

Phandagron Chronicles: The Ninja and the Paladancer

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Chapter 1

The wyvern

As they entered the old, dark, seemingly abandoned building, they both wondered if they arrived at the right spot. Quietly they made their way upstairs, holding their hands tightly. Not that it would matter anyway. Even though the place seemed old, the stairs weren't squeaking under the weight of their feet. Slowly, silently, they climbed the stairs. If they did it more quietly, well, it would just be a bit more quiet. No human being could be completely silent.

They finally made their way upstairs. They only had one lantern to light the place, and surely it wasn't enough to see everything clearly. This place was clearly abandoned, as there was no furniture present here. Slowly, they moved down the hallway, until they came upon a room with more doors.

Suddenly, they heard something. Quickly they moved their lantern to see where the sound was coming from. A closet door opened, and out there was a hideous beast, a monster, the one big nightmare they were hoping they would never ever meet. It was more hideous than a troll, more dangerous than a bog beast, it was. . .

"Oh god dammit, Clint," Tea said to the figure appearing from behind the walls.

But I think I'm moving a bit too fast here. Let me start from the beginning, in a small village, on a small planet called Phandagron, situated between Warget and that other planet we should never mention ever. It was several decades ago, when the floating city of Order wasn't as popular as it is now, where times were. . . pretty much the same as they are now, but it was earlier than now. Obviously.

It was in Koki Village where two girls became best friends. Their friendship started when a very young girl with dark hair approached another girl, around the same age, with blonde hair. You see, this blonde haired girl was a shy girl, who didn't get along with the other kids. The dark haired girl however, wasn't as shy, and happily played with the rest.

"Hi," the dark haired girl said. "My name is Tea. Tea Cha. What's your name?"

The blonde haired girl remained silent for a while, then softly said, "I'm Delta."

"Hi Delta," Tea said. "Wanna play?"

And play they did. What? Did you expect some elaborate story on how they

became friends? That's not how real life goes. Real life is always simple, like a flower. Flowers are small and gentle, and most of the time smell right, except they die when you don't nurture them well. Also, they survive by photosynthesis, so I guess that's where the comparison stops.

Tea and Delta quickly became best friends, sharing the good times and the bad times. But alas, like I said, friendship is like a flower. What do you say? Life is like a flower? What fool would state-oh right, never mind. Anyway, friendship is something you'd have to handle with care. Sure, best friends can say a lot more to each other than regular friends, but even that wouldn't last forever, so after a huge fight, they both broke off their friendship, and went their own way. There might be one point in time where their friendship was already put to the test, though, and it would be the start of their falling out.

Now to properly tell you their tale, I might need to remind you of certain facts about Phandagron. You know, just in case you aren't exactly from Phandagron. You see, like the other planets floating around in the same ellipsis, Phandagron has a certain trait, a certain style of life. Nobody exactly knows why this is, but it just is. Everybody knows that Landbox is the planet of opportunities, where cities are formed and entertainment is created. It's common knowledge that you should be on Craneus for the latest technological development, or just for any kind of knowledge. Wars have been started on Warget, and will always have wars. The dark industrial planet called Zholhu will always be shrouded in a mist of mysteries and horror. And... Well, nobody knows what exactly is special about K.O. Ken. But Phandagron, this planet, it's the most wonderful of all. It's the only planet where you can find marvelous creatures and where magic flourishes. Sure you can move these creatures to other planets, and sure you can use magic outside of Phandagron, but you'll always know that Phandagron is the place where they belong. And yes, Zholhu might have the best schools, Craneus might be the best technology, and maybe Phandagron might still be a place where people live in huts that are only warmed with fireplaces and lit with candles, but it's the only place with this much beauty, not to mention it's a great place to adventure.

Tea and Delta were only eight years old when they wandered off while playing games. It wasn't unusual for them to wander off, it's what they've done many times, mostly in the nearby forest, but they always stayed close to the village, at least within hearing distance, and it wasn't until they noticed their village was only a speck that they realized that they went too far. Seeing as they were kids though, they were curious about what lied beyond.

Of the two, Tea was always the one who took more risks, while Delta always stayed rational, thinking things through. Delta also wasn't as brave as Tea, but she always would follow Tea around, even though Tea was the more agile one, being able to climb any tree in seconds.

"Maybe we should go back," Delta said.

"No way!" Tea said. "We've come this far already. I wanna know what's over this hill."

"But what if something happens to us?"

"Don't worry, Delta, nothing can happen to us. Besides, if we would ever get in a tight spot, I could use my wicked ninja skills to get us out."

They decided to move along, up the hill. When they finally reached the top, they were amazed by the view. Trees as far as the eye can reach, with some mountains in the background. The forest seemed bigger and more lush, perhaps even more dense, than the one near their village. Quickly Delta noticed that there was a path leading straight into a forest.

“Tea, look!”

“Wow, amazing find, Delta. Now I wonder, who would put that road there?”

“I don’t know, but if someone has built that path, it surely wouldn’t be that dangerous.”

They quickly made their way down to the path, into the forest. It was cold, due to all the trees blocking most of the sunlight. They wore light clothing, so they held each other close, hoping to keep each other warm.

“I don’t like it here,” Delta said.

“Yeah, let’s go back,” Tea said.

Just then they noticed an abandoned caravan, probably left over from a raid. Needless to say, it was empty, save for some ripped pieces of cloth from the tent itself, and some broken weapons.

“Nice,” Tea said, while taking some of the broken weaponry. “Take this,” she said, taking some of the larger pieces of cloth and throwing it to Delta.

“What am I supposed to do with this?” Delta asked.

“Wrap them around you,” Tea replied, “that way you wouldn’t feel so cold.”

Delta wrapped the cloth around her. “I look ridiculous,” she said.

“Well, tough luck. Either you’ll be cold or you’ll look ridiculous, it’s your choice.”

She begrudgingly agreed. Tea meanwhile took some pieces of cloth and bound them on a stick.

“What are you going to do with that?” Delta asked.

“I’m making a torch,” Tea replied. “All I need now is something that’s flammable, but doesn’t combust quickly, and something to light this thing up.”

“I don’t think we’ll find either here.”

“That’s why we need to keep moving.”

“But I thought we were going back.”

“We’re going to, after I finish this torch.”

It got darker and darker, the forest becoming denser and denser, unnaturally even, and they held each other tighter, not because it was getting colder, which it did, but because they were scared. Even Tea realized this wasn’t one of her brightest ideas.

“Can we go back now?” Delta said.

“Yeah, let’s go back,” Tea replied.

They turned around, but because it got so dark, they didn’t realize they strayed off the path.

“Where’s the path?” Tea said.

“I don’t know.” Delta said. “Are we lost?”

“Of course not, we just got off track.”

“So we’re lost.”

“We just need to keep going. Maybe we’ll find the path again.”

“That’s the complete opposite of what you’re supposed to do in this situation.”

“Well, we don’t have a lot of options, do we?”

“We could just go back the way we came. You just want to explore this forest more.”

“No I don’t. I’ll prove it to you, let’s go back the way we came.”

“Which is?”

At this point they both knew they were lost. Luckily, it didn’t take Tea long to come up with a plan.

“Maybe if I climb up a tree, I could try and figure out the closest way to the edge of this forest. I’m sure we’re not that far.”

Even before Delta could speak, though, Tea already made her way up, jumping from branch to branch, quickly reaching the top. And just as quickly, she descended, pointing in a direction.

“That way.”

Tea was right, with each step they made in that direction, the forest became less dense, and they could finally see a little where they were heading again, but that didn’t help their feelings about this place, as it became much grimmer. Among the giant trees blocking the sunlight, they could see dead trees, burnt trees, some still standing, most lying on the ground.

“Hey look,” Tea said. “I found some sticky sap. Perhaps that’ll burn!”

She dipped her torch in the substance, until the cloth was fully drenched.

“You should have tested it out, you know,” Delta said.

“Well, it’s too late for that now,” Tea said.

With that, Tea marched along, with Delta closely behind her. But as they went further, Delta could hear a faint hissing. It wasn’t close by, but it was there.

“Tea, could you hear that?”

“What? I don’t hear anything.”

“I hear something hissing.”

“It’s just insects, you scaredy pants! Now let’s move on before it gets dark!”

But the hissing only got louder, to the point that Tea couldn’t ignore it. By that point it was already too late. As they stopped to hear what the sound was, it got even louder, moving closer, until they could see some trees moving. The smell of wood burning was now also present. Tea and Delta could only watch and wait while the thunderous sound grew closer.

There, from behind the trees, they could see a wyvern coming at them. In a reflex, they both jumped in different directions, only narrowly missing the beast storming at them. Delta ran one direction, drawing the attention of the wyvern, who turned towards her and opened her mouth.

“Duck!” Tea screamed, and just when Delta jumped down, the wyvern blew out a blast of fire hot enough to incinerate even an ogre within a second, the blast just barely missing her. After the wyvern was done, Tea jumped right at Delta and picked her up, after which they both ran away. They both knew however that the wyvern was faster, so they had to disable it for a while, perhaps even kill it.

“Take this,” Tea said to Delta, still running away from the monster. Delta took one of the broken weapons, while Tea took some smaller shards and threw them at the beast, all hitting it, but none doing any visible damage.

“Let’s split up,” Delta said, and she ran another direction, while Tea headed for the trees again. While Tea prepared for another attack, Delta ran around, looking for something useable, something that would give her the same or similar agility as Tea. The only thing she could find at the moment was a long, straight branch,

which looked sturdy and was strong enough to hold her weight. She quickly picked it up and rolled away, just as the wyvern passed her.

Tea noticed it, and at that point she jumped off her tree, onto one of the wyvern's wings, using a broken blade to make a tear in it. This made the wyvern flinch, giving Delta enough time to use her stick as a pole and give the wyvern a kick in the face, which, surprisingly, was pretty effective, although it might have had something to do with the fact that her foot hit the beast's eye. This kick however was enough to make the beast spit out a sticky goo, one with the same consistency of the substance Tea dipped her torch in. The flammability of that goo was confirmed when the beast coughed out a small flame and the goo caught flame in an explosive way, blowing Delta away.

"Delta!" Tea screamed. Luckily Delta was okay, and she quickly got up as Tea ran towards her.

"The torch," Delta said. "The sap it's drenched in, it's explosive. You should get rid of it."

"I've got a better idea," Tea said. "Distract it for me, I've got a plan."

The beast recovered shortly after, and was ready to go after Delta. She however used the stick to launch herself upwards, on top of the beast's head, where she swiftly planted the broken sword in its head. It wasn't enough to kill it, as the blade wouldn't reach that far in, but it did cause a reaction on the wyvern, as it was now wildly moving around, flailing Delta in all directions. She wouldn't let go, though, and when the beast wasn't moving so badly, she let go and jumped off the beast. She however didn't count on the beast whipping her with its tail, which sent her flying for a short distance. She didn't break anything, but she felt she couldn't go on anymore. At this point, the wyvern opened its mouth again, ready to shoot another blast. Just then, Tea jumped in front of it, and threw the torch inside the mouth of the wyvern.

Suddenly, a huge explosion was heard, and when that silenced, Delta was relieved to be alive, only to hear the blood curdling scream of her best friend. When she made her way to Tea, she could see what happened. The blast blew up the creature's head, but with that, it flung all its chemicals inside it in all direction, with some of it hitting Tea's face.

After they reached the town, both Tea and Delta were treated for their wounds, and even though their parents weren't happy with what they did, and that, by the way, was an understatement, they did feel a sense of pride that their daughters had slain a beast, and a wyvern no less. However, it wasn't all well. Even though both recovered from their wounds, Tea was now permanently scarred on one side of her face. But it was obvious this entire experience marked them both. Tea became much less impulsive, and even though you couldn't tell by Delta's behavior, it really affected her from the inside.

As years progressed, Delta became a bit more open, more willing to take risks, and even though Tea lost her impulsiveness, she would still tag along with Delta, and although she always enjoyed their adventures together, she never took initiative. She also hid her scar behind her hair, making only half of her face visible. It did help maintaining her confidence in herself, but it also caused her to rarely be intimate with anybody.

It's also because only half of her face was visible that she was able to still get asked on dates, as she always told Delta. To Tea, hiding her face was important, which is why, when Delta exposed her scarred face, their friendship ended.

After this incident, Tea left the school she was on at the time, pursuing her dreams of becoming one of the best ninjas. At the same time, Delta pursued a career as a paladin.

Chapter 2

Divergent paths

She had traveled for weeks, but finally she found it. Beyond the mountains, deep within the jungle, lied the Oukora Shrine, an ancient shrine built by ogres. It was known for residing near a secret training ground for ninjas, although one can say it's debatable whether it's a secret or not.

As she approached the shrine, she could sense that something was about to happen. In one swift movement, she made a quick turn, catching a dart that was supposed to be hitting her. At that moment, more darts appeared around her, and she dodged each and every one of them, running, jumping, ducking, using the environment to stop incoming darts.

Unfortunately she didn't anticipate that the entire environment was shrouded in a mist of sleeping powder. When she woke up, she found herself in a bed, with an ogre standing besides her.

"Where am I?" Tea said.

"I think you know where you are," the ogre said. He took a chair, and sat besides the bed. "I'm very impressed with you. We all are. It's rare that a non-ogre shows that much skill. Normally we would have thrown most non-humans out, but it's people like you we keep around."

Tea looked around. Even though it was really silent, she could hear the faint sounds of footsteps, blades moving through the air, sounds normal humans wouldn't be able to hear. She had trained her ears to pick up these faint sounds, though.

"Now tell me," the ogre said. "What's your name?"

"I'm Tea. Tea Cha."

"Tea Cha. I assume you are here to become a better ninja, right? What is your motivation to become one?"

"It's my life dream. I mean, I've trained all my life."

"Is that all?"

After a short paused, she nodded.

"Well, that works for us," the ogre said. "Remember though, that the path of a ninja isn't an easy one. It might take years, but it might also take a lifetime to be of a high rank, and even though you show a lot of potential, it's still very raw."

"That's why I am here, I was always self-taught, going from films and comics, even books."

"We'll see how far your current skills go. Come, let me give you a tour."

Tea got out of bed, and felt the cold floor under her feet. She then noticed a pair of slippers next to the bed.

“They’re yours now, we’ve customly made it for you.”

“How long have I been out?”

“An entire day, give or take a few hours. Our stuff is very potent. Not deadly, but potent enough to knock out a hydra. Oh, before I forget, let me introduce myself. The name is Kou.”

As they were walking through the hallway, Kou told Tea the history of his race.

“I’m sure that by now you’ve read the Ninja Ogre series, or at least watched the movies. As you might know, they take place after a certain war between orcs and ogres, with tensions between both races still present. What not many know is what the true nature of this war was.

“You see, the war between races, also known as the Urudo Oukora War, began the moment orcs and ogres came upon this universe, born on two separate sides of our home planet. Back then, the two races were raised from a literal genetic pool. It initially was a battle for survival, which, after centuries of strife, turned into a battle for dominance.

“Both orcs and ogres were initially evenly matched. However, while us ogres began growing in size to give us an upper hand with strength, orcs maintained their size, which gave them more of an edge when it came to speed and agility. Combine this with the fact that they were technologically superior, being able to craft better weapons, and you could see that our race was no match unless we learned to adapt.

“This is how ogres, despite our size, would become great ninjas, and even long after the war had passed, the tradition still stands. We became more stealthy out of necessity, but now that the war has been long over, we train anybody we would find worthy, even orcs. Now I have to say, not every academy is as strict as this one, but there’s a reason why we currently have to.”

“And that reason is?” Tea asked.

“It has mostly been a sort of tradition. This academy has always strived to become one of the best in the entire Digit-5 solar system, and to maintain that quality, we have to set barriers, skill gates to only let in those who would be worthy enough, who could keep up with this quality.”

“I understand, I guess.”

They stood in front of a door.

“Are you ready?” Kou said. Tea nodded, and when Kou opened the door, Tea’s mouth dropped from amazement. Everywhere she looked she saw various training equipment, all moving around, but seemingly nobody there to handle them. Only just the softest shuffles were heard.

“This place seems empty, right?” Kou said.

“It does,” Tea said. “I can still slightly hear sounds though, but I can’t see anybody here.”

Kou smiled. “Well, it appears your hearing is excellent. With a little bit of training you can localize your targets just by listening, and if we train your perception, almost nobody can sneak up on you without you knowing.”

“Will I be one of the best?”

“That will be completely up to you.”

It was the first day for Delta to be trained as a knight. She was nervous, as she was the youngest of them all, with her being only fourteen. But she didn't come this far for nothing. Once she went through this, she would be one step closer to being a paladin.

"Delta Omi."

"Present, sir!"

"So you're the girl who had slain a wyvern."

"Yes sir. With... some help."

"That's what I like, some good old fashioned teamwork. Everybody, keep that in mind. Teamwork is the most important thing. You cannot, I repeat, you cannot do everything alone, so don't try to be a hero. You are not a special snowflake. Now, let's move on."

There were quite a few candidates here, but Delta knew that not many would make it to the end. In general, you would rarely get kicked out for underperforming, you'd only have to redo the entire year, as knights were scarce. Most of the drop-outs left the barracks themselves, mostly because they couldn't handle the pressure. Now, this wasn't the best place to be trained as a knight per se, but it was the one she could afford while still having the possibility to become a paladin after her training was complete.

After the roll call was done, it was time for the first training. It was basically just doing laps and basic work-out. It wasn't a walk in the park though, it was tough. If someone didn't do his best, everybody had to suffer, and it happened to be that Delta just couldn't keep up with it all. This didn't really go well with the rest of the group, as this caused everyone to have to work harder. Needless to say, during lunch, nobody really wanted to talk to her, and during the other exercise courses she did even worse, bringing the anger of some of the group members. She was cast out of the group.

At night, when everybody went to bed, she got out and packed her stuff. Without making any noise she made it outside. It was a cold night, even though it was one of the warmer days of the year. But she knew she couldn't go on for the rest of the course of her training.

The next morning her bed was still empty. When the instructor called for her name, nobody replied. Some were clearly relieved that she left. It was a cold morning, and the sun was still hanging low. As everybody prepared for their morning workout, sounds could be heard at the obstacle course. While everybody was standing in line, the instructor went and took a look. What he saw there didn't really surprise him, but it still did give him a sense of pride.

