess.”

“I understood that. It’ll make things easier for people here to understand you.”

“Well, good for me. Magics, blood rituals, and immortal beings and creatures. Te’riyla will never believe this. So, Warden, where do we go from here?”

“Like the beginning of any adventure game, we hit the tavern and get some information.”

“Drinking? Never expected that from you, but it’s a good start. Lead on, Warden.”

Ryan sighed, and they headed down the cobbled path.

Chapter Three - The Blind Cyclops

Ryan led the way to town. The river near the destroyed stone bridge wasn't raging as it had been the last time he was here, and they crossed without much trouble. He didn't bother surveying the area. He'd just been here, and the layout was burned into his memory from the Dungeon and Dice module he'd played in his first life.

If he hadn't already been here with Kat and Vicki, he would've thought he was dreaming. LARPing and rolling twenty-sided dice never prepared him for the real dangers of a fantasy world. When you get hit, it really hurts.

Instead of sneaking in as he had done before, the two men followed the path directly into town. Ryan expected it to look mostly the same, but it wasn't.

Makeshift gallows lined the town's entrance, lashed together from rough beams, five on each side. Some bodies had been up long enough for the clothes to hang wrong and the skin to darken. Others still swayed in the afternoon breeze like they'd been strung up only hours ago. Ryan recognized a few tabards from the queen's army. Two more wore what had once been fine clothing. Their faces were beaten, swollen beyond recognition, and dried blood crusted their shirts. Ryan's stomach tightened, and he forced his eyes forward and kept walking.

Davyx unslung his rifle. "Should I be worried?"

"Not sure yet, but I'm guessing the locals are taking revenge on their previous rulers and they're not holding back. Tread carefully."

They moved past the swinging bodies, their noses twitching from the smell of decay. People rushed here and there, and the sounds of construction echoed from buildings that had been left broken not long ago. Fresh timber, piles of stone, and freshly made mortar were being unloaded from wagons. The town was rebuilding fast, while trying to bury what had happened under the Cyber Queen's rule.

Heads turned as people noticed them. Ryan's armor and gear marked him as out of place, and Davyx looked like trouble even when he stood still. Some stopped to point and whisper, while others scurried away. They slowed as men with shields and shortswords approached them.

Davyx nudged Ryan and tipped his chin upward. Ryan followed Davyx's eyes and spotted two crossbowmen on a rooftop, both already braced behind the low edge, watching them.

"You two!" a guard shouted. "Stop where you are!"

Ryan raised his hands and kept them there. "We're not here to cause any trouble. We're heading to the tavern to get a drink, and then we'll be on our way."

Another guard moved in beside the first, eyes never leaving Davyx. "The big one is of a kind I have not seen."

Davyx gave a low warning under his breath, and the guards tightened their grips on their swords.

A voice from a nearby building broke the tension. "Leave them be!"

Everyone turned to see a young woman standing there, and Ryan's face lit up. The girl they'd met on their first night here. She'd been malnourished back then, and suffering from

Tourette's syndrome, her body jerking and twitching in ways she couldn't control. She thought she was possessed by something evil. Kat had argued against interfering with the locals, but after scanning the girl and understanding her condition, she changed her mind and cured her with a simple injection.

"Apothecary Emelyne," a guard said. "They're outsiders, look at their clothing, and the big one is not human."

"Outsiders, no." Emelyne pointed at Ryan. "That is the man who faced the Night Stalker, who the bards tell stories of in the tavern. His companion, the Cleric Kat, is the one who cured me."

"The-the returned Warden," said a guard, stumbling over his words.

The guards' tension eased. One waved his hand downward, and the crossbowmen went back to keeping watch.

"My apologies, Warden. We were not aware," said a guard.

Ryan held his hands out. "No worries, and my name is Ryan Hunt. You can call me Ryan."

"That would not be proper, Warden Hunt."

Ryan sighed and shook his head when Davyx leaned in. "Don't let the praise go to your head."

"Fine," Ryan said. "I appreciate the help and will leave a special note at the tavern that drinks for all of you are on me."

The guards grinned, slammed their fists to their chests, and headed off to continue their patrol.

Ryan turned to Emelyne with a big smile at the sight of a familiar face. The young woman was still wearing the tactical jacket he had given her. "So, your name is Emelyne. I never did get it the last time we met."

"It is. Both of you, please come in and talk for a bit. I thought I would never see you again, Warden Hunt."