The entire night, Delta was out to train by herself. After her encounter with the wyvern, she spent the rest of her youth at night, learning how to make short naps throughout the day so that she wouldn't be sleepy. It's why she could spend the entire night working on her condition as well as strength. Even though she was tired and her body felt broken, she just couldn't stop.

"Omi!" the instructor yelled to Delta, who was already climbing the hill. "Get down here!"

She was visibly tired, but nevertheless ran to the instructor as if she was full of energy.

"What is it, sir?"

"Do you think you can handle today's training regime?"

“Yes, sir!”

“No, I don’t think you can. However, I’ll give you two choices. Either you’ll hit the beds, I’ll tell the rest that you’ve fallen ill, or you’ll train with the rest, but if you do so, I’ll expect you to perform. You got that?”

“Yes, sir!”

The instructor was right, she couldn’t handle the training that morning, but she still did her best, and despite the fact that she was hurting all over her body, she performed well enough. After the morning training was over though, the instructor forced her to go to bed, or as he said, “The last thing I want are people who kill themselves over something that isn’t as important as their life.”

“Can I have breakfast first, sir?”

“Yes you can.”

When she arrived at the canteen, everybody started staring at her. She was about to reach for some bread, when one of her group members walked over her and threw her plate away.

“We don’t want you here,” he said.

“Hey!” another one said. “Stand down, right now!”

It was a young woman running towards her to help her out with her plate.

“Why are you defending her?” the knight in training said. “She’s keeping the rest down.”

“First of all, you shouldn’t be talking like that to one with an actual rank. Second, she’s still a human being.”

“Whatever,” the pupil said, as he walked away.

“Are you okay?” Rosalind said to Delta.

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“The name is Rosalind.”

At that point two other trainees came up to her.

“Hey,” one said. “I’m Jules, this is Clayth, and I guess you technically already met Rosa. I’ve heard what you did last night. That’s pretty impressive.”

“I agree,” Clayth said. “It shows courage and determination to still stay, even though you’re not nearly as far as the most of us when it comes to training. I assume you didn’t first become a squire, right?”

Delta shook her head.

“Well, I don’t think you’d really need that anyway,” Clayth said. “It’s still pretty impressive you managed to even survive an encounter with a wyvern, especially at that young age.”

“You heard about it?” Delta asked.

“Of course we did,” Rosalind, “Koki Village isn’t that far from where we live, in Zaendal.”

“Wait,” Delta said. “If you come from Zaendal, why aren’t you training there?”

“We’re actually on a tour, going through each barrack and academy where they train knights and paladins. We stay for a few weeks, and then head to the next to evaluate the quality there.”

“And you all do that for this reason? Why would you do that?”

“Orders from the king,” Clayth said. “It’s not so bad, really. If you want, you could tag along. We’ll make sure you’ll get the best education in becoming a knight.”

“Yeah,” Jules said. “Right now we’re all paladins in training, so we already know everything about knight stuff.”

Delta was stunned, she didn't expect this. "Well, thanks guys, but wouldn't I be a burden to you?"

"You've survived an encounter with a wyvern," Rosalind said. "Most adults won't come near such a fearsome creature, they'd rather run away. You survived an encounter and even managed to slay it."

"It was still with the help... With some help. Besides, don't I need a horse first?"

"Well, we could purchase a horse for you, and until then, you can hop along with one of us."

"I bet you one copper that she won't make it."

"Why don't I just hand you the copper, because we all know she won't make it."

"I'm not so sure about it, last time she made it halfway."

"Anybody could make it halfway. Even Loud Loka could make it, and she's really loud!"

Tea didn't really mind their laughter. This time she was certain she'd make it. Even though she was still a beginner, she was determined to finally beat the Fortrun test, a test that would simulate a siege to a fort. It basically consisted of sneaking past the gate through any means possible, and making it to the treasury without being detected. It was one of the slightly harder tests, but it was one that would allow Tea to learn certain advanced techniques.

She already knew where she couldn't go. She couldn't go up the wall, as it was too steep and there was nothing to hold on to due to the smooth surface, so she needed to go through the gates. This was the easy part, it's one of the first thing she learned since coming here to train. The next part was either trying to steal the keys to the treasury from one of the guards, represented by dummies that were remote controlled by other students, or pick the lock of the treasury. She would always go for the keys. Once that was done, she'd only have to reach the treasury, which lied across a hallway filled with non-lethal traps. This hallway was what most considered the halfway mark.

She first made it through the gate, by sliding alongside the wall, behind the guards. Once inside, she hid, until she found a dummy passing along with the keys, sneaking up on it to snatch them, all without alerting the dummies. Now came the hard part, the traps. Only this time she knew what to do. First, she took a few small rocks outside the hallway. She always figured why there would be so many small rocks even though it was a controlled environment, and realized that these might be part of the test itself. She used these rocks to activate the various traps by throwing the rocks at the hallway. And it worked, as they triggered and disabled various traps.

Now this was another crucial thing. She had to make sure these traps didn't trigger again after they've already been triggered, so she took another rock and aimed it just at the nearest triggered trap. If it didn't go off, she'd jump towards that rock, pick it up and throw it at the next. She continued it until she finally reached the end of the hallway.

She inserted the key, and turned. Nothing. The door wouldn't open. For a moment she was confused until she realized that...

She woke up again a few hours later, in her own bed. Apparently the door was rigged with a sleeping gas. She was mad. At first because she thought it wasn't fair, but then because she realized that she should have checked if the door was rigged or not. She then wondered why she would need to learn how to pickpocket and dismantle traps anyway. Those might be handy as a ninja, but weren't necessarily traits associated with them.

"Master Kou," Tea asked. "I know I shouldn't ask, but, why does the test involve pickpocketing and trap dismantling?"

Kou smiled. "What made you wonder?"

"Well, they're both handy skills, but they aren't really ninja skills. Our deal is stealth, pickpocketing is more for thieves, and I'm sure trap dismantling isn't really something that's associated with stealth."

"Maybe there are other ways to get to the goal," Kou said.

This made Tea think. "Master Kou, is it alright if I take a look at the test itself?"

"I can't see why not."

Tea knew she had to search for things that might clue her in on how to complete the test. She went through every detail. The test was pretty basic. There was a wall, a fake courtyard and a hallway with at the end the door to the treasury. She went back to her quarters, and tried to piece it all together.

The next day, she attempted the test again. She again went past the guards through the gate, except this time she went straight to the hallway. She noticed that the walls of the hallway were easily scaleable, so she used that to get past the traps. In those cases where she couldn't go on, she used a grappling hook. She then finally reached the door, where she peered through the keyhole. There was nothing special about the keyhole, except, it wasn't a regular keyhole. She then decided to push and pull the door, and after wriggling the door knob, she finally managed to open the door. The keyhole was a fake. Of course! Why would they need to lock the treasury anyway? It was already riddled with traps, and a keyhole would only be a minor inconvenience for thieves who already got this far.

Once she entered the treasury, she found a scroll, and after reading it, she realized that this was the reward she was looking for, the reward for completing the test, so she went back the same way, closing the door, going through the hallway, back outside. When she met up with her fellow students, they all congratulated her.

"Disappointing reward, right?" one of them asked. Tea did nothing but smile.

That night, while everybody was asleep, Tea was found in the kitchen, trying out the recipe she just found on the scroll. It was one of the few times she was able to smile again.

"You're the only one who actually appreciated this reward," Kou said to her.

"Oh, hello Master Kou," Tea said. "I was just feeling hungry, that's all."

Kou laughed. "You know, I have always been wondering. Why do you have your hair like that?"

"Oh, you mean those purple highlights? Those were magically applied on to my hair when I was a kid, they're pretty much permanent."

"You know what I mean, Tea. Why are you hiding that scar on your face?"

"You know about the scar?"

"Of course I do, everybody here does. It really isn't hard to see. That hair barely covers it up."

“Well, you know. I hide my scar because. . .”

“Because you’re afraid of what others think? Aside from you, this place is filled with ogre. Now I don’t want to talk bad about my own race, but did you really look at us? We’re not exactly the most beautiful race. Even our women look butt ugly.”

They both laughed.

“Another reason is though,” Tea said, “it has grown on me a little. It just makes me feel safe. I don’t know.”

“Well, I’m sure nobody would mind your scar.”

“Come on, you’re keeping the whole group down!”

“Yeah, it’s the fourth week already we have to do this!”

“It’s because of you that we won’t get actual training!”

She didn’t care about what other said. She did what she always did, doing her best, and in her spare time train some more. In the weeks following the first day, she began to realize that being a knight wasn’t just about having strength. She learned that you would have to have patience, wait for the right moment. There was a reason everybody had to do these basic exercises instead of doing things knights were supposed to do. She noticed this when observing the actual knights. Not just her new friends, but the other instructors as well. Instead of sitting around when they had nothing to do, they’d do things to keep themselves in shape. This of course included weapon practice, but also things like doing laps or strength training. This meant that the instructors have always intended the students to have them train harder, regardless of whether one would fall behind or not.

And sure, she didn’t like all the bullying that would happen around her, but she felt like she had to endure this. And the fact was, the group needed her. With her, they had a common enemy, which would boost their teamwork.

It was also the last week for her friends, after this week, she’d have to say goodbye to them. Even though she loved to hang out with them and train with them, she felt that she wasn’t ready for it yet.

“Guys, hear this out. There’s been a sighting of a beast within the territory of this barrack!”

“What kind of beast?”

“Who cares? If we slay it, we surely could be trained as real knights?”

Delta overheard this. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Yeah, and who asked you anything?”

“I just don’t—”

“Look, nobody wants to hear your opinion, so shut up or you’ll be sorry.”

“Whatever, I’m not the one getting killed here.”

That night, when everybody save for a select few were asleep, a small group of students snook out of the barracks, all geared up, ready to take on this beast. It wasn’t just cold, though, there was a thick fog, which made it hard to see far.

“Well, where is it?”

“Silence, maybe we can hear it.”

Everybody was silent, but for a long time, it seemed like nothing was there.

“That’s it, I’m going back.”

“Yeah, me too.”

Suddenly, a faint howl was heard, followed by a flare of light far in the distance.

“There!”

The group quickly sped to where the light was. When they got closer, they could hear growling. They knew they were close. Just then, the fog partially began to clear up, and they could now see a silhouette of something that seemed like a cross between a lion, a warthog and a bull.

They decided to attack it together, charge straight at it, until they realized the beast could breathe fire. After that came the realization that the beast was bigger than they expected, almost half as big as a wyvern. And as the group tried to flee, they came to realize that the beast was not only too fast for them, but also too smart, as the beast began cornering individuals. They were about to be toast, when all of a sudden the beast was distracted by something else.

It was Delta, who brandished a metal training lance.

“Run!” she screamed, as she began stabbing the beast in its legs, knowing it wouldn’t exactly wound it or even hurt it. Needless to say, the beast wasn’t too glad about that. As the beast tried to eat Delta, she jumped up, on top of its head. This gave the beast enough distraction for the group to be able to run back to the fort. It was a great struggle, and it required Delta’s full strength to even just hold on, but when she noticed everybody was safe, she jumped off the head, took the lance and began making her way back to the barracks.

She was fast, but the beast was faster. She didn’t mind though, because she had it exactly the way she wanted it. As the beast stormed at her, she ducked, and then held on to its belly. The beast stormed on for a while towards the barracks, until it realized Delta wasn’t there anymore. Right at that point when the beast was about to slow down, she let go, and slid on her back over the wet grass back to the barracks. Of course this didn’t bring her too far, but at least now she was closer to safety, and close enough for her to crawl back. Luckily, she didn’t need to crawl back for long, as the gates opened, and a horde of knights came out to chase away the beast.

The next morning, the inspector called the group together.

“Last night, some individuals have been sneaking out of the barracks on their own, attracting the attention of an unidentified beast. As you all know, leaving the barracks has been strictly forbidden. Now I don’t like to send people away, so I give you all a choice. Either I send the individuals home who have been sneaking out, or the one who has been responsible for this idea confesses, and only he or she will leave. The choice is up to you.”

“It was Delta, sir,” one said.

“Yeah, Delta came with that idea!”

Everybody began accusing Delta. She herself didn’t say anything, did nothing to defend herself.

“Everybody quiet!” the instructor yelled. “Delta, is that true?”

She remained silent.

“Very well, everybody’s dismissed. Go back to the dorms, and prepare for the next training. Omi, I need you to come with me.”

In the office, Delta was ordered to take a seat.

“Delta Omi. I can’t say that I’m happy about this situation. The only thing I can say is. . .”

He paused a bit, and then looked back at Delta.

“On one hand I’m proud of you. You didn’t fight back when everybody accused

you, even though none of it was true. It shows loyalty. On the other hand, you need to stand up for yourself. A knight has to be humble, yes, but there is a limit. Now I've been threatening with sending people home, but the thing is, I never intended to do that, not in this case. Yes, it was reckless of them to try and hunt this beast, but it's also a lesson they must learn, that eventually, there might be something too strong for you to handle. What you did there was noble, and it was even more noble that you took responsibility, but you really didn't have to."

The instructor sat down.

"Delta, I've heard about the offer. Rosalind and her group are excellent knights, they can teach you a lot more than me, and I think you're better off with them. This place purely trains your strength, but, well, you're not exactly the type of person whose strength is a strong point. I really think you should reconsider and join them."

"But. . ."

"I know you feel like you have a duty here, but I realize that this group doesn't have any form of teamwork, not even with a common enemy or scapegoat. I'm sorry I put you through all of this, but once you leave this place, they might realize it was never you who was the problem.

"I'm not saying you'll be the best knight, or that you'll even become a knight, but you also shouldn't give up on that dream, because once you do, you'll never reach your goal. And remember, being a knight isn't everything, you can achieve a lot when you do what you're good at."

Chapter 3

A brief reunion

Two years have passed. Both girls have become sixteen, and this would be the first time they would meet again.

Tea had been training to become a great ninja, and even though she wasn't nearly there, she decided to train her skills on the field. Even though she knew the other ogres would think she was a quitter, she decided it was best to leave. Master Kou once taught her that the beauty of life was that it wasn't perfect, there were always flaws.

"At the academy we teach you how to do things the 'proper' way, according to traditions. But this doesn't mean these ways are made for you. In the end, doing things the 'improper' way might work out for you better."

Before she left, Kou's son, Kalek, went to her.

"Father wanted you to have this," he said, giving Tea a pendant.

"Is that..."

"It's his soul gem. He said it would guide you through your adventures. That and you might want it more than I would."

Tea took it, and put it on. Kalek noticed a tear running over her face.

"Tea, I know you miss him. I miss him too, but he doesn't want you to grieve for too long."

She wiped her tear away. "You're right. It already has been too long."

"Anyway, here's a satchel of coins. It contains a few copper, some silver and some gold. Even if you won't be able to find work for a long time, you'll have enough to last."

"Thanks, Kalek. You're a good friend. Good luck running this place."

"I'll try as hard as I can to run it as my father has done."

"Maybe you can change some ways. I mean, you know what Master Kou always said."

Kalek smiled. "I know, and I hope it would cause some of us to finally get out every once in a while. It did do me a lot of good."

Tea took one last look, and recalled the wonderful things she had done here. Even though she was made fun of by everyone here, they all had respect for her, perhaps even more than for their own kind. Some even said that she would become great, perhaps greater than most of them. Tea already knew she would, or at least that she would die trying.

As Tea and her friend parted ways, so would Delta have to say goodbye to her friends.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Clayth said.

“I have to if I ever want to become one,” Delta said. “It isn’t cheap, you know, so I’ll need to take any opportunity I can get.”

“You know you can just train here,” Jules said. “I mean, there’s nothing wrong with choosing your direction, but this is an opportunity.”

“I know, it’s just that, I don’t think I’ll ever be ready to be a paladin, and the direction I want to go to seems to fit me best. Besides, I’ll still learn everything a paladin should, I just learn other things as well.”

“Well I think it’s a good idea,” Rosalind said. “The paladancer is one of the few hybrid classes that is partially paladin. And who knows, maybe you’ll eventually become a paladanzard.”

Delta was thrilled. “Yeah, I really can’t. It’s going to be awesome!”

As Delta began packing her horse, everybody said goodbye to her.

“Are you going by your old village?” Rosalind asked.

“I don’t think so,” Delta responded. “I mean, I do miss that place, but it would only make it harder for me to leave. Besides, I’ve already said goodbye to my parents yesterday.”

“Either way, you should always take care. Oh, and before I forget, I have something for you.”

Rosalind disappeared for a short while, then came back with a large box.

“Open it.”

Inside the box was a long rod-like lance. It almost looked like a pole, and it was exactly the kind she always wanted.

“Wow, thanks!” Delta said.

“I know you were going to save some money for one of these yourself, but since I’m basically sitting on huge piles of money, I just wanted to give you the best Zaendal has to offer. Although, truth be told, this one actually came from the city of Order.”

“So that’s what you were doing up there.”

Delta climbed on her horse, and looked back one more time.

“Thank you guys for a wonderful time.”

“See you again soon, kid,” Jules said.

As they all waved while she rode down the mountain where Zaendal resided, she thought back on everything she experienced, like the one time she finally managed to slay a great beast all by herself, or the slumber parties she was invited to. And that time she visited Koki Village for a few days and was asked out on a date by one of the lads. She was going to miss it all, but she also wanted to reach her goals.

Help wanted

Requesting help to retrieve a golden viola.
Will pay you a considerable sum of money
(open for debate), plus the spoils that

remain. I need someone who's stealthy and someone who is good with a weapon.

Ask for Garfield Kane.

PS: Ask the barman. In case you weren't sure who to ask.

"I'm looking for Garfield Kane," Tea said to the barman.

The barman pointed his finger. "He's right there, next to that blonde."

Tea looked around, and surely enough she saw a man standing next to a blonde. A blonde who looked very familiar, and when she came closer, she realized who it was.

"What are you doing here?" Tea said, a bit annoyed.

"Happy to see you too, Tea," Delta said. She knew from her tone that Tea still wasn't over it, and she herself was done with it as well.

"I can't help but notice you two—" Garfield said, before being cut off.

"I see you haven't changed that look," Delta said.

"And I see you couldn't have worn any less," Tea said.

"At least mine's functional. What use is that pluck of hair?"

"You know damn well why I wear it like this."

"All it does is obscure your vision."

"Okay," Garfield said, "this is getting a little bit awkward."

"And how is that 'armor' any useful?" Tea said, pushing Delta a bit. "Any arrow is a well-aimed arrow with that much exposed."