They followed her into the building, which was set up like a mercantile. A long counter stretched across the center, with mostly empty shelves lining the wall behind it. A sparse collection of potions and ingredients sat on the few occupied spaces. To the far right, an opening led to a back room.

Ryan walked over to lean on the counter, while Davyx positioned himself near the window, keeping watch.

"So, how did you end up being an apothecary and opening a store so fast?" Ryan asked.

"It wasn't planned. I took off with the pouch of gold you gave me. On my journey back here, I passed out. When I woke, I became aware of the plants around me and the knowledge of how they interacted. Cleric Kat's divine being must have taken an interest in me, so I decided to pursue the healing arts like her."

Davyx turned from the window. "Specific plants, when mixed correctly, can assist with healing. I have seen it in my travels."

Ryan shrugged. "I was never into alternative medicines, but if it works, it works. And I guess the gold helped to get the store going."

"It did. By the time I arrived back here, word had already spread that the queen had fallen and the Night Stalker was defeated. There were stories of blue fire seen in the old burial grounds during the great battle. I knew it had to be you. The tavern keeper took control of the town from the queen's governor and became the one in charge."

"Let me guess. The old governor swings in the breeze?" Davyx asked.

Emelyne looked out the window. "He does, and no one was sad to see him go."

Davyx grinned. "Good."

Ryan slapped his hands together. "So, you were able to buy the building?"

"Yes, the tavern keeper let me purchase my own building, and I splurged on a bed and clean sheets." Emelyne smiled and wiped a tear from her eye. "It's the first time I've had a place to call home. All thanks to you."

Ryan lifted his hands, unsure what to do when Emelyne quickly hugged him. Eventually, he put his hands lightly around her and returned the gesture.

"How quaint," Davyx said.

Ryan gave him a look.

Emelyne broke the hug and took a step back, her expression changing to serious as she cleared her throat. "Warden Hunt," she said, "why are you here?"

"The Night Stalker was defeated but not killed. My companion Davyx and I are hunting it, and we need information on where to start."

"That is beyond my knowledge, but I am sure someone in the tavern will know. Follow me."

"About time," Davyx said.

The Blind Cyclops was the town's only tavern. Two weeks ago, it had been a haven from the Night Stalker during the evening hours with guards at the door and barred windows. A place where the wealthy and those who knew the owner could party all night and stay safe.

Ryan had bribed his way through those doors so he, Kat, and Vicki could get some answers. This was where they met a rogue named Farlow the Magnificent and his apprentice Jayde, both instrumental in taking down the Night Stalker, also known as the Cyber Queen, the ruler of the land. Almost no one knew they were the same being.

The takedown hadn't been easy. After the Cyber Queen's ship crashed on this world, she managed to survive for many centuries and ruled as their queen after conquering all the known kingdoms. She had found a way to hack the main system that controlled the land, making her all-powerful and the local population easy to rule over.

The key to stopping her was a set of ancient pendants carried by Ryan, Farlow, O'Peka, and the professor. Together, they used them to access the land's main system and reboot it.

Once the Cyber Queen fell and the land reset, magic returned, though it was really

ancient technology that made the world seem mystical.

Before the group left, the control system asked Ryan its final question: whether the people of the land should be allowed to evolve. He told the system AI to step back and let the people evolve rather than remain trapped in a fantasy world. Something that could take hundreds of years, but for now, the world was still mystical.

A sweet melody caught their ears as they entered. On a small stage, a woman was performing on a mandolin and humming an enchanting tune. The tavern wasn't as busy as it had been the last time Ryan was here, but it was still daytime. A few people hung about here and there. Two scruffy-looking men appeared to be negotiating over something in a bag. In a corner, a small group huddled, whispering, eyes darting to check the room, while others told wild tales over tankards of drink and a hot meal.

Ryan, Davyx, and Emelyne could feel the eyes following them as they approached the bar. Davyx's eyes fixated on the head of a Cyclops with a missing eye mounted above the center of the bar.

"That must have been a great hunt," Davyx said, his sharp teeth showing.

"It was," said the old barkeep, easing back a step toward the far end of the bar, "or so the story goes."

There was a brief silence as the barkeep eyed them.

Ryan glanced around. More people were watching them now, and the music had stopped.

He looked back at the barkeep. "You can let go of whatever weapon you're reaching for. We're just looking for some information."

"I can vouch for them," Emelyne said.

"And I can as well," said an older woman.

She stepped through a curtain beneath the Cyclops head, moving like a seasoned warrior. High black boots and a loose sword belt blended into fitted black breeches, with a white ruffled tunic standing out against the dark. Gray hair was pulled back tight, and her face had the weathered lines of too many roads.