"For the record, I wear chainmail under this, and under that I wear a shirt made from the strongest spider silk. This stuff can even stop a bullet. And second, I wear this so that my movement won't be restricted. All that pluck of hair is doing is obscure your view."

Garfield had enough of this. "Ladies, ladies, don't you two want to earn money?"

"I want double if I have to work with her," Delta said.

"I want at least what she's getting," Tea said.

"Okay, you're breaking my crown jewels here, but sure, I'll do that. Heck, I'll double that if you two would just settle whatever you two had and not kill each other. In fact, let me just pay you half up front, so that I can just ditch you two if there's a chance I might get killed by either of you."

"I'm down with that," Delta said.

"How much am I getting again?" Tea said.

"Twenty silver," Delta said.

"Could have been worse. Couldn't you have worn just a little less to get some extra coins out of it, perhaps a gold?"

"Shut up."

"So where are we going to?" Tea asked.

“A goblin’s cave,” Garfield said. “Reliable sources told me a bunch of goblins were seen carrying a golden viola to this cave. Now, the viola is somewhere hidden in a chest, except I don’t know which chest.”

“So why do you need us?” Delta asked.

“I need someone to sneak in, and another one to distract the goblins, preferably by making them goblin shish kebab.”

“Thanks for the mental image.”

“Or any means to kill them. These are feral goblins we’re talking about, they spare nobody, not even children. Heck, there’s a bounty on the goblins of this cave, posted by goblins, I’ll split the pot when every goblin is exterminated.”

“Okay, wait,” Tea said. “If you want us to kill them all, why do you need me to sneak in?”

“That’s an excellent question,” Garfield said. “Right now I am without a weapon, and as a bard, I can seriously be of assistance with a musical instrument.”

“Eh, good enough answer. Next question. What are you going to do with that golden viola? It’s not like you can actually play on one, considering it’s made of gold.”

“Another good question, but you’ll just have to see.”

The job was simple enough. Tea had to sneak in, find the right key and chest, then bring back the viola. Delta would make sure the goblins were too busy fighting her.

For Tea, it wasn’t hard to find the key. All chests still had the keys in their locks. Apparently the goblins were too feral to even take the keys out of the lock. How they even got the objects inside the chest would forever be a mystery, though, or at least for the moment.

Meanwhile, Delta did some careful provocation, as she had never encountered a feral goblin before. She carefully walked towards the entrance, and threw a rock right at a goblin. It was a miss, but at least she got their attention.

One by one Tea opened the chests, while Delta began slicing feral goblins in half. When Tea finally found the right chest, she quickly ran back to Garfield.

“Thank you,” Garfield said. “Now let me show you what a true bard can do with a golden viola.”

He took the viola and bow, which then began to glow. As he was preparing to hold the instrument, he quickly ran towards a group of goblins and whacked the group with it, killing them.

“You’re right,” Garfield yelled, “golden violas are useless as instruments, but in the hands of a bard they can be an incredibly heavy weapon.”

“Doesn’t that dent it?” Tea said, while fighting off goblins herself.

“Magical golden viola,” Garfield replied.

Tea couldn’t help but thinking how stupid this quest was so far. But at least they got some actual action now, and they would even get paid for it.

As the last goblin hit the ground, they took their time to take their breath. Delta however noticed something.

“Are feral goblins supposed to move like that after they died?”

Garfield looked on in horror as he realized, “Necromancer.”

Now, any beginning adventurer would be thrilled to see something like this in action. Unfortunately for those, such an encounter would end badly. Fortunately for Tea and Delta, they weren’t beginners. You know, because they had slain a wyvern

once.

“Should we just run?” Delta said.

“Definitely,” Tea said.

As the three began to run, the feral goblins began to rise again, this time just as strong as they previously were. Possibly even a little bit weaker, because that’s how being undead works. I’m actually not sure why they opted to run away in the first place, and both Tea and Delta both thought the same thing, as they both turned around and restarted their fight again. They knew the necromancer could be anywhere from close to moderately far away, and they both bet on far away. Either way, once they would have the necromancer in sight, they’d run like the wind.

“I guess that explains the filled chests,” Tea said.

“Filled chests?” Delta said. “What’s in them?”

“Random treasure.”

“You mean more than the various piles of copper and silver lying around?”

While both of them were fending off the undead goblins, the two could clearly hear the frantic sound of a violin or a viola.

“Oh yeah,” they heard Garfield say, “and a true bard can actually play the golden viola.”

Suddenly a flare of light lit up the sky, and created a temporary artificial sun. Now, it’s true that it really doesn’t matter if there’s sunlight or moonlight, but a night sky does make an undead stronger, so by creating an artificial day sky, he tipped the battle in favor of Tea and Delta. It would also keep any necromancer away, as they draw most of their power from the night.

They finally arrived at the inn, and, as promised, Garfield gave them their coins, and both went on their way.

“I take it you don’t want to hang around?” Delta said.

“You’ve guessed correctly,” Tea replied. “I hope this will be the last time for us.”

“I sure hope so as well.”

They left, now as rivals, and parted ways. Or at least that was the intention. When both thought they were gone, they went back to the cave, to get the remaining treasure.

“What are you doing here?” they both said. “I was here first! Get lost!”

“The treasure is useless to you,” Tea said.

“I’ll be the judge of that,” Delta replied.

They both rushed in, Delta was already grabbing as many coins she could get, while Tea opened the chests she needed to open. Some contained jewelry, but she was only out for specific items. Needless to say, Delta took the rest.

When they finally had what they needed, they headed out of the cave. When the ground started to shake, they quickened their pace. They fullout ran away once the undead came from under the ground behind them.

“Screw this, I’m out of here,” Tea said, as she ninja-teleported away. Delta however had her own ace, as when she jumped off the cliff she was heading to, she used her lance to somewhat break her fall, and landed safely on her horse.

Chapter 4

New friends

In the following months Tea had been doing various jobs, mostly for the money, but sometimes just to improve her own skills. There were even moments when she wasn't taking any jobs, instead she would just sneak into caves or hideouts, because she could.

And then came her one true horror that would follow her for years to come. Or at least in the following years.

It was one of those split-the-loot cases, just a standard one. The notification was brief, basically just someone who needed a party to explore some dungeon. It said to meet him in front of the entrance at a certain time, which she did.

When she arrived, two other adventurers, mostly inexperienced, were already waiting. Tea considered making small talks with them, but she didn't really feel like it. After a few minutes, more adventurers would come, until eventually the one who summoned them arrived. His name was Clint Punchkick, which Tea thought was a pretty stupid name, but hey, who is she to judge, right?

"Okay guys, listen up! This dungeon is not a normal dungeon, it's what we call a random dungeon. Why is it random? Because this dungeon constantly changes shape, and its treasure consists of the belongings of previous adventurers, which means that there's a lot of treasure. I mean, that is, if the loot of my previous party is still there. Man, that was a close one, I was almost a goner! Also, a moment of silence for those who have fallen."

At that point almost all dropped out. Now, I'd like to point out that when a man starts a motivational speech like that, it should really make you think, how competent is he as a leader?

"Hey, where are you guys going! It's really not that dangerous! At least not for the first two floors, after that it's basically a deathtrap party."

Even more dropped out.

"Oh come on, it's not that bad! I was once in a group where most survived. Then again, most were missing a limb or two."

Almost all have now dropped out, except for Tea, who was facepalming all the way through his "motivational" speech.

"Well, it seems it's just you and me," Clint said. "Are you ready?"

"Will I ever be ready?"

"Nope," Clint said as he stepped inside the dungeon.

“That was a rhetorical question!” Tea yelled after him.

The first floor was pretty well lit, and all they could find were some giant rats. There were also some chests found, which contained just coppers, and not that many. Tea did find a ring or two, and some broken arrows, but nothing she could use herself.

The second floor was a bit more exciting. There were more giant rats, but also some giant bats. The loot still was rather abysmal, although a little bit better, and this time, for some reason, the creatures also dropped loot.

It got dangerous at floor three, as Clint said. The worst thing was that Clint just marched through everything, as if nothing was there, triggering traps where he went, and always, for some reason, barely missing them. Meanwhile, Tea had to dodge whatever he triggered. Added to that were the imps roaming the place, who at least did occasionally drop loot, like weapons and pieces of armor. Not that she had any use for them, but loot was loot, and maybe she could re-forged them into something she could use.

On the fourth floor, she stopped Clint.

“I think I hear zombies,” Tea whispered. “If we remain silent, take out all torches and sneak our way past them, I think we can avoid confrontation.”

“Okay,” Clint said in a regular and clearly audible tone. His voice echoed through the hallways as the moaning of the undead temporarily stopped. Needless to say, Tea facepalmed, and various shrieks were heard.

“Great work there, buddy.”

On the plus side, though, most of these zombies had coins with them, some of them even gold. It was a horrible experience, though, as the zombies kept returning, and it seemed they even brought friends, as they became more numerous.

They eventually reached the fifth floor, one of the checkpoints where you could safely return back to the surface, on which Tea was about to throw her hands up in the air and walk away.

“I’m done with this, I can now see how everybody could have died.”

“Oh come on,” Clint said, “floor eight is the ninja floor. I’ve always wanted to get ninja loot.”

This piqued her interest.

“When’s the next checkpoint?” Tea said.

“Well, it’s every five floors, so I guess it’s. . .” Clint paused. Perhaps a bit long. It was then that Tea knew that Clint didn’t know the answer.

“Ten. It’s on the tenth floor.”

“Right, right, right.”

It was then that Tea realized why Clint actually had to travel with others, because otherwise it would be his death. Or, he could have been obfuscating his stupidity, she really wasn’t sure. So far Clint got through without a scratch.

The next two floors almost became her death, with skeletons and more imps, even some slimes on the way, but they finally reached the eighth floor, the moment she’s been working towards.

“Okay, Clint, listen up. We have to be careful this time, because we still have floor nine, and honestly, I don’t want to die here.”

“Relax, this floor is pretty easy.”

“And how’s that?”

“Nobody’s here. Ninja floor, remember?”

“You idiot! It means that everybody here is invisible!”

“Oh, well then, we really have to be careful.”

And then Clint proceeded to march on, drawing the attention to Tea.

“Oh god dammit, Clint,” Tea said, as invisible assailants were beating her up. Lucky for her, she remembered to rely on her other senses, and even though she took a lot of beatings, she managed to survive, and even get some cool loot from it.

“Okay, Clint. This time, we’re going to sprint to the end.”

“I don’t think we should—”

“Listen to me! We sprint now!”

Tea then took a sprint, but in doing so, she was hit with every trap that this floor had to offer. She did manage to dodge the deadly ones, and she would have made it to the end if she wasn’t hit by a big sledge hammer throwing her across the floor.

“My loot!” Tea yelled before she disappeared in a hole, her voice echoing long after she disappeared.

When she opened her eyes, she found herself outside again, and Clint next to her.

“I’m not dead?” Tea asked.

“I never said that adventurers die here, I only say they fall. That’s the nature of this dungeon, it doesn’t kill, it tests. Also, it brings us some nice loot.”

“But what about those people who lost some limbs?”

“Pirates. Most of them didn’t have these limbs to begin with, so they mostly lost their prosthetics. Look, I found Skippy’s arm!” While saying that, he waved with a wooden arm. “Yeah, Skippy’s not his real name, I forgot what it was.”

“So, does that mean I lost all my loot?”

“Well. . .”

Clint reached into his bag, and gave Tea almost everything she lost. It was missing some things she found, but she was still grateful that Clint took the time to recover the loot.

“You’re lucky that you got out with all your armor on, they really must have sentimental value to you if the dungeon couldn’t take them away from you. You wouldn’t believe how many times I ended up outside in my underwear!” He laughed. “Oh wait, do you even wear underwear? Because it might have also considered your clothes as such. It never leaves someone outside completely naked. Well, unless you enter it naked.”

Tea wasn’t really amused by that comment. I mean, she did have underwear, but the fact that he might have imagined her without creeped her out. But she couldn’t really stay mad. This would be their only time they would meet anyway. Hopefully.

“Feel the music! Now jump, and slide down the lance!”

It was the final lesson before her first test, and she was kind of nervous. Even though Delta knew she could do this, it was still something completely different than what she did before. That, and she only had one month to practice everything, from using magic and actually wielding the lance, to performing dances that would either be used as attacks or cast spells. At least she already knew how to use the lance, which gave her a slight edge.

But after this first month, things would be more exciting, but also more scary. Before the end of the first half year, she would have to pick a specialization. For her, this wasn't that hard. Her weapon of choice was the lance already, and she always knew from the beginning that the best specialization for the lance was pole dancing, and she was really excited to go that path. She already did the orientation lessons and was now following special classes which would carry over to the actual pole dancing lessons. The one thing she was worried about though was what others would think, as even on Phandagron pole dancing had a negative connotation.

"Good work, Delta! Keep it up! Okay guys, it's almost the end of class. Remember to practice this a lot. There won't be any music during the test next week, so you'll have to prepare your own."

Delta already had something prepared, but first she had to ace this test. First, she had to do magic, which mostly were supporting spells. There weren't any offensive spells being done yet, although she did learn a few during class. Next came the weapon test, and one she was certain she would ace. Spoilers, she did ace it. The hardest for her, though, was the dancing. Even though they were taught certain dances, in the end, it was the result that counted, so it didn't matter if you changed the steps or how it looked, as long as the results were still there. However, it was encouraged to perform a dance that was at least good, as the magic would flow through the body better.

In this case, the test was to summon and dismiss a weapon through dance. As her weapon of choice was a lance, she had a really difficult task. The one she had wasn't even a special lance, so she decided to create one made from energy. She performed the first steps, and tried to be as graceful as possible, but it did still come out a bit stiff. In the end though, she did manage to summon a lance, and managed to give it a solid form which the tutors could also hold. When they asked her to dismiss it, she started her dance again, without actually holding the weapon, and it disappeared without harming the tutor holding it. Even though the tutors thought that the dance could have been better, she still passed, because it did what it was supposed to.

In the end, it was a good day, but the best day was yet to come the next week. It was a day she's been working towards. The exercise was a simple jump, slide down the lance, and land, but in a clear rhythm.

"So Delta," one of the students said. "Are you excited for next week?"

"Of course I am, Keila, it's all I've been thinking of."

"So," another student said, in a sultry voice. "Do you wanna hang out with us later today?"

Delta laughed. "I know what 'hanging out' means with you, Dom, and you know I don't swing that way."

"Oh, come on," Keila said. "Dominique and I were just going to take a little stroll through the city."

"Yeah right," Delta said. "Anyway, if you two are getting it on, just warn me beforehand, so that I can actually find a place to sleep this time."

"Or," Dominique said, "you could just stay and watch us."

Keila was blushing. "Don't say stuff like that. But anyway, have you already talked to Doug? I think he's into you."

"I don't know, I don't really think I'm ready to go for any form of relationship."

"She's not saying you should go that far, you can just ask him out on a date or

something.”

“I’d love to go on dates, but I want to take it easy for a while. Besides, I still have to find a job while I’m here.”

“Didn’t you already have enough for your entire training, then?”

“I do, I’ve even paid for the entire course already even, it’s just that, sometimes I also want to do something fun.”

“You could just go through one of the many random dungeons,” Dominique said.

“I’ve heard of that, what are those?”

“Well, basically you go in, slay a bunch of stuff, get loot and get out without getting beat yourself. These dungeons are magically enchanted to always be random in layout, and you can’t get killed there. You will lose most stuff you have on you though, even the stuff you brought along. These things will be redistributed throughout the dungeon.”

“So what, I should go through one practically naked?”

“Or in your underwear,” Keila quickly said. “It won’t take away parts that could indecently expose you, so you could just wear no underwear underneath your armor.”

“Well, it sounds like fun, but it is kind of a high risk one.”

“Not necessarily, there are some dungeons that are easy, and most have resting points every five floors so that you could just return to the surface, keeping your stuff.”

“Sounds an awful lot like an RPG to me.”

“Shhh,” Dominique said. “That’s how most wallers start. First they notice something that is typical of any kind of fictional media, after which they start to see more patterns until they actually start to believe everything around them is a work of fiction.”

“I don’t think it works like that,” Keila said. “I just think they were insane to begin with.”

“Are you guys talking about wallers?” another student said, overhearing the conversation. She turned to Delta, shaking her hands. “Anette Lenoise. You must be Delta Omi. So anyway, I know this guy who knows this girl who happened to be a cousin of mine, and she once dated this one guy who all of a sudden became a waller. It was totally crazy, he was perfectly fine one day, and the next day, poof! He went all ‘press A to attack,’ or ‘that person dies on page x, but will come back to life on page y.’ The crazy part is that he acts normal most of the time.”

Keila nodded, “Yeah, I guess you can’t really judge a person by its sanity.”

They all laughed, except for Delta, as she didn’t really get it. She didn’t mind though.

“So anyway, I’ll be out finding a job, see you guys later!”

It was only one week later that she took another job, this time for an escort mission. It wasn’t what she would usually do, but she also wasn’t exactly new to this, she’s escorted people before. She would be paid royally for her work.

This wasn’t a usual escort mission though. She was to actually ride a carriage along a dangerous path herself. She approached the carriage, and that’s when she realized the escortee was Clint.

“Hello!” Clint said.

“What are you doing here?”

“Well, someone revoked my license to travel by myself because of my reckless horse riding style.”

“Wait, how can you ride recklessly anyway? How can you even get a non-existent license revoked?”

“Well, for starters, I was told that my horse wasn’t exactly a horse. It was a lesser wyvern.”

“How did you—never mind. Okay, where do you need to go?”

“I have this hideout somewhere in these mountains.” Clint pointed to a volcano that hasn’t been active for quite some time.

“You have got to be kidding me,” Tea said. “Why would you build your hideout inside a volcano?”

“Because it’s cold in the winter.”

“That’s not a valid reason!”

“So, can we go now? My feet are getting tired.”

“You’re not even standing!”

“Oh right, I actually meant to say your feet are getting tired.”

As Tea rode the horse carriage to the top of the mountain, Clint gave her directions on where to go. At first the ride was gentle, but further upwards, it got more dangerous. For one, the path got smaller, increasing the risk of falling down. Then came the random ambushes from small fire imps. Those weren’t the illusion kinds though, these were the real deal. Not that it really mattered a lot, they were practically the same as the illusion ones, except these could actually kill her. She dispatched of them effortlessly every time she came upon them. Another thing she had to worry about was falling rocks, which happened frequently. It was only after she got higher that she noticed these rocks came from stone golems.

They then had to cross a large gap. Getting down the gap was pretty hard on its own, but crossing it proved stressful when molten rock suddenly began rolling down through the gap. She could barely get to the other side without incinerating herself or the passenger.

They almost reached their destination, when Tea heard something hissing. It was a familiar sound.

“Oh hey!” Clint said. “That sounds like Lizzy!”

“Who the hell is Lizzy?” Tea asked.

“It’s my horse! Or lesser wyvern, I don’t know. She did try to bite me a lot, so I guess lesser wyvern does make sense.”

They then heard footsteps, and from behind the other side of the volcano came a wyvern.

“That’s not a lesser wyvern!” Tea said.

“Oh, did I say lesser wyvern? I meant regular sized wyvern.”

“Oh god dammit, Clint!” Tea said.

She quickly decoupled the carriage from the horse, and began charging. She then began standing on the back of the horse’s back, and jumped, landing on top of the wyvern’s head. Once there, she quickly took two kunai and began to quickly and repeatedly stabbing the head, playing it like a drum. This in the hopes of penetrating through the skull and severing the brain from the rest of the body. Unfortunately it didn’t exactly work, and the wyvern quickly threw her against

a wall. She tried to regain herself as quickly as possible, and when she did, she dodged the charge attack of the wyvern, who crashed against the wall and became disoriented, thanks to the multiple stab wounds on its head.

Tea then began to climb the tail, tying a rope around it, and ran over its back to its front legs. Quickly she jumped under the beast and made her way to her back legs, all the while the beast kept turning around, trying to find her. This actually helped Tea though, as she was able to not only tie the rope around the wyvern, but also make it as tight as possible, due to the way the rope wrapped around its legs. The wyvern was disabled, and she was actually able to quickly dispatch it, weren't it for the fact that Clint then said, "Oh wait, it's not this mountain, it's that one."

"Did you hear something?" Keila said.

"I hear nothing," Delta said, looking over the landscape from the edge of the city of Order. "What did you hear?"

"I don't know, it seemed like someone yelling, 'god dammit Clint' or something. It might just be nothing."

Delta had heard lots of stories about the floating city of Order, but now that she's been there for a while, she could definitely say that nothing that has been said could do the experience justice. She enjoyed it every second, even if the lessons were tough. Every day she would see new people. Mostly adventurers, merchants and tourists, but also street artists, and people visiting other academies found on this floating island. The island itself was pretty big, consisting of multiple levels. Most of them were underground, but they all could be considered full cities by themselves if they weren't already connected to each other.

There were also many mines, and even though working there was tough, Delta accepted a job there as a gem miner. The pay was decent, but this would also be a way for her to toughen up. On the first day she was worried that she wouldn't be able to do both this and her training, but she found out that she already had gotten stronger, and mining didn't really put a lot of strain on her muscles, or at least no more than when she would constantly wield her lance.

Most of the time, she would find common and occasionally uncommon gemstones, but the gemstones they were looking for had certain magical properties. Most of them were used for energy generators which would last a really long time. The oldest energy generator using this kind of gem was about a few thousand years old and was still running. The only things that needed replacement were not made out of these kinds of gemstones.

As they were standing there, overlooking the scenery, Dominique joined them. "So, are you ready for the test?"

"Of course I am!"

"Well, I have some bad news for you. The test has been postponed because of an incoming wyvern attack."

"Wait, what wyvern attack?"

Dominique pointed at the sky. "That wyvern attack."

Immediately, the three started running. "Why didn't you tell that sooner?" Delta said as the wyvern got closer.

"I have absolutely no idea," Dominique said. "It sounded funnier in my head."

"This ain't funny!" Delta yelled. She then stopped. "Okay, get out of here."

Delta turned around as the wyvern landed where they originally stood, while her friends continued to run.

“What are you doing?” Keila yelled.

“I’m buying you guys some time!” Delta replied. “I’m the only one of us wearing full armor. Don’t worry, I’ll get out of here the moment I know you guys are safe.”

She began to twirl her lance above her head until she found her rhythm, then jumped up, threw the lance in the ground, grabbed the pole and began swinging around, doing the basic techniques she was taught. As she did that, the lance began emitting certain sounds, almost as if it was music, and as Delta touched the ground, a massive wave of light was heading towards the wyvern, blinding it. She then noticed that her friends were safe, so she too made her way to a safe spot.

What she didn’t notice though that her pole dancing tutor has been watching her all this time. Originally she was going to tell her about the test being canceled, but the wyvern was already there when she arrived.

As the guards secured the area and dispatched the wyvern, Delta’s pole dancing tutor took her aside.

“I’ve seen what you did, and while I thought it was fairly stupid of you to confront the wyvern like that, I do have to say you did a great job there.”

“Thanks,” Delta said.

“I also wanted to say that you don’t have to do the test anymore, you’ve already passed it. I’ve actually never seen someone use a weapon as the source of music. Most rely on external equipment, and blame it on faulty material when they can’t hold a beat.”

“Well, I don’t know what to say.”

“Well, you could teach it to me.”

“Sure, but it’s quite easy. What I actually do is charge the lance with magical energy at set intervals, mostly with the magic I want to perform, but also with some extra noise magic, as each different kind of spell emits different kinds of sound.”

“And how do you determine the exact rhythm?”

“I’ve noticed that when you charge a certain amount of energy into a weapon, it resonates with a certain length. In order to know how much energy you need to put into, I just swing my weapon over my head with a certain speed and just use the training magic, which doesn’t make sound but does make my weapon glow a little, and re-absorb this energy when I need to re-adjust. I use that as a measure for the other magic.”

“Why don’t you show it to your fellow students? Paladancers could use people like you, you know.”

Chapter 5

Home again

“I sure as hell hope it won’t start raining,” Tea said, while resting at Clint’s hide-out.

“Why would you think that?”

“I think I saw a lightning flash or something.”

“Oh, that’s probably just the floating city of Order. You should visit it one day. Anyway, here’s your pay.”

“Thanks, I guess?”

“So, you wanna hang out?”

“No thanks, I’ll have to get going again.”

Tea went back down the mountain, which just happened to not be a volcano filled with death traps. She already knew where she was headed, but she still had a few weeks to go. Perhaps it wasn’t such a bad idea to go to the floating city. It would provide her with a quicker way to get home.

She followed where she had seen the light flash. The island could go in any direction, so she just took her chances. Perhaps it would stop at a city. She did know that there was a city nearby, but it would be an entire day of traveling if she wouldn’t stop to rest. She needed to find a way to travel fast. She did have a plan, though.

As she was still on top of a mountain that was positioned close to a volcano, there would have definitely been places where hot air was flowing upwards. Either way, though, moving through the air would be much faster, even if she wouldn’t be propelled in the air.

She made a sprint, then jumped off the mountain. She then unfolded her kite. At first she would just flow a bit downwards, but every once in a while she would be propelled in the air. This allowed her to make some speed. And she was lucky, there were many places with air flowing up, allowing her to at least make it out of the forest with enough altitude to make it to the next village. Maybe with some luck she could even reach the nearby city.

But she had another trick. While traveling, she gathered ingredients for new kinds of tiny bombs, and one of them was the whirlwind bomb, which would create tiny whirlwinds when detonated, so whenever she needed some more height, she just threw one right under her when it was about to go off.

When she finally was halfway to the city, she could see the floating city, and it apparently was heading towards the city. That meant she had an entire day to get

to the city. Not that she needed that time, though, by the time she would hit the ground she would already be inside. However, just so that she wouldn't be shot out of the sky, she would just land somewhere before the gates and enter the normal way.

Once inside the city, she waited for the floating city of Order to arrive. The docking platform was already being prepared, it would only take a moment before the city arrived. From here she could see the floating island already. It was a gigantic island, almost as big as a province. Below the island a magical projection of the sky was visible. You would still be able to see it was the city of Order, but it wouldn't cast a huge shadow, as it would emit a light that would be as intense as the surrounding light. On certain days though the intensity would be toned down a bit, so that the shadow could cool down the area when it would be too hot. Or, when it would be too cold, it would emit a brighter light. It would still be cold down below, but not as cold as without it.

It was still going to take a while before she could board the island, and she had an entire day to do so anyway, so she decided to sightsee. There were a lot of things she always wanted to have, but couldn't, because she was still a kid, and her parents weren't really that wealthy. Now that she had a lot of cash, she could spend it.

But first, she headed to the Digit-5 Inter-Planetary Bank, to deposit her coins for IPC, Inter-Planetary Currency. Not that she would ever go off the planet, but at least that way whenever she would get robbed, she wouldn't lose her precious money. There weren't any machines that would convert IPC back to coins, though, so she didn't deposit it all.

After that it was shopping time. She wanted to have some nice clothes when she would see her parents again. Souvenirs she would get on the city of Order. She also wanted to grab some lunch somewhere, so she searched for a good restaurant or a pub. She always preferred pubs due to the beverages, though. After that, she headed to the platform, where she could finally board.

The island was huge, bigger than Tea could have imagined. You could find many things here. Most of it was still traditionally dressed, like most buildings on Phandagron, but she could see that many of them were modernized to accommodate the tourists coming from all around the system. It made her feel a bit uncomfortable.

She wandered around the island, until she happened upon a mini-town that was the most traditional. Next to it was a small forest situated. After asking around, she found out that the forest was free for campers to set up their tents if they so chose. In fact, it was one of the many places for campers and adventurers who were low on cash to stay for the night. Even though Tea had enough money for even the most luxurious hotel, she decided she'd rather sleep in a tree, like she did throughout most of her journey. Mostly just to save money, though.

That night, she could hear the sound of nocturnal creatures flying through the sky. It was a wonderful sound, at least to her. It made her forget about the rest of the world. Life hasn't always this easy, and in the past few years she had to work hard to get where she is now. She wasn't even there yet. For now though, she just closed her eyes, and went to sleep.

Delta couldn't sleep. Not because she was restless, but rather, because her roommates were. And it didn't just make Delta feel uncomfortable, Keila herself

felt a bit embarrassed by this.

“I’ll just go outside, I need some air.”

“You go do that,” Dominique said.

Actually, Delta wasn’t really all that tired. Not only did she pass the test that she was excited about to do, even though it was postponed, she was both allowed to continue doing it besides her regular stuff, and she actually could teach something to others.

It was a bit chilly outside. Being set at the edge of the city was actually a pretty sweet deal, as they’d always have easy access to the most beautiful views on the island, no matter where they were. It was always a beautiful sight to see the world move below you.

They would be heading to Zaendal again the next day. She thought about going to see her parents again, but she decided she’d rather stay on the island and practice what she would learn.

Well, at least she got more casual-looking armor on this time. The chainmail underneath her clothes were a lot lighter than those she would wear during training, but the tradeoff was that it was a lot less protective. Not that anything would happen tonight though. She’d only wear the chainmail because you could never be sure, and any armor is still armor.

She decided to make a small walk through the park, to listen to all the sounds of the night. She once knew someone who really loved the outdoors, who really loved the sounds, especially after, well, the incident. She missed her, but too much had changed between them. Delta knew she wouldn’t be supportive of the choice of class she picked. That already was abundantly clear the last time they met.

“Mind if I sit here?” a guy said to her, when she sat down on a bench. It was Doug.

“No,” Delta said, “I don’t mind.”

“It’s pretty cold here.”

“It’s not so bad. I’ve had colder weathers.”

They remained quiet for a while. The moon was shining bright, high in the sky. Because they were all floating above the clouds, the sky was clear, and the stars were all visible. With a little bit of concentration, you could see Chakar. Delta heard that the sky was beautiful, even during the day. She wished she could see it one day. It was a dream she shared with. . .

Finally, Doug said, “You wanna go out with me someday?”

“I don’t know,” Delta said. “I kind of like being single for a while. You know, I’ve dated a lot of guys, and most of them wanted more than I wanted to give them, so I beat them all up when they tried to do anything funny. Are you going to try to do anything funny?”

“I don’t see why I would have to, so I guess I won’t.”

“Then my answer is yes, I’d love to go out with you. But remember, if you’re trying to take advantage of me, I will rip off your genitals and wear them as my personal jewelry.” Delta smiled. “I’ll give you a call when I’m available.”

With that, Delta went back to the dorms. She felt really confident, but she did remember a time when this wasn’t always the case. She wasn’t entirely sure when it all changed, though. Perhaps she just became more confident after becoming a knight, knowing that she could do anything if she would only give it her all.

Her dorm was silent, aside from Dominique’s snoring. Apparently they were

done already. Delta slipped in her night clothes, and then silently went to bed. By now, she's gotten used to that snoring, but it still did keep her awake. She didn't mind though, eventually Keila would hit Dominique in the face, and the snoring would stop. Slowly, Delta would fall asleep, ready for another day.

The next morning she got up early to get some early breakfast. Basically just to start the day right. Tea already had seen a nice place where she could go to. It was the one place that served everything she liked, like rice balls, whole chicken and big assortment of fruits. Most others would only serve bread during breakfast. She didn't want any of that. And she really needed all that food due to how much she would move around, which would burn a lot of energy.

The next point on the agenda was to search for a fitting souvenir. She hadn't seen her parents for over two years, and she might never see them again, so it needed to be really special, so she decided to have a portrait of herself made. It didn't even have to be big. Eventually she settled for a studio. After that, she searched for a matching frame, and gift-wrapped it all.

The trip would take about half a day, so Tea had some time. She hired a locker to keep everything safe, and went to one of the random dungeons. She decided to just go until the fifth floor. Not because she couldn't handle lower floors, but because of time reasons. Before they would arrive at Zaendal, she first wanted to get something to eat.

The dungeon was pretty easy, even at the fourth floor, so she decided to just take the next five floors as well. She did miss all the loot the creatures would drop due to her taking the stealthy route, but the loot in the chests were enough for her. She mostly did it for the coins anyway.

Her lunch was great, and pretty much the same as her breakfast. After that was done, it was off to the bank again to deposit some more coins, and time to head back to the locker to get her portrait. She was anxious. What would her parents think of her? Would they be mad at her for leaving just like that? Would they still live there? The road from Zaendal to Koki Village was still pretty long, and she would arrive there around dusk. She had a lot of time to think about it, but she didn't want to. She just wanted to enjoy the moment, and the prospect of traveling the world again, trying to become a better ninja.

She descended down to Zaendal, the majestic city running from the top of a mountain to the bottom, with a magnificent castle at its peak. Almost every part of the mountain was used. There, right next to the castle, was the training ground for new knights and paladins. She remembered someone who wanted to be a paladin. Was it wrong to lash out at her? Did she make a mistake?

Why did all these questions pop inside her head? Was it because she was close to home? It was all so confusing, and the trip was taking too long. Once she got to the city, she decided to hire a carriage to take her to Koki Village. It would still be faster than to go back on foot.

It was still day when she arrived home. The place looked the same as it did before, and yet it didn't really feel like her home anymore. As she walked to her old house, she noticed people looking at her. They all had a feeling as if they knew her, but weren't exactly sure from what. When she finally arrived at the door, she hesitated. Then she knocked. First once, then a few times. Finally someone opened

the door.

“Mom?” Tea said.

“Tea? Is that you?”

They tearfully hugged. Shortly after, her father noticed her as well, and came to greet her as well, just as emotional.

“Where were you?” Tea’s mother said.

“I was traveling,” Tea said. “Look, I’m a real ninja now.”

Her father laughed a bit. “I was already joking about that to your mother when you first left. We didn’t think you’d actually would go through with it.”

The house looked just like it was when she left, nearly nothing was changed. Even her old room seemed untouched.

That night she got dinner. It wasn’t a particular great meal, but it was a special one, at least for her. This might have been the last time she would ever have dinner with her parents.

“So,” her father said. “How long are you staying?”

“Actually, I’m leaving tonight,” Tea said. She could see the disappointment on her parents’ faces.

“So when will you be back?” her mother asked.

Tea found it hard to tell her. “Mom... I don’t think I will ever be back. I don’t want to give you guys the illusion that nothing will happen to me, I’m sorry.”

She could see her mother tearing up.

“I think we already knew this day would come one day,” her father said. “I just wish we could have seen you more often.”

It was then that she said her final farewell to her parents. She gave them her gift, and they all hugged. After that, she disappeared in the night.

“Mom, dad, what are you doing here?”

Delta was pleasantly surprised to see her parents on the floating city.

“Well, I promised your mom that I would take her here one day,” her father said. “Anyway, we just came to check up on you, if I don’t see you again, good luck with your training.”

“Thanks dad. Bye mom!”

It was always nice to see her parents again. She realized that she would probably see them less often, and eventually she would have to say farewell to them. But that time wouldn’t be here until after she finished her training.

She hadn’t seen Doug all day. She wondered if it was because of what she said last night. She smiled a little. It was kind of funny. And perhaps she should do something like that next time she meets a guy she actually would like to get rid of. Doug wasn’t a loss anyway, she knew any romance she’d have during the following few years wouldn’t last, and she would probably have many more.

It was already getting late. Keila and Dominique would be out on a date tonight, meaning she could finally go to bed in time. Not that she had to, tomorrow was a day off, but she didn’t really have a lot to do at the moment anyway. She could have gone out as well, but it was no fun without someone else.

“Going to bed already?” Anette said when Delta passed her. “You’re just like my sister, always going to bed early.”

“Well, unless you wanna hang out with me, then yes, I am going to bed.”

“Sure. Where should we be going?”

“To be honest, I actually don’t know. I was actually joking, but if you really wanna go with me some place, we could just hang out in the city.”

“We could have a shopping spree!”

“Isn’t that a bit too girly?”

“Who cares, we’re women, right? Just because we can kick butt doesn’t mean we can’t look good, right?”

“Good point, never thought of it that way.”

Chapter 6

The rogue bard

She was close, she could feel it. All she had to do was be careful to not run into bandits. She didn't spend two years training and another three years adventuring just for nothing. She surveyed the corridors. Nothing, only a few traps, but those weren't really a problem at all, she knew how to disable or avoid them, and they weren't really that deadly anyway. She just didn't want to get caught in one.

She reached a giant pit which she had to cross. The ceiling was too low for her to jump over this gap. Despite that, it really wasn't hard to cross that one, because there was a lever right there on the wall. She flipped it, and a bridge appeared. After she crossed it, she flipped the other switch, so that the bridge was gone again. Sure she could have left the bridge there, but she didn't want to draw any suspicion if somebody were to arrive or leave.