There was a time, Ryan thought, when this woman broke plenty of hearts. And maybe she still does.

People looked, saw who it was, and went back to their drinks. The bard strummed the mandolin and picked up where she had left off.

"You're the owner from the upper window after we battled the Night Stalker," Ryan said. "I never got your name or the chance to thank you for the food after the battle."

"I'm Mavrene Stonebrook, tavern keep and retired traveler. You can call me Mav, Warden Hunt. And your friend here is...?"

The music faltered, and a few patrons froze, cups half-raised.

"This is Davyx, and why is everyone staring?"

"Because you're the one who defeated the Night Stalker and brought down the queen," the bard said. "A big huzzah for the Warden!"

Tankards rose, and the patrons gave a loud "Huzzah!"

Ryan blushed and waved his hands downward until the cheering faded into laughter and murmurs. “Everyone, you do know the Night Stalker and the queen are one and the same. Right?”

Patrons exchanged looks. Confusion moved through them in a ripple, then a few slow nods started as people stitched the story together the way stories always got stitched in taverns. Eventually, they went back to their business as if they had learned nothing new.

“Follow me to the table in the back corner,” Mav said, leading them. “It’s best to talk away from others.” She held her stare on the two scruffy men as they settled into their seats, then she shifted her attention back to Ryan and Davyx.

Servers rushed over with cooked meats and mead as they got comfortable.

Ryan leaned his adventurers backpack against the wall, and Davyx didn’t hesitate to tear into the meat. Emelyne waited until Mav took a drink before grabbing for her tankard.

“So, Warden,” Mav said, “what brings you back?”

“They’re looking to finish off the Night Stalker and need information,” Emelyne said.

Ryan nodded. “That’s correct. My companion and I are here to hunt the creature and kill it. If it’s allowed to live, it’ll cause havoc across the land.”

Mav leaned back and took a drink of her mead, her eyes never leaving Ryan’s. “What you announced earlier—I had my suspicions they were the same thing. A queen coming to power and ruling long before I was even born, and a dark creature that hunted the night.”

Davyx set his empty cup down, and the server rushed over to refill it. “Ryan, be honest with the woman, or we’ll be here all day with you side-stepping a lower civilization.”

“Fine,” Ryan said, turning his attention back to Mav, who now squinted her eyes at him.

“We’re not from here. We’re not even of this world.”

Emelyne’s eyes widened.

“Emelyne,” Mav said. “Take your food and drink and head back to your store. Some discussions are left to a few.”

“Yes, Mistress Mavrene,” Emelyne said, then looked over to Ryan. “Warden Hunt, thank you again. If you need any healing, come find me. I owe you.”

“I appreciate that.” Ryan fished out a few silver ingots and handed them to her. “Before you go, can you let the barkeep know these are for the guards? I promised them drinks.”

Emelyne took the ingots. “I will.”

“And one more thing. I think you should rebrand yourself Cleric Emelyne. It has a better ring to it.”

Emelyne smiled and headed back toward the bar.

Mav was the first to talk once Emelyne had left. “Best certain things stay with certain people. Some folks don’t know what to do with the truth.”

“Understood,” Ryan said. “But I guess gold talks. When I first met Emelyne, she was sick and starving on the streets.”

A sly grin crossed Mav’s face. “The girl now has value, and not being ‘possessed’ helps.” Ryan rolled his eyes.

Mav reached out and tapped Ryan's arm, her fingers testing the lightweight combat armor. It didn't have the cold bite of metal. Her eyes narrowed. "I figured you two were portal travelers. Your clothing, that hand cannon of yours, and your magics are unique. Not of this land or any land that I know of."

"How do you know of portals?" Ryan asked.

"Warden, I've traveled far and wide. Seen things and read various old parchments before they could be confiscated and destroyed."

"Then you know the Night Stalker is also not of this world," he said.

Mav shook her head. "It makes sense now, and why you're the one meant to stop it." She flicked her gaze toward Davyx. "Your friend here doesn't look to carry the same passion."

Davyx looked up from his second plate of food. "It's a noble cause, but the Warden here owes me money. If he dies, I don't get my commission."

Mav laughed. "A true business owner at heart." She held up her mug, and Davyx clanged his against hers. Mav took a long drink, then set the mug down and looked back at Ryan. "So, hunters. What is it you need?"

Ryan sighed. "The hard part. Where to find the Night Stalker?"