Finally she came into a big room with lots of boxes. She could hear the sound of footsteps, meaning there were some bandits guarding the place. All she had to do was sneak past them, and reach the one room that would contain this supposedly magical artifact. She wasn't even sure what that artifact was, what it looked like, what it did, she knew absolutely nothing, only that she had to retrieve it, or at least had to assist in retrieving it.

She followed the footsteps she heard, making a step each time someone else did, to mask her own. At times it would be a close call, as she had to crawl underneath some boxes. At some points in time, she even had to dispatch a bandit without ever getting seen, and had to hide the bodies in one of the boxes. Finally though, she reached the artifact. It was in a separate room, and it was heavily guarded. Tea hid in a dark corner, where she could clearly see the leader of the bandits talk.

"Boss, do you think it's safe to leave this unguarded?"

"Who's stupid enough to go this deep into our hideout? Really, you should stop worrying."

At that point, everybody was distracted with their own things, so she rushed over to the artifact, and...

"Hello!" she heard. All bandits turned back to the artifact, which was now in Tea's hands, with Clint somehow managing to get in through one of the walls. Clint had literally punctured a hole in the wall, although it immediately collapsed.

"Oh god dammit, Clint!" Tea yelled.

Needless to say, a fight broke loose, and Tea, together with Clint, had to dispatch

the bandits. It was a hectic fight. If this fight was part of a movie, this would be the moment when a nice opening scene would be. It would kind of be like the *S.U.N.: The Movie* opening sequence. For those who haven't seen that one, I'll try my best to describe, and I'm going to assume you at least do have a basic knowledge of the series.

Basically, what happened in the film was, Monette, Wedina and Frida were trying to infiltrate this base of the bad-guy, and after they get discovered, they were surrounded. At that point a fight scene would break out, but since it's the beginning of the film, this point would be a great opening sequence, where the camera would zoom in on the three. One by one they would be introduced to us, where the background would be completely blacked out, and the characters be colorized in their respective colors, with some added filters like grain and other kinds of noise to make it look more film-like. Basically, the same would be for this fight. I mean, assuming the movie would start with Tea infiltrating the base.

The fight lasted roughly as long as the time it took me to explain to you how I'd imagine the fight would be were it a feature film. Maybe a minute longer, it wasn't a terribly long fight, despite there being a lot of bandits. At this point in time, Tea had grown as a ninja, but Clint also turned from a bumbling fool with a lot of luck to someone who at least could deliberately strike someone. In the end, only Tea, Clint and the bandit leader were still standing, with most either dispatched or incapacitated.

"I'll get you next time," the bandit leader said, shaking his fist. "You hear me?! Next time!"

And with that, he got away.

"He got away!" Clint said.

"Yeah, because we're letting him. He's not worth chasing. But seriously though, next time you're asking me for a stealth mission, don't."

"But you know how important this is for me!"

"How is this artifact going to help you into becoming a rogue bard? I mean, that doesn't even make sense, a bard is a subclass of rogue. It's pretty much the same as calling yourself rogue rogue."

"Now that's just stupid. You don't just dual class with two of the same classes."

Tea facepalmed. "That's my entire point! You know what, never mind, forget it, I'll just take the loot from the next room, and I'll be on my way again."

"Okay then, see you next time!"

"There won't be a next time!"

"Okay then! Is tomorrow fine?"

"Aaargh!!!"

Tea couldn't believe she had done more missions with Clint than she had with other people. Lately even she exclusively had done missions with him, almost every day. She hoped that tomorrow would finally be different, but she knew it wouldn't. She knew she would be dragged back in again by Clint. That's why she had to run away fast. She had nothing to do here anymore. Well, she had some things to do, but that could wait for the next time they would inevitably meet again. The best thing at this moment she could do was to run away, leave before he would find her again. Yes, that's what she would do! Except she was really feeling tired today. It was almost night, and she had no energy left, especially after the fight.

Okay, one more night. Just one more, but this time, she would depart early in

the morning.

She indeed did get up early, and was ready to leave. Except her stomach wasn't ready. Okay, just one breakfast, but a very light one. No more sushi or egg rolls, no more omelets and bacon, no more rice and potatoes in gravy, no more. . .

After she was stuffed, she was finally ready to head out. She was finally ready to leave this town, and right in time before. . .

"Hello!"

"Oh god, please no. . ."

"Hey, I just wanted to say that if you're really going to leave, you shouldn't worry about me. I've got another companion."

"Well, that's nice. Tell that person that—"

As Tea said that, she looked at Clint's companion. It was a tall man, the kind you'd only see in statues. He had the perfect build, the perfect body, the perfect face.

"Hi, I'm Trent."

He even had the perfect voice.

"—he'll be having another companion traveling with him," Tea said. "Surprise! I'll still be traveling with you."

"Well," Clint said, "you don't have to—"

"Seriously, you guys could really use my help. I mean, what if you guys need someone to stealthily dispatch some horrible creature?"

"I'm an archer," Trent said, "I could just shoot them before they see us."

"But what if you guys need someone to sneak somewhere in, to retrieve something without somebody noticing me?"

"He's a rogue, I'm sure he can do it."

"Dude, no offense, but have you ever seen him in action? He can't even stealth his way through an empty room even if his life depended on it."

"Ouch," Clint said, "that hurt. But okay, you can come along!"

"Yes!" Tea whispered to herself. It was a long time since she last dated, so this was a perfect opportunity. Now she would only have to get rid of Clint.

"So how did you become an archer?" Tea asked.

"By training?" Trent said. "Hey, Clint, what exactly is our plan?"

"There's an artifact lost in an old abandoned dungeon, dragged away by pixies to the deepest part."

"Ah, so it's a classic dash and kill. Got it."

"Hey Clint," Tea said. "You've collected a bunch of artifacts. What are you planning on doing with them? Sell them?"

"Sell them?" Clint said. "Of course not! What fool's selling key items? Well, aside from that one merchant."

"Well, what are they supposed to be for?"

"Take a look."

Clint took a bunch of artifacts out of his backpack, and laid them on the ground. He then started to align them next to each other, causing a little lightshow to appear.

"So, what's that? Some secret code? A treasure map?"

"No, they're just pretty lights. I love pretty lights."

"To each their own," Trent said.

“Wait,” Tea said. “How are they going to help you earn that rogue bard title?”
“I don’t know,” Clint said. “I just know I need them.”

After a long day, they finally arrived at the dungeon. It was an old place, nobody seemed to be visiting it anymore. You could see that it was infested with creatures, dangerous creatures. But despite its age, it still was a solid structure.

“Ready?” Clint said.

“Ready when you are,” Trent said.

“Wait,” Tea said. “You guys aren’t serious about that dash and kill thing, are you?”

But before she finished her line, they were already gone. She had no choice but to follow them. It wasn’t really hard to track them, everywhere they went they left a trail of dead creatures. On the one hand she thought it was kind of a stupid plan, but on the other hand, she was a bit bummed out that she would be missing out on all the fun.

When she finally caught up on them, they were a bit fatigued.

“Let’s just take a short break,” Clint said, tired of all the running. The break was brief though.

“Wait, before you guys are dashing and killing again, let’s just take things a bit slower. That way you wouldn’t be completely fatigued when we actually are in any real danger.”

“You mean like with that pixie?”

Tea looked at where Clint pointed. “That’s not a pixie!”

“Wait, did I say pixie? I meant troll.”

As he said that, the troll swung his club. Tea dodged, and the weapon narrowly missed her. Trent meanwhile had drawn his bow, and began shooting the giant humanoid. It didn’t seem to affect the troll.

“His skin is too tough!” Trent said.

“Let me try!” Tea said. As she said that, she drew some shuriken with her one hand and a kunai in her other. First, she threw the kunai, which was attached to a rope. It pierced the skin of the brute, which allowed Tea to wrap the rope around it, while she threw the shuriken in quick succession.

Trent meanwhile switched arrows, using ones with special arrowheads that would combust when fired off. Even though the troll didn’t catch fire, it did hurt it. Clint pulled out his dagger, and began stabbing its feet. Through their combined efforts, they all managed to slay the troll.

“You meant to say that the artifact was dragged here by trolls?” Tea said in an aggressive tone.

“Didn’t I say trolls?” Clint said.

“You said pixies!”

“Pixies, trolls, what’s the difference?”

“It’s a huge difference!”

“Ma’am,” Trent said, “calm down. No need to make a fuss. It was a simple mistake, everybody could make it.”

It’s because he’s cute, Tea thought, otherwise she would have shanked him dead. At least now she knew they had to be more careful though.

As they made their way to the lower parts, Tea made sure they stayed stealthy

and wouldn't draw the attention of any more trolls. They were lucky to survive this one. Everytime Tea would see a creature, she would determine whether it would be safe to take it on heads-on. On one hand she really wanted to do it as stealthy as possible, on the other hand, she knew how much action meant to Clint. In that regard, Clint was one of the worst rogues she ever met.

They finally made it to the artifact. This was going a bit too easy. Slowly, Clint approached the artifact, took it, then put it in his backpack. But as they were about to leave, Tea heard something.

"Did those rumors mention a giant spider?" Tea asked.

"No, why's that?"

"Because I'm pretty sure I'm hearing one right now."

Tea began to sprint, but noticed Trent and Clint were still standing there.

"What are you guys doing?"

"Oh wait," Trent said. "Was that a cue for us to run?"

"Yes, it was!"

"Alright then."

All three now began to run to the exit of the dungeon, and not a moment too late, as the giant spider was now pursuing them. Unfortunately they weren't fast enough, and in one leap the giant spider was in front of them.

Now a giant spider might not have a skin that's as tough as a troll. That's because they have an exoskeleton, which means they'd have to go through a layer of spider skeleton. It's not impossible to pierce it, but it does take something more than just arrows and kunai, and this is why they had to run. And yes, they do have weak spots, but they aren't numerous. The weak spots that is, giants spiders can basically be found anywhere on Phandagron.

It was a hard battle. Clint was basically the only one who could do some actual damage, due to him having a dagger. Tea did try to tie its legs with a rope, but the spider was always too fast for Tea to circle it. Trent also did try with his combustible arrows, but he only had a limited supply of them.

Eventually, after a long but pretty monotonal battle, they managed to slay the big spider. But if you thought that this was the end of it, well, you're absolutely right, it really was the end of it. They quickly made their way outside, and not a moment too late, as they could hear trolls arriving. They patiently waited in the bushes until all of them were inside, and then quickly made off.

After they set up a small camp, Clint held the artifact in his hand. The look on his face, it was something she hadn't seen before in him. It was some sort of concern, or at least it was more serious than how he usually was.

"So, what does this thing do?" Tea asked.

Clint shrugged. "I have no idea. It looks pretty though."

"Where to next?" Trent said. "I mean, I assume we're not done yet."

"Well," Clint said. "There's a town not far from here. We still need a fighter. After that, we head off to this mountain." He pointed to a mountain that was just barely visible with the naked eye.

Everybody went to bed. Like always, Tea climbed up a tree, looking at the stars. She wondered what this adventure would bring her, and where it would bring her. And you know, during all these adventures with Clint she did have to admit that she was never bored. Maybe she was just as messed up as he was.

Tea reached inside her pocket, taking out a pendant. She looked at it, then

looked at Clint. He was sleeping like a baby, literally even. It looked silly, seeing a grown man sleeping in a fetal position, and a thumb in his mouth, but there was also something tragic in it. It helped that Tea knew about Clint's origin, after so many times going on adventures with him, he was bound to talk about his past. She then realized that she couldn't just simply leave him just like that, at least not without properly saying goodbye to him.

After a long day of working, she finally arrived at the inn. She was beat, but at least she finished the job. That was yet another wyvern slain, and another few golds for her and her party. She wondered how Keila and Dominique were doing, as she hadn't seen them for quite some time.

"So, Kyle," Delta said. "I guess this is it."

"Wait, you're really going to break up with me?"

"Yeah, it seems so. Bye now!"

Defeated, Kyle took off, never to be seen again. Like, literally, he won't be mentioned again, at least not in this story. Kind of a waste to actually give out his name, but then again, we also hadn't heard anything from Doug, and he won't be back either.

"Barkeep, give me a cold one."

"Comin' right up! This one's on the house by the way, as a thanks for slaying that wyvern."

"Thanks man, I really appreciate it."

"Not a problem. You want somethin' to eat as well?"

"No, I'm fine. I'm kind of on a diet."

"Well you gotta eat, young lady. A warrior like you should always keep herself nourished."

"How much is it going to cost me?"

"It's included with the room. One free dinner and one free breakfast per night per person."

"Wow, that's pretty cheap."

"Not really, we're actually overpricin', to be honest. We could have easily asked half of that an' still make a profit."

"Well, thank you for your honesty."

"Oh, don't thank me, me wife had put a spell on me so that I can only tell the truth. She suspected me of cheatin' on her."

"And what happened?"

"Let's just say it's goin' to be a helluvalot awkward when her sister comes by."

It was pretty early in the morning. She knew she had to get up early, because most adventuring parties would depart pretty early. She rushed into her armor, downstairs, to the adventurer's board. Was she up late again? There were nearly no notifications, except for one.

"Yo, barkeep. Who's this Clint Punchkick?"

"Ah, the rogue. Weird lad. Not so bright either. Based on how he acts, it's a miracle he's still alive. You should definitely be around him, a lad like him would surely give quite some good luck."

“Okay, sounds fun. Has he already been here this morning?”

“No, can’t say that he did.”

From upstairs, Delta could hear a familiar voice.

“Oh come on, Clint. By the time you’re ready there will be no adventurer left to recruit!”

“She does strike a valid point.”

“But it’s still early! Ow! Why’d you hit me?”

“Get out of bed right now!”

“Okay, mom. Ow! I was just kidding!”

After a while, she heard people coming down the stairs.

“Delta,” Tea said. “What are you doing here?”

“I was about to ask you the same question,” Delta replied. “Long time no see. Who’s that hottie?”

“You mean Clint? I didn’t know you were into mustached trolls.”

“Hey!” Clint said. “Don’t make fun of the stache!”

“I’m talking about that big hunk over there,” Delta said, “and yes, I know you were being sarcastic.”

“That’s Trent Demazure,” Clint said.

“I can see you dress the way you act,” Tea said. “What are you supposed to be, some pole dancer?”

“I’m a professional paladancer,” Delta said.

“Pole dancer, paladancer, what’s the difference?”

“If you want to settle this right now, why don’t we just step outside?”

“Game on.”

“Hold up, ladies,” Trent said. “We’re not here to start a fight among each other, are we? The last thing we need is to wait here for two other adventurers because our previous two just killed each other.”

“Shush,” Clint said to Trent. “I wanna see them rip each other’s clothes off.”

“Oh. In that case, proceed.”

“You know what,” Delta said, “you’re right. I shouldn’t waste my time doing petty fights with her.”

You could see the disappointment on Clint’s face.

“Don’t worry little man,” Trent said. “If you want, after all this adventuring is done, we could go watch the amazons. They gladly fight each other while ripping off each other’s clothes for money.”

“But it ain’t the same.”

“Oh trust me, I know this pair of sisters. Let’s just say that they both had a piece of me, and they generally don’t like sharing.”

“This is stupid,” Tea said. “Why does it have to be her?”

“Don’t worry, Tea,” Delta said. “Once this quest is done, you don’t have to worry about me anymore.”

The road was long, it would probably take them quite a few days before they reached the mountain, especially since they had to go through the jungle. Every once in a while they’d stop, so that Trent could shoot down something to eat later in the day. Of course they also had to stop to take a short break.

As they got deeper into the jungle, they heard a sound.

“Wyvern,” both Tea and Delta said.

“I bet I can slay it first,” Tea said.

“Not if I do it first,” Delta said.

“Think you’re as fast as a ninja?”

“Think you’re as strong as a paladancer?”

“Yeah right, as if pole dancing would do you any good.”

“It’s not... Never mind, I’ll show you how it’s done.”

Both girls ran into the night, or day, or whatever it’s called in a jungle, it was pretty dark at spots, but I guess it was still day since light was shining through the trees, but anyway, they both took off, leaving behind Clint and Trent.

“Resting moment?” Trent said.

“Sure, why not.”

Tea arrived first. Not that it really helped her a lot though, as it wasn’t just one wyvern. It was a bunch of lesser wyverns and a couple of bigger wyverns.

“Yeah, I’m not going to do that one,” Delta said, who shortly arrived after Tea.

“It’s not worth it,” Tea said.

They both went back to the others, both a little bit disappointed. Maybe they just had too many adventures, killed way too much, to actually jump straight into the action. They both remembered how scared they were the first time they encountered a wyvern, and even though it’s good that they now could handle one without cowering in fear, they both realized they lost a bit of their innocence.

Once back, they quietly made their way around the wyvern herd, which took quite some time. Every few steps they had to stop to see if none of the beasts had noticed them. Once they were finally in a safe spot, it was already getting dark, so they decided to set up camp. Tea again climbed up a tree, while Delta set up her tent.

The stars were bright. You could see the sky from the camp. Delta took this opportunity to look at the stars. She hadn’t done it that often, so it was nice to have the time to do that. She almost forgot how beautiful it was. She wondered what lied beyond, and dreamt of one day going there.

Tea herself was also enjoying her view. It was one of the reasons she preferred to sleep in a tree. When it would rain, she’d always set up her tent up there, and for some reason the tent would always hold, even during the strongest of winds. Still, though, she preferred to sleep outside a tent, as she would be able to see the sky clearly.

As Delta looked up, she couldn’t help but notice Tea, and for a brief second, Tea looked back at her.

A few days have passed since they entered the jungle. They’ve been to various dungeons, accepted a small quest from a jungle village, and even managed to slay a few jungle beasts, but now they were at the foot of the mountain. The climb up was long and hard and perilous. Occasionally they encountered lesser imps and fire bats, but they weren’t that hard to dispatch. They also went through tunnels just to get to higher ground. There was some sweet loot though.

Finally they reached their destination. It was yet another bandit’s hideout.

“So, what’s the plan now?” Tea said.

“Well, you guys dispatch the regular bandits,” Clint said, “while I take care of their leader.”

“Wait, what?”

“I think I’ve finally found him.”

“Who?” Delta asked.

“The rogue bard,” Tea said.

One by one they entered the hideout. It seemed like a big cave with lots of coins and other kinds of treasure laying around. The plan really was simple, just dispatch anyone they’d encounter, and make sure the leader wouldn’t escape.

They noticed their first batch of bandits, guarding the area.

“Who’s that?” one of the bandits said.

“Your doom!” Clint yelled.

Tea facepalmed. “Clint, we don’t say—”

“Charge!”

It wasn’t really an intense fight, but they knew there would be more. They quickly made it to the next batch of bandits. The result was pretty much the same. There were some traps, but Clint managed to avoid them all, even though they should have killed him outright. It did make the jobs of the rest easier, as they now wouldn’t have to worry about the traps anymore.

And then they finally reached the final room. In it, they noticed a man, obviously the leader of the bandits.

“Are you the rogue bard?” Clint said.

“Yes, some call me that. Why’d you ask? You want to claim my title? You’d have to take it from me.”

“Clint,” Tea whispered. “Are you sure about this?”

“Hecks yeah!”

Needless to say, the battle was a battle of wits. Or brute force, Tea couldn’t tell the difference. All she could see was Clint dodging a lot and the leader trying to stab a lot. Neither seemed to be getting tired of this little dance. Eventually though, Clint began fighting back, until at last Clint came out victorious. His quest was now over. Now that he had defeated the rogue bard, he would become the next one.

“That absolutely didn’t make any sense,” Tea said. “Just because you defeated the rogue bard doesn’t mean that makes you one.”

“Hmm, you’re right, let me check. Well, I do feel kind of more rogue-y, but not so much bard-y. Yep, turns out you’re right. That guy wasn’t the real rogue bard.”

“What exactly is a rogue bard actually?” Delta said. “Is it, like, a dual class rogue / bard?”

“Yeah,” Clint said, “that’s pretty much it.”

“Well, then this entire quest was pointless.”

“At least someone who agrees with me,” Tea snarked.

Delta continued. “You need this guy called Mammon Thyl’Ahn. He’s been rumored to be a true rogue bard.”

Tea became confused. “Wait, what?”

“Makes sense,” Trent said.

“What?” Tea said.

Clint got excited. “Well, let’s go then!”

Tea got even more confused. “Okay, seriously? Are you for real?”

“Sure I am,” Delta said. “Back at the academy, there’s this entire database of known threats and delinquents. Mammon Thyl’Ahn was listed under the rogues. I remembered that name because the name was funny, and it also listed him as a rogue bard.”

Clint got even more excited. “So, are you guys in?”

“I’m at your service,” Trent said.

“I’m in,” Delta said.

“Fine,” Tea said.

Chapter 7

The barbarian and the alchemist

And so our party went out for a new adventure. They traveled night and day in search of the civilized world. On their way, though, in a rocky and mountainous landscape, they heard some grunting coming from down a cliff. Silently, they looked down, to see a barbarian surrounded by rock beasts.

The barbarian began to growl, at which point the beasts came charging towards him. He hit one with his giant club, then another one, then dropped his club to pick up another rock beast, which he proceeded to throw against yet another one, crashing them into a wall. He picked up his club again, and began swinging it around, until all of them were slain.

“That guy is awesome,” Clint whispered. “Hey guy!” Clint then yelled. “Yeah, you there! You’re awesome!”

Tea facepalmed. Meanwhile, the barbarian looked up, walked towards the cliff they were standing on, and began climbing the wall. Within seconds, he stood in front of them.

“What did you just say?” the barbarian said.

“I said you were awesome!” Clint said, excitedly. “Hello! I’m Clint Punchkick. That ninja girl is Tea Cha, the archer is Trent Demazure, and this pole dancer is Delta Omi.”

“It’s paladancer,” Delta said, “not pole dancer.”

“Oh yeah?” the barbarian said. “What’s your specialty? Every paladancer must have a specialty. Is it breakdancing, ballet, interpretive, capoeira?”

“It’s... It’s pole dancing...”

Tea couldn’t contain her laughter. “Oh man, that’s just great.”

“Shut up!” Delta yelled at her. “Pole dancing is a very intricate style. Not everybody is fit to do it.”

“Well, it does explain your stripperific armor.”

“That armor is for mobility.”

“Don’t judge the style, young ninja,” the barbarian said. “Pole dancing indeed is harder than it looks.”

“So,” Trent said. “With who do we have the pleasure?”

“Right, sorry. My name is Hank Barton.”

“Nice to meet you, mister Barton.”

“You can just call me Hank.”

“So,” Tea said, “what brings you here?”

“My monthly work-out,” Hank said. “Every month I go out trying to find the toughest beasts. It keeps my body in shape. And what’s your business?”

“We’re looking for Mammon Tyl’Ahn,” Clint said. “I need to slay him so that I can become the rogue bard.”

“Hmmm. . . I’ve heard of that name before. I don’t know who he is or where he is, but I do know someone who might know it.”

“Well, would you go with us? We can always use some extra muscle.”

“It’s better than just going around slaughtering helpless critters. Okay, I will join you in your quest. I can even show you to the nearest city. That’s where my person is.”

Vandour, a big city with trading posts and several shops. Several were for common day goods, like food and household equipment. There were also some book shops, one for just literature, another containing spells and recipes. Then there were the alchemy shops. They had to be in one of those, and finally they found it, a run-down shop. It was a wonder the building was still standing.

It wasn’t just an alchemy shop though. Aside from the typical alchemy stuff, they could also find ingredients and equipment for witchcraft, wizardry and other kinds of magic, as well as some scientific equipment.

From the back of the shop, a young woman appeared.

“Suzette?” Delta said. “Suzette Lenoise?”

“Excuse me, am I supposed to know you?”

“Well, I know your sister, Anette.”

“Oh. Oh! So you must be Keila then. No? Dominique? Delta? Oh, Delta! Hi! Welcome! And welcome to you too, Hank.”

“Nice to see you too,” Hank said.

“Are you going to introduce them to me?”

“Well, this is Tea Cha. She’s a ninja. That’s Trent Demazure, an archer, and this is Clint Punchkick, a rogue. He wants to know where Mammon Thyl’Ahn is.”

Suzette immediately went quiet, with a serious look on her face. She then began searching through her shelves, putting a bunch on one of the tables. She then took one of the books on the shelf, and opened it up.

“Mammon Thyl’Ahn isn’t just somebody. He was the very first rogue bard in existence, and to my knowledge the only rogue bard ever. His existence predates that of Phandagron’s history. Take a look here.”

They all looked at the book.

“All I can see is a cloaked figure,” Tea said.

“That’s because nobody knows how Mammon Thyl’Ahn looked like,” Suzette replied.

“So he’s dead?” Delta said.

“I. . . I’m actually not sure. Some say he still exists somewhere.”

“Well then,” Clint said. “Let’s go!”

“Wait!” Suzette said. “Let me pack my stuff, I’m coming with you.”

“But Suzette,” Hank said. “What about your store?”

“This place is a dump, any moment now this place is going to crash. Now if you all just wait outside, I’ll have some packing to do.”

As everybody went outside, Suzette did her magic. Possibly literally even, as she came out shortly after, with just a bag in her hand.

“If you guys want me to carry some stuff, I’d gladly do it.”

“Oh!” Clint exclaimed. “How about these artifacts?”

“Sure.” She took the artifacts and placed them in her bag.

“Oh, and I also would like to take some other stuff with me. To the market!”

After a shopping spree, Clint was finally done, and all his stuff was put inside the bag. Most of it was useless junk, though.

“Isn’t it heavy?” Tea asked.

“Not really. Here, see how it feels.”

Tea took the bag, and indeed, it was really light, despite all the stuff Clint has put into it.

“How is that. . .”

“It’s a magical bag,” Suzette said. “Bought it from an old wizard. I’m an alchemist by the way, but in my spare time I dabble in magic. Or at least magical stuff. So far I haven’t been able to cast anything.”

“So wait, does that bag basically contain your entire belongings?”

“Basically, and it’s linked to me, meaning that even if someone were to try and steal it, it would always come back to me if I wanted it to.”

“That sounds convenient,” Delta said. “I think I might get one myself one day.”

“It’s not cheap though, it cost me quite some gold, and that old man didn’t accept IPC. There aren’t a lot of banks that allow me to withdraw that much gold.”

“So what did you bring along?”

“Well, most of the stuff from my store that I could actually use. My cash register. It was quite a hassle to get the money out, so I just took the whole darn thing. A few tents, all pretty much new, my spellbooks, my alchemy recipes, my potion recipes, my food recipes, some stuff to actually make these things, some devices, a few shelves, and Mr. Huggatus.”

“Who’s Mr. Huggatus?” Tea said.

She blushed out of embarrassment. “It’s my teddybear.”

“That’s. . . a pretty bad name, no offense.”

“Well, he’s a magical bear, so he needs to have a magical name.”

“Oh really? What does he do?”

“Well, nothing, but sometimes I pretend he’s a wizard.”

“Right, that explains everything.”

“So what’s the deal with that hair of hers?” Hank asked Delta.

“Just ask it herself,” Delta said.

“Well, it seems to me that she’s hiding something.”

Delta looked at Hank in disbelief. “Seriously? That’s the conclusion you’re drawing?”

“I never said I made clever observations.”

“So Delta,” Suzette said. “How did you know about me?”

“Well, I met your sister during paladancer training, and we basically became friends, so when I asked her who the person on one of her pictures was, she said it was you. So yeah, that’s the story.”

“So what’s the deal with that hair of yours?” Hank asked Tea.

“Why’d you ask?” Tea responded.

“Just curious. I was just wondering if you were hiding something.”

“Well, there’s your answer.”

Night fell. They already had made some distance, so they set up their camp.

“Hey Suzette,” Tea said. “Where exactly are we heading to?”

“We’re going to one of the abandoned shrines. It might give us some answers.”

“How’s that?”

“Because it’s haunted. Maybe we can get answers from the undead. Or just the dead, whichever is easier to talk to.”

“That makes as much sense as any of Clint’s plans.”

“No, you don’t understand. The shrines were all originally designed as a quick portal to other realms. For example, you have Urudo shrines or Oukora shrines, which would allow for fast communication between other shrines of the same kind, including those on Chakar, by creating a tiny wormhole, a sort of portal between two places. Usually these holes are just big enough to transmit sound or imagery, but since ghosts don’t have any physical form, they can just freely travel through these portals.”

“And what’s so special about this abandoned shrine?”

“It’s one of many that have no connected shrine on this dimensional plane, in this reality, yet they appear to be very active. It is believed that *these* shrines are a link to a sort of spirit world, or perhaps even a different kind of world, a world that exists next to that of ours. If Mammon Thyl’Ahn exists on any of those planes, we’d be able to find him.”

“And why are we going to this one?”

“Because it’s the closest.”

“So if this one’s not the one, we’ll just have to go to the next one?”

“Pretty much, yeah.”

It was only a couple of minutes before morning came. Even before the first birds began to sing, Tea prepared her bags. It would be some time before the others would be awake, so she had some time to wash up in the nearby lake. She took off her clothes, and bundled them up, after which she hung them on a branch.

Only a minute in, though, Tea heard something moving in the water. She slowly made her way through the long reeds, as silently as possible, and then screamed, just at the same time as Delta screamed.

“What are you doing here?!” Tea said.

“I’m just taking a quick bath! Isn’t that why you’re here as well?”

Suddenly they heard some running, and when they looked, they could see Suzette stumbling, trying to strip naked. “Wait up!”

After she had all her clothes off, she jumped and made a big splash, right between Tea and Delta.

“What are you doing?” Tea said.

“I’m skinny dipping. Isn’t that what you guys are doing?”

“No. . .” Delta said.

“Well, doesn’t matter. The guys won’t be awake for another hour or something.”

“How do you know that?” Tea said.

“I’m an alchemist, I used sleeping powder. Whenever I go out to this lake and there’s a group nearby, I make sure to put them all in a slumber.”

“You go here often?” Delta asked.

“Of course, why not? The water’s nice, and they say it has magical properties.”

“What kind of properties?”

“I don’t know. I think it relaxes the body and mind a bit, but that isn’t exactly something magical, I think.”

It was a long trip, taking over a week. There was a lot of bonding and bickering. Despite their rivalry, Tea and Delta both stayed in the group. They did fight sometimes, but it was quickly resolved by either Suzette or Hank. They went through various landscapes, from grasslands to deserts.

But finally, they arrived at one of the abandoned shrines, conveniently called the Dead Shrine, because on this place the dead were buried, until someone thought it wise to not set up a settlement next to a graveyard, especially one where the dead frequently come alive, or at least come to haunt, and move much further away from it.

“What now?” Tea said. “It’ll be quite some time before it’s night.”

“Well,” Suzette said. “We could just wait, or we could do something else.”

“Like what?”

“After spending my entire life learning every alchemic recipe in existence and experimenting a lot, I have come up with quite a lot of concoctions that could, well, bring us to ‘higher planes.’”

“I know where you’re heading,” Delta said with a smile. “I’m down with it.”

“I’ll just stay clean,” Hank said. “The last time you gave me one, I almost murdered an entire group of bandits. It really didn’t help that you locked them inside the inn with me.”

“It’s not like I want to invite you anyway,” Suzette said. “Besides, this one’s not like that.”

A half hour later the girls were sitting in a large tent, completely baked.

“Okay, okay, okay,” Delta said. “Who was—who was your first. . .”

“I’m still a virgin,” Tea said, dazed.

“Bull. Crap.” Delta said, barely holding her laughter. “There’s no way some pretty face like you still hasn’t done it.”

Tea began giggling. “And I’m supposed to believe... believe that you’re still untouched as well. Surely some guy has, you know...”

They all burst out in laughter.

“Screw boys,” Delta said. “Who needs them when you’ve got these?” She then tried to pull up her hands, and then again tried to move her fingers. “Man, this is strong stuff.”

“And what about you?” Tea said.

“I have no idea where I am,” Suzette said. They again burst into laughter.

“Hey, you know what would be fun?” Suzette said. “If you two would make out.”

“Heck no,” Tea said, “I’m not going to do that. You do it.”

“Okay,” Suzette said, who then tried to get up, then stumbled, eventually just giving up on trying to walk. “Okay, I think we had enough of this.”

They all sat there, giggling, staring at the ceiling of the tent.

“Hey Tea,” Delta said. “What’s the deal with you and Clint? You guys, like, a couple?”

“Heck no,” Tea said. “He’s just someone I have adventures with a lot. He’s like, a younger brother. I literally have to take care of him.”

“Well it seems he can survive by himself just fine.”

“I just think he needs me, or at least someone who he can call family. You know what I’m saying? I mean, I’ve never seen him, like, sad and all, but he seems happier whenever he’s around people he considers family. Like, he was really happy when he met Trent. Never seen him that happy.”

“So, Trent. He single?”

“Yeah, but I already called dibs. So no steal.”

“Yeah, right. As if he’s into you.”

“I’ll see you try.”

They both laughed, and when they noticed Suzette was fast asleep, they laughed even harder.

“Suzette, Tea, Delta,” Hank said, standing just outside the tent. “It’s almost night.”

This woke the three up. When Tea and Delta noticed they were huddled together, they quickly backed away from each other.

“Let’s just pretend all this never happened,” Tea said.

“I agree,” Delta said.

“I definitely should change the dose,” Suzette said. “This one’s more potent than the last one I made, although at least it does have the desired effect.”

Just at the moment the sun completely set, Trent pointed to the Dead Shrine.

“I think something’s happening,” Trent said.

All around, glowing entities began rising from the ground. They were spirits of the deceased, but I guess you already figured that out. If you didn’t, shame on you.

“I hate ghosts,” Hank said. “Almost as much as I hate spiders.”

“And yet you continuously slay them,” Suzette said.

“For the last time, I kill them *because* I hate them.”

As the moon began to rise, they made their way to the shrine.

“Are all these ghosts staring at us?” Delta asked.

“Pretty much, yeah,” Suzette said. “It’s not often that they see someone from the land of the living, let alone an entire group.”

Clint could only watch in amazement. “Wow, real ghosts!”

“Dude,” Tea said, “we’ve already seen many ghosts.”

“But these are different ghosts!”

“They’re only different because they’re different people.”

“And what’s your point?”

Tea facepalmed. “God dammit, Clint.”

When they finally arrived at the shrine, Suzette began peering into the shrine. After a while, she came back.

“Nothing,” she said.

“You mean there’s nothing?” Tea asked.

“No, I mean that I didn’t see anything. I don’t know any magic to activate the portal, and even if it was open already, there’s nothing I could see. This portal is probably just made for the dead.”

“So what are we doing here?”

“We’re waiting until a ghost pops out from the other side, so that we could ask it a few questions.”

A few hours passed. Tea and Delta had to refrain Suzette from using her stuff again several times, and Clint was really getting on everybody’s nerves, but the waiting finally sort of paid off. Finally, a ghost appeared at the shrine.

“Hey!” Tea yelled. “Yeah, I was talking to you, ghost!”

It was the ghost of a fallen warrior.

“Do you know of some guy named Mammon Thyl’Ahn?”

“Not that I know of. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have to find my grave again.”

“Wait!” Suzette called. “What’s behind that portal?”

“Nothing much, mostly rocks and other dead people.”

“Well, thank you for your time.”

“You’re welcome.”

The ghost then left.

“I think we should wait until at least sunrise,” Suzette said. They all begrudgingly agreed.

The next ghost that exited said pretty much the same, and the rest also had nothing interesting to say. As the sun began to rise though and they all prepared to leave, Delta could see the soul of a young child staring at her. Delta walked over to her, at which the little girl said the following words.

“The lights will give you the answers you seek.”

“What are you looking at?” Tea said to Delta.

“I’m just talking to this little ghost child,” Delta said, but when she looked back, the girl was gone.

“Are you sure sleep deprivation didn’t get to you?” Tea said.

“I swear, there was a ghost girl talking to me, she said that the lights would give me the answers I seek.”

“Yeah, that’s not possible. The sun is already up. All ghosts have gone to sleep a long time before that.”

Chapter 8

The breather episode

“Come on,” Suzette said. “Why can’t we stay for an entire week?”

“Because it would be a waste of our money,” Hank said. “Besides, the sooner we finish this quest, the sooner we can go our own way.”

“Well, I think we all could use a little break,” Delta said, “so why not at least for three days?”

“I’d hate to agree with her,” Tea said, “but we could all use some rest.”

“Too late!” Clint said. “I already booked for a week.”

Suzette stuck her tongue out to Hank. Hank sighed. “Okay, since our little friend has already booked us for the week, we might as well just stay for the week.”

Suzette cheered, and immediately went to the pools. Delta immediately followed, and Tea, not wanting to be the only girl around a bunch of guys, also went, although only after she got the keys to their room, as she would share a room with both Suzette and Delta. At least the staff ensured her that there would be three separate beds, so that was a relief. Sure, she would likely just sleep outside again, but the thought was nice. If she would have to sleep inside, she at least wouldn’t have to share a bed with Delta.

It was a pretty modern resort. It had all kinds of luxury you could find on a planet like Landbox. Tea did think it was a shame, it signified that Phandagron too was beginning to modernize. The rise of the steam-based machinery imported from Zholhu already made a rise in this world, which would also show in the way cities were built. Sure, it was more convenient, at least now most of Phandagron had decent sanitation, but it still felt like Phandagron was losing its uniqueness.

The water of the pools wasn’t too cold, it was heated to a bearable temperature. Failsafes ensured that the temperature wouldn’t rise too high, and failsafes to that would ensure that the heating systems would just shut down. And if that would fail, some more failsafes were put in place to just drain the pools. Luckily it never had to come this far, and for the duration of their little vacation it didn’t.

It was still strange to see the mountain and its Dead Shrine clearly. At night, you would probably be able to see the glows of the many ghosts floating around there. The resort was that closely built to the burial ground. But they wouldn’t have to worry about that, they wouldn’t need to go back there anyway. Besides, it really was time for them to relax.

“I’m gonna go get some snacks,” Suzette said. “You guys want some?”

“No, I’m good,” Tea said.

“I don’t think eating while swimming is such a good idea,” Delta said.

“Anyway,” Tea said, “I’m off to see where the others are hanging out.”

“Whatever,” Delta said, while swimming away.

Tea went to the dressing room to get changed again. She then noticed the mirror, and saw the part of her face again she long covered up. It was only for a brief moment, but that one moment reminded her who she was. Or perhaps just who she thought she was. Did she really have to cover her face? In her life, she’d seen many proud women who wore her battle scars like a trophy. They didn’t care that some might not find it beautiful, but she also found that most did find it more attractive. Hers though weren’t as clean. Her right side was mostly disfigured, from her neck up to her temples. She was lucky nothing happened around her eyes, and that most of it was on her cheek.

She dried herself, put on her regular clothes again. She didn’t need to think about that, and even if she would, she would have to see it as a trophy to her first victory. Her victory with. . .

“Hey Tea,” Clint said. “Check out these arcade cabinets. They’re recently imported from Landbox. They even contain their own energy crystals, so it doesn’t need to connect to a main crystal.”

“I see you’re having fun,” Tea said. “Don’t spend too much on those arcade machines, though. Do you know where the others went?”

“Hank headed to the gym, and Trent went to the target range.”

Tea knew exactly where she would be heading. The target range was set in a big open field that was boxed off, meaning that anything that’s been thrown or fired within the magical borders wouldn’t accidentally hit other bypassers by accident, as nobody was allowed within these borders. You were allowed to use your own stuff, but the park did provide everyone with free training equipment and ammunition. There was a large assortment of things, like training arrows, bolts for crossbows, lead balls for muskets, they even provided kunai and shuriken for ninjas. But her main target was Trent.

“Hi,” Tea said.

“Oh, hi,” Trent said, while firing an arrow.

“How’s it going?”

“I’m kind of busy here.”

“Well, don’t mind me, I’m just training my shuriken skills.”

“Hi Trent!” Tea could hear. It was Delta.

“What are you doing here?” Tea said.

“Training my paladancer specialty.”

“You mean pole dancing, right? Isn’t that the complete opposite of offense and ranged?”

“It can be used offensively, and yes, I can use it ranged, thank you. Also, unlike you, I’m going straight for the target. Hey Trent, are you busy tonight?”

“Actually,” Trent said, “yes. I promised the resort to help with the hunt. They could always use an extra hand.”

“Maybe they could use my help,” Delta said.

“I don’t think they have any use for melee fighters.”

That didn't really fall well with Delta.

"Come on," Tea said, "let's go. We don't want to keep the man busy."

"Okay, what was that about?" Delta said.

"Look," Tea explained. "If we both keep pushing ourselves on him, he'd just walk away with, I don't know, Suzette."

"Suzette? No way!"

"I'm serious, Suzette might seem like some kind of innocent girl, but I've heard her talk when she was asleep."

"But there's no way. Anette's pretty timid herself."

"Look, I'm not saying it is the case, but if any of us wants to stand a chance here, we have to play it subtly."

"And why should you care if he would reject me or not? Seems to me that you just want him to yourself."

"No, look, you're hurting both our chances. Do you think that I would be able to steal him away from you after he's rejected you? No, you're even lowering my chance with that, as I'm in the same company as you are."

"Oh come on, Hank," Suzette said. "Just this one time?"

"What are we talking about?" Delta said when entering their bedroom.

"Nothing," Hank quickly replied.

"I was just asking him to scratch my back," Suzette said. "And perhaps a bit more."

"And I said no," Hank said.

"Jeez, what kind of man are you?"

"The kind of man who travels with a bunch of idiots."

Hank walked off.

"So," Delta said. "You and Hank. What's up with that?"

"Oh, we've dated once. He broke up with me, said it didn't fit."

"Wait, you mean..."

"Yeah, it kind of is an odd couple, a rough barbarian and a small alchemist. He was mostly afraid of my reputation, though, that him dating me would ruin it. But hey, it's not like it was serious or anything."

"Right." Delta turned to Tea. "I seriously thought she was talking about something else," she whispered.

"We did almost do it, though."

"So you two..."

"Yeah, he even made a reservation at a restaurant, but, yeah, he backed out at the last second, claiming he 'couldn't find a good suit to wear for our dinner'. I think he just has commitment issues."

"Right." Delta again turned to Tea. "I seriously thought she—"

"I know," Tea said.

"He's great though," Suzette said.

Delta paused for a moment. "Yeah, he does seem like a nice person."

"No, I meant he's good in bed. Look, I know what you guys are thinking, but humans have needs."

“So just then. . .”

“Yes. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’d like to have the room to myself for the next half hour, unless you want to watch.”

“Yeah,” Tea said, “I’m out.”

“I’ll just crash here,” Delta said. “I’m really tired at the moment.”

As Delta said that, she literally dropped herself on her bed, armor and all, and fell asleep.

Even though Suzette tried to be as quiet as possible, Tea could still hear her from her tree. At times she did curse the fact that she trained her ears this well. Back at the ninja academy, she also heard the ogres doing stuff, except it was much worse, in that ogres sound worse. Seriously, you don’t want to walk in on an ogre.

After a while, Suzette went outside.

“I’m done, you can come in now!”

“I’m fine up here,” Tea said.

“Oh come on, it’s no fun inside here without you!”

“No, I kind of love it here.”

“Don’t be such a spoil, just get in. Besides, we already paid for the beds.”

After some more persuasion, Tea finally got inside. However, she noticed that the beds were now shoved together, as one big bed.

“No way am I going to sleep like this.”

“Oh come on, do it for me! I did all the trouble pushing these beds. Do you know how heavy they are? Especially with a fully armored person on top of one of them.”

“Fine. . .”

It was early in the morning again. Tea made sure everyone was asleep, then quickly went to the shower. It was a fairly cold shower, but it wasn’t anything she wasn’t used to. In fact, she did like it a bit.

“Oh hey,” Suzette said. “Mind if I join you?”

Before Tea could protest, Suzette stepped in the shower.

“That’s cold!” Suzette said, and began to hug Tea.

“Hey, stop it, what are you doing?”

“Well, I was getting cold, so I thought we could hug for a little.”

“Or you could just not touch me.” Tea didn’t like it that someone else was in the same shower with her, and she was a little embarrassed.

“You know,” Suzette said. “You’re pretty. You shouldn’t hide that face of yours with that hair.”

“Don’t touch it,” Tea said. “Why are you in here anyway?”

“Just wanted to save some water. Anyway, you shouldn’t let the water run like that.” She turned the water down. “Look, if you really want to get clean, use some soap. But don’t let the water run.”

Begrudgingly, Tea started to soap herself in. However, just as she was about done, Delta walked in, still a bit sleepy, and turned on the water. Only then, after the temperature of the cold water scared her awake, did she notice both Tea and Suzette.

“What are you people doing here? What’s wrong with you?”

“We’re just taking a shower,” Suzette said.

“I like to take my showers alone!”

“Way to say that so tactfully,” Tea said. “Besides, we were here first.”

“Well, get out then.”

“No, you get out, you came in here later.”

“Girls, girls,” Suzette said. “Why don’t we just take a shower together?”

“Because it’s a one person cabin!” Tea and Delta both said at the same time.

It was breakfast, and as usual, Tea filled an entire tray full of stuff that could easily feed a party of four. Delta only took some water and bread, to keep her figure, as she would say it.

“A healthy diet is one where you eat throughout the day, but with moderation.”

“Screw that,” Tea said, as she was shoving some more food inside her mouth. “A good meal consists of lots of food.”

“I concur,” Hank said. “A warrior needs lots of nutritions. But dang lady, you could feed an entire village with that tray.”

The sauna. Tea already half expected both Delta and Suzette being present.

“Hi guys, no surprise running into you two.”

“Hey Tea,” Suzette said.

“Hi,” Delta said.

Everybody was silent for a while. Finally, Tea broke the silence.

“So, what’s for today?”

“We could stay here for the entire day,” Suzette said.

“And why would we do that?” Tea said.

“Because I added something to the oils.”

“We’re getting baked, aren’t we?”

“So,” Delta said, “when exactly did you and Hank, you know, do it?”

“I dunno, we were, like, really, really young. I mean, not young young, but, you know, young young.”

Tea laughed. “I have absolutely no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Like, we knew each other from when we were kids, you know?” Suzette said.

“And surely, we eventually, like, experimented and stuff. I mean, you know, like, when you’re young, you, like, play alchemist and crazed berserker, right?”

“I don’t think that’s what it’s called,” Delta said.

“And was it this one time?” Tea asked.

“‘Course not. I should actually tell this when my mind’s more clear, but, some barbarians are born that way, they can’t be, like, stealthy class thingies and stuff, you get what I’m saying. You know they’re born that way because they sometimes go into berserker mode. This can also be induced by drugs. Now, when they’re in berserker mode, they like to kill and murder things. The only way to stop them is to, you know, distract them. Or ‘distract’ them.”

"I like what you're saying," Delta said. "I think. Wait, what do you mean by that?"

They all burst out in laughter. "I'm serious though," Delta said.

"So," Suzette said. "What do you guys think of Clint?"

"He's an idiot," Tea said.

"He's a total whackjob," Delta said.

"Well I like him," Suzette said. "He's kind of cute, you know."

"I bet you only say that because you're high," Tea said, after which they all burst out laughing again.

"No, really, it's true, I think he's cute."

"You have to be kidding me," Delta said. "He's like, I don't know, he kind of looks like that creepy uncle you see at reunions."

"Now don't be so cruel. Even though that's actually true."

Even more laughter ensued.

"Seriously, I feel really funny," Delta said. "Did you change something to the formula again?"

A grin appeared on Suzette's face. "Yeah, I'm not going to explain it while I'm in this state, it would really blow my mind. I mean your minds."

"At least we didn't pass out this time," Delta said. "Seriously, what was that?"

"Okay, so I was trying out all these kinds of concoctions that could cause several temporary reactions, like burning sensations on certain body parts, or itches, pain relief, complete paralysis. So I started to further experiment, to try to create something that would help me with, well, you know." She pointed down.

"Right," Tea said.

"Well, I did find out something that was actually supposed to work by attaching itself to the right synapses, and releasing a chemical that would reroute any form of touch and convert it into, well, that other kind of sensation."

"And that's what we've experienced?" Tea said. "Oh god..."

Both Delta and Tea felt a bit embarrassed.

"Hey guys, it's okay, we're adult females, so we shouldn't be ashamed of it."

"Okay, so, why did you mix it with the sauna oils?" Tea said.

"Because it originally didn't work, so I figured I might just try a steam treatment. Now normally I would have just used a tiny steamer, but this time I had to let it be absorbed by my entire body. And then Delta came in, and you came in, and we all..."

"We get it," Tea and Delta said.

"Okay," Tea said, "let's just agree to never talk about this again."

Chapter 9

Trip by train

The week passed, and they all felt much more relaxed than they were before they arrived. Even Hank admitted it was nice, and that he would install a sauna in his own mansion one day, because, as he would say it, “Saunas are hot. No pun intended.”

Their next goal was the abandoned Mar’Ahne Shrine. Mar’Ahne was supposedly a deity, one that brought prosperity. Her shrine would be at the abandoned fields, where people used to plant their crops. Nobody knows why people left this place, or even, why they set up their farms here, as the ground wasn’t exactly fertile.

Luckily, this one wasn’t far, at most a day or two traveling, and that was including breaks. The shrine was embedded in a big hill.

“So, what now?” Delta asked.

“I have no idea,” Suzette said.

“Well, couldn’t you open a portal or something?”

“I’m an alchemist, I can’t do magic. But I do have another idea.”

“Yeah, no,” Tea said. “Let’s not do that.”

“Relax, I’ll leave you guys out of you don’t want to. Just let me build a tent around the shrine and I’m good to go.”

“I’ll go with you,” Delta said.

“Well, at least there’s someone who wants a bit of fun.”

“Just make sure it’s not one of those ‘special’ concoctions.”

“Man, I’m so glad you came after all,” Suzette said.

“That’s what she said,” Tea said, giggling. “So what did you do in this one this time?”

“Some powder I’ve got from some witch. It would give some sort of out-of-body experience, or at least some experience. Basically it would send one’s soul to the astral plane.”

“Astral plane, huh?” Delta said. “Shouldn’t we be sitting down then?”

“Jeez, that seemed like a nasty fall,” Suzette said. “Okay, so, time to step through the portal?”

“Do you think that’s a good idea?” Tea said. “Who knows what’s on the other side?”

“Only one way to find out,” Delta said.

One by one they went through the portal, which wasn’t normally visible, but as they have now set foot in the astral plane, they were able to see it. At the other end of the portal was a big misty plane, in what at first appeared to be a giant cave. It soon became clear though that this wasn’t a regular realm, and with every step the environment changed, with elements suddenly appearing and disappearing at the same time.

“This place is weird,” Delta said. “How is it all possible?”

“This place doesn’t follow our three dimensions,” Suzette said. “It’s like noodles. In their solid state, they’re straight, and you can easily follow it from one side to the other. However, things change a lot once you cook it, put some sauce on it, and eat it, then—”

“You’re really bad at these things,” Tea said.

As they walked on, Tea noticed a little child walking around, then fading out again. She thought she imagined it all, so they just moved on.

“What did you come here for?” they heard. It was a sudden voice, with no definite direction where it came from.

“Did you hear that?” Delta said.

“Yeah,” Tea said, “and I think we should answer her question.”

“Uh,” Suzette said. “Mar’Ahne, goddess of prosperity, we have come here for some answers. First of all, we would like to know if you’ve heard of Mammon Thyl’Ahn, and if you happened to know where he was. Our second question is where we could find the exit, I haven’t really taken notes on where everything might be.”

They could hear the sound of an earthquake, or a landslide, they weren’t sure, mostly because they noticed nothing else. Then the entity responded.

“Unfortunately, I do not know of this Mammon Thyl’Ahn, nor do I know his whereabouts, so in that regard I will have to disappoint you. I do know of someone who might know where this person might be. I think you know her as Chse.”

“You mean the goddess of love and fertility?” Suzette said.

“If that is what they are calling her, then yes. She has knowledge over all that lives, in your realm as well as the realms around it. I assume you know where to find her shrine.”

“Thanks! I mean, we appreciate your kindness.”

“Please, drop the formalities. I mean you no harm.”

Another quake was heard.

“Now, as for your second question, I will gladly direct you to the way back.”

“Oh thank you,” Suzette said.

“Wait, one more question,” Tea said. “If you’re the goddess of prosperity, why did all those farmers try to raise their crops around your shrine?”

“It is because they were idiots,” the entity said. As she said that, yet another earthquake was heard. A mist then came over them.

“Okay guys,” Tea said, “pack your bags, we’re going to the Chse Shrine.”

“But that shrine isn’t abandoned,” Hank said.

“We’ve talked to Mar’Ahne,” Suzette said. “She said to go there. It might bring us closer to Mammon Thyl’Ahn.”

As they prepared to move, Tea took another look at the shrine. She almost couldn’t see the portal anymore. When she turned around, though, she could see a young girl.

“The lights will give you the answers you seek.”

Tea could only stare at her, not even blinking for a moment. She was so shocked at her sudden appearance, and the fact that nobody else seemed to notice her. Wasn’t she the girl she saw in that other world? She didn’t know, she wasn’t sure. She was completely stunned by the presence of her.

“You know, it would help if you took your eyes off me,” the girl said. Tea then blinked. She was gone.

“Thank you,” Tea heard her echoing.

The Chse Shrine would take several weeks of travel, so they decided to just go by train. The city of Order wouldn’t take them there, and it would’ve taken longer to wait for the city and then actually travel to a nearby location than to go by the public transport.

The guys had their own cabin, as did the girls.

“Uh, Suzette,” Hank said, from outside the cabin. “Are you . . . decent?”

“Of course,” Suzette said, “I’m with company. Come right in.”

Hank opened the door. “Can I ask for some of your . . . stuff?”

“Sure,” she said, while throwing a bottle. “Have fun. You still got one of those things I gave you?” She pointed at the device that she laid out in front of her.

“Of course,” Hank said, as he closed the door. A while later they could faintly hear Clint exclaim, “It’s been a long time I’ve done this.”

“What kind of stuff was that?” Delta asked.

“It’s a special blend made for him,” Suzette said. “Hank doesn’t use it often, but in the few times he does, he prefers this. It really soothes his mind, and doesn’t really have the numbing effect our stuff has. Of course, knowing Trent, he’d just powder his own herbs and add it in there.”

“So . . . Are we going to do this as well?”

“Meh, only if Tea’s down.”

“Hell yeah I am,” Tea said. “Make it the stuff we had at the Dead Shrine.”

“Woah, getting frisky, are we? Won’t you have a problem with it with Delta here as well?”

“You know what, I don’t care, I care about what I want. Besides, we’re going to be here for a couple of days, no privacy and all, and I sure as hell am not getting naked here.”

“You know,” Suzette said, “sometimes double standards can benefit both sides.”

“Wait, what do you mean?” Tea said.

“Well, when guys do it, it’s gross, but when girls do it, it’s hot. The point is, we women can take advantage of this.”

“Heck, we already do,” Delta said. “This one time, two obnoxious guys came up to me and Anette, and so we pretended to be a couple by making out with each other.”

“For real?” Suzette said.

“Of course not, we didn’t actually make out with each other, we faked it.”

“That’s not what I—”

“So what happened next?” Tea said.

“Well, those guys still bought us drinks. We even got to give them an autograph and made a picture with them.”

“That’s hilarious!” Suzette said.

“Yeah, we shouldn’t abuse our womanhood,” Tea said.

“Hey Suzette,” Tea asked. “How long is this going to last?”

“What do you mean? The stuff? If I don’t refill it, it might take about three hours or so. I’ve added something in it to make the effect last longer.”

“No, I mean, us, the entire group. Eventually we’d disband.”

“You don’t know that,” Suzette said. “And besides, if we do break up, it’d be after our quest is complete.”

They heard a knock. “Can we come in?” Hank said.

“Not now,” Suzette said. “I’ve used that special stuff.”

“Oh,” Hank said. The three girls could then hear Hank talk to the others. “Yeah, I don’t think it’s a good idea to join them. Come on, let’s head back to our cabin, smoke some more of that ‘friendship pipe’”

“So yeah,” Suzette said. “What was I saying again?”

“I dunno,” Tea said. “Never mind.” She laughed a bit. “Look at her, wiggling around like—oh crap.”

Suzette laughed hard at both Tea and Delta. “Man, you two really have a strong connection.”

“Shut up,” Delta said in-between breaths. “No we don’t.” It did make Delta laugh, though, and Tea was laughing with her in-between her breaths. And when it also began for Suzette, none of them could contain their laughter.

“Hey Tea,” Suzette said. “About that scar, haven’t you tried to fix it up? Go to some wizard or something?”

“Can’t. I’ve already tried. It’s been too long ago, and even then, it was caused by a magical substance, even though the burn mark itself wasn’t magical.”

“So are you guys into guys or girls?”

“Guys, definitely,” Delta said.

“Guys exclusively,” Tea said. “What about you?”

“You’d like to know, right?” Suzette said.

“We already know you did it with Hank, so I can only assume you also fall for girls.”

“Definitely a girl who likes both,” Delta said. “I know one when I see them.”
 “How?” Tea said. “You had experience with that?”
 “Yep,” Suzette said, “time to add some more stuff.”

“Oh!” Delta said. “Now I get it!”
 “Get what?” Tea said.
 “Well, Anette once told me that Suzette often went to bed early.”
 “And? Oh, wait!” Tea burst out in laughter, followed by Delta and Suzette.

“Wait,” Tea said, “how long are we on this stuff?”
 “Only about ten hours,” Suzette said. “We’ve got time.”
 “Suzette,” they heard from outside the cabin. “We’ve got trouble.”
 “Can’t you guys solve it yourselves?”
 “No, that’s why I’m knocking. We really could use the two fighters.”
 “Wait, and you think I can’t fight?”
 “You’re too baked to fight.”
 “We’re all too baked to fight!”
 Silence. Then a faint, “Yeah, we’re screwed.”

“Okay, hold up,” Suzette said. She threw a bit of powder, and immediately the three snapped out of their high. They then opened their cabin.
 “We’re ready,” Suzette said, holding her crossbow.

“So what’s the situation,” Delta asked.

“There are a few harpies attacking the train,” Hank said. “They’ve already reached the engine room.”

“Let’s go then,” Tea said.

They all rushed to the front of the train, but when they entered the next car, they were stopped by a bunch of harpies who already made their way inside. The space was really cramped, as train cars aren’t really that big on the inside.

“How are we supposed to fight them?” Delta said.

“Leave it to me,” Trent said. He shot his arrows, killing a few harpies. Suzette then used her crossbow to dispatch some more, while Tea used her shuriken.

“Oh heck no,” Delta said, and began dashing to the next car, with Hank and Clint following. There the three found more harpies. Hank used his club to, well, club some harpies, while Clint used his dagger to slash. Delta assisted, by combining offensive moves with her lance with her pole dancing abilities.

“Is that Rock-A-Tear?” Clint said, referring to the music coming out of Delta’s lance.

“Of course,” Delta said. “That song is really a **blast!**” As she said that last word, she landed on her feet while pulling out her lance, not only sending a shockwave through the floor, but also shooting one out of the tip of the lance, disorienting the harpies.

Meanwhile, the other three dispatched their wave of harpies, and made their way to the next car, right at the time they were done as well.

“Next one’s going to be difficult,” Hank said. “Small corridors. We need to send one to the front who can—”

“Attack!” Clint yelled, running to the next car.

“Oh god dammit, Clint!” Tea said, running after him.

“Wait for me!” Delta said.

As Clint arrived in the next car, harpies again began to attack. Tea could see though that Clint could manage the harpies just fine. She did assist Clint though by throwing shuriken, and Delta helped with magic that would increase Clint’s speed, while using her specialization to add even more buffs to her allies.

Everybody then made their way to the engine room. There, on top of the car, they could see a giant harpy, a harpy queen. They could see her, because the roof of the engine room was torn out.

As they all prepared their attack, Suzette and Delta broke down, unable to concentrate on the fight.

“I thought you neutralized the effects,” Delta said to Suzette.

“I only neutralized the effect of the vanilla stuff,” Suzette replied. “That special stuff is still in complete effect.”

“Wait, why isn’t Tea affected?”

“Oh, I am,” Tea said, “I’ve just trained myself to ignore any distractions if I wanted to.”

Tea then began charging up to the harpy queen, throwing a kunai attached to a rope. It wrapped itself around one leg. She then pulled the rope as hard as she could, pulling the half bird half human down to the floor.

Tea looked at the other girls. “While yours make you weaker, mine makes me stronger.”

When both Delta and Suzette regained control, they could gain the upper hand at the harpy queen. Once they subdued her, they decided to question her.

“What are you doing here?” Tea said. “Why did you attack this train?”

The harpy queen looked at her, and then smiled.

“I came for you,” she said, and as she grabbed the ninja with her paws, she broke loose from her bonds and flew off.

“Tea!” Suzette yelled, as the train went into a tunnel.

Chapter 10

The harpy queen

“I bet she’ll be fine,” Delta said. “We can just go on without her.”

“But I don’t want to,” Suzette said. “I want Tea to be on the team as well!”

“Oh don’t act like a little kid, Tea can handle this. She knows where we’re heading.”

“She’s right,” Hank said. “We have to move on.”

“Why?” Suzette said. “It’s not like we have a time limit.”

“That’s true,” Trent said, “but we’ve been dragging this quest on for too long, we all want to move on eventually. We can’t do this quest forever, we’re not getting younger from this.”

“But. . .” Suzette said. Delta could almost see tears in her eyes appear.

“Fine,” Delta said. “Next stop I’ll get off and search for her.”

“Really?” Suzette said, a smile appearing on her face. “I’ll come with you!”

“No, really, you don’t have to.”

“Look, maybe you don’t see this, but aside from my alchemical potions and my knowledge of legends and entities and other stuff most people don’t really get, I’m pretty much dead weight. I don’t have real combat abilities. Heck, I have a crossbow, but that’s useless against most beasts. At least with you I feel a bit useful.”

Delta paused, and looked back. Indeed, Suzette has been really useful to her, even if it was only for recreational purposes.

“I agree,” Hank said, “Suzette should come with you. Aside from traveling to the lake near Vandour, she hasn’t done any adventures without me.”

“Okay,” Delta said, “but what if you guys need some of that stuff?”

“We can live without it,” Hank said, and as he said that, Trent pulled out a pipe to demonstrate that they were fine.

Just then, Clint stormed in.

“Guys, we should split up the team. Delta, Suzette, you go out and search for Tea. The rest of us will go on as planned.”

“We already decided that,” Trent said.

“Oh, well, get going people!”

“Are you guys going to be okay?” Suzette said.

“I’m pretty sure we’re safe,” Hank said. “I’m more worried about you.”

“Don’t worry about us. Also, make sure you’re there when we arrive. You guys still need me for the shrine.”

The train rode off, and the two groups said their goodbyes. It would be a long way before they could find out where Tea would be.

“So,” Suzette said, “where to now?”

“Well, I know that harpies usually can be found somewhere high, so we need to find some high mountains.”

“But there’s a lot of mountains all over Phandagron, and harpies are known to be able to fly for pretty long.”

“But they aren’t fast, and they rarely go too far from their nest.”

“We could just ask people around here if they’ve seen any harpies.”

“So, after questioning a lot of people, we’ve come to the conclusion that there are no harpies here, but that there have been some seen in that village.” Delta was holding a map, and began to draw a circle around the village. “Now, the attack took place here, and ended about here.”

“Right, so we now roughly have an area where the harpies don’t go. I think we should head to that village, to see how frequent the harpies would appear.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

They headed to the village.

“Hey Delta,” Suzette said. “What’s the deal between you and Tea? I mean, most of the time you two are downright hostile towards each other, but when you guys hang out with me, everything’s relatively fine.”

“I think we both just try to put away our difference temporarily, mostly for you. I know you are trying hard for us to make things as fun as possible.”

“But how did you two become so hostile towards each other?”

“Well, believe it or not, but we both used to be friends, best friends even. It’s just that, things happen, and something made us grow apart.”

“But it can’t just be one thing, there has to be more to it.”

Delta remained silent.

“Look,” Delta then said. “Signs.”

“‘Beware for harpies’? This must roughly be the point where harpies appear.”

“Wait a sec, I’m marking it on the map.”

Their investigation took all day, where they took several paths leading out of the village, in roughly the same direction as where they entered the village, until they found another sign. This way they had a rough line that represented the reach of the harpies. They had to follow this line though to find the center of it, so they headed to the next village, and worked from there. They would move to the next village to do the same until they finally had a rough curve, which took them a day or three.

“So if we draw a circle here,” Delta said, “we would only need to find the center, which is here.”

“That’s a pretty long way, about a day of travel, maybe two. And we still aren’t sure which mountain it would be.”

“We’ll just think about that when we get there.”

After two days of travel, they finally arrived. Even though the journey was perilous, they never had a real encounter.

“Okay,” Delta said, “what we have to do is look at the sky, search for any harpies. Once we see some, we need to figure out where they’re coming from or going to.”

They watched and waited. Sometimes they would see a harpy flying, but they were always too late to catch where they were coming from. Eventually, though, as night began to fall, they could see harpies return from their journey.

“I think it’s that mountain,” Suzette said.

“Great, now we need to climb up there and somehow sneak inside.”

“Or we could just climb in my bag and travel with it. I’ll just lay the bag somewhere at the foot of the mountain, make it look like it’s discarded, we both climb in, and get out once we get there.”

“That sounds like a stupid plan.”

Silently, they crawled out of the bag. Delta couldn’t believe it worked, they were actually inside. As Delta was looking for any form of dungeon, though, she noticed Suzette filling her bag with coins.

“Do we have to do it now?” Delta said.

“It’s only a few, and I’m just shoving it in.”

“Okay, but hurry.”

When Suzette was finally ready, they headed to the hallway. Apparently the treasury wasn’t that heavily guarded, which meant that it was really deep inside the hideout. There were several rooms, but they knew they had to take the stairs down. Once they finally found one, they found the dungeon, where they could see several cages filled with young women. Then they spotted Tea.

“How the heck did you guys get in here?” Tea said.

“By using this bag,” Suzette said.

“It’s actually really spacious,” Delta said.

“Well, give it to me,” Tea said. They did, after which Tea climbed into the bag herself. “You’re right, it is spacious. Instruct the others to climb in here as well.”

One by one the prisoners entered the bag.

“Wait, Rosalind?” Delta said. “What are you doing here?”

“The same reason most of us are here, we were captured.”

“You two know each other?” Suzette said.

“We go way back,” Delta said.

Once all prisoners got inside the bag, Tea and Rosalind climbed out.

“So, what are we going to do now?” Delta said.

“I’d hate to say it,” Tea said, “but we need to take on a dark wizard.”

“Why?” Suzette said.

“It’s because of me,” Rosalind said. “The only reason we’ve got kidnapped was because they were looking for female warriors. They were out to get the princess of Zaendal.”

“Wait, the princess?” Delta said. “I don’t get it, why would they...” It was then that Delta understood that one of her friends was a princess.

“Wait, why would they want the princess?” Suzette said.

Rosalind explained. “The dark wizard requires the blood of a royal to open a gate to a realm where a dark demon is imprisoned.”

“I don’t get it,” Suzette said. “Why would it link to a demon?”

“Because the ancestors of one of the bloodlines were the ones that locked it away,” Rosalind said. “My ancestors.”

“Well, why can’t we just get out?” Suzette said.

“Because the wizard has already drawn a little blood from each and every one of us. He’s already tried some of the blood, but not yet that of mine. I need to stop him from doing it.”

They all headed to the portal room, where the wizard would be. On their way, they encountered harpies, but with their combined forces the harpies were easily dispatched.

Finally, they arrived at the portal room.

“So you managed to escape,” the wizard said. “That must mean that either of you two must be the one.”

“How are you even sure any of them is a princess?” Suzette said.

“Magic, my dear. Now, my magic isn’t strong enough to pinpoint the exact location of the right one, but it did allow me to find potential candidates.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve sent my harpy queen out to fetch anybody who had the soul of a royal with them. I’ve enchanted her with eyes that could pick up anybody who does.”

“Wait,” Tea said. “I’m not a royal.” She held her pendant. Could it be...

“Well,” the wizard said. “If you’re not the one, then that means...”

He took a vial, and walked to the center of a large marking.

“You’ve all arrived just in time for me to do the last step in this ritual. Now witness, the return of Lyeh’r’ehr!”

He threw the potion on the ground, and for a moment nothing seemed to be happening. But then a puff of smoke appeared, which grew larger and larger.

“Wait, why didn’t we interrupt him?” Suzette said. “He was monologuing, for crying out loud. We could have dispatched him before he did that blood thingy.”

From behind the wizard, a portal opened. First small, but as more smoke accumulated, the hole grew bigger and bigger, until it was even bigger than the harpy queen. Out of this portal, a hand came, and then another hand, followed by feet, then the head, and finally the rest of the body.

“Yes! Master! Be free!”

The demon looked around, and then blasted a hole in the sky, through which he flew off.

“Well that was anti-climatic,” Suzette said.

“Now as for you,” the wizard said. “I have no use for—“

Just as he was saying that, Delta had thrown a stun magic at the wizard, paralyzing him, prompting the harpy queen to attack. They all then proceeded a full-on attack, each using their own weapons. This proved to be effective, and the harpy queen was defeated, which actually wasn’t all that surprising, seeing as Tea herself could have taken her on.

“No,” the wizard said, recovering from his paralysis. “My love.” He looked at the harpy queen, lying on the floor, holding his arms out as if he wanted to pick her up, after which he turned his attention to her attackers. “What have you done!”

“Oh come on, she’ll be fine,” Suzette said, but this just enraged the wizard. He then shot a dark ball at Suzette, which caught everybody in surprise. As she fell down from the impact, the harpy queen began limping towards the wizard.

“Oh,” the wizard said. “Apparently you were right.”

The harpy queen then looked at the wizard. “You. . . You called me your love?”

“Yes. Yes, I think I did. I love you, my sweet Airdeena. Let’s get married!”

“Are you proposing to me?”

“Yes!”

“Then I accept!”

As the harpy queen and the wizard flew away, the rest was standing around Suzette.

“Suzette!” Delta said. “Suzette, wake up! Wake up dammit! Don’t you go die on us!”

For a moment nothing seemed to happen, but then she opened her eyes.

“Ow, that hurt,” Suzette said. She stood up.

“Come,” Rosalind said. “We have to get out before they get back.”

All women were released from the bag, and everyone parted ways.

“What are you going to do now?” Delta said.

“I’m going after the demon,” Rosalind said. “It’s a shame you couldn’t come with.”

“I have other obligations.” Delta paused. “Do. . . Do they know?”

“About my heritage? No. Or at least they didn’t. I’m sure they’re all searching for me right now, though.”

They both looked at each other.

“So,” Delta said. “This is goodbye then.”

“We’ll see each other again,” Rosalind said. “Until then, farewell.”

“Farewell.”

Chapter 11

Chse

“I really think we should have gone back up there to get the rest of the money,” Suzette said.

“It’s too dangerous,” Tea said. They looked up, and in the distance, they could see the harpy queen and the wizard flying back, now happily married. It was all kinds of messed up, but in a way, Tea found it kind of cute. It showed that even bad people sometimes can have a good moment. When she began thinking about how their children would look though, she stopped thinking about it altogether. Then again, all harpies were female, and newborn harpies had to come from somewhere. Yeah, now even I don’t want to think about that.

“You’re right,” Suzette said. “Hey, we should totally get wasted!”

“You know I’m always up for that stuff,” Delta said, “but shouldn’t we wait until we’re somewhere safer? Besides, we need the next train to catch.”

“Is this the vanilla stuff?” Tea said.

It would be four days until they would finally arrive, quite a few days longer than they originally planned, mostly because the only fast train that went straight to their destination was out of commission due to the attack. This train had smaller private cabins, but at least you could still lock it from both the inside as well as the outside. It did prove to be a bit of a problem for the three, as you couldn’t really comfortably sit, but Suzette had a solution. She filled gap between the two benches to basically make a mattress where they could comfortably sit on and even lie on if they would really get tired. They still didn’t have a lot of space to move around, and because of its limited space it would get pretty warm inside, but that didn’t bother them. All three would just wear something more comfortable. It was only unfortunate that the windows weren’t allowed to be opened, but on the other hand, with harpies flying around, why would they?

They also hung a curtain in front of the door, in case one of them had to leave, so that they’d still have their privacy when the door opened. Not that much happened, aside from the stuff they’d use to ease their minds a little, there was nothing else happening.

“Actually, it’s a completely new blend,” Suzette said.

“What does it do?” Delta said.

“I have no clue, so far it doesn’t really do anything.”

“Yeah, I’ve noticed it,” Tea said. “What do you think it’s supposed to do?”

Suzette paused. “Did you guys see anything strange happen when we were near a shrine?”

“Well, yeah,” Delta said. “I saw a little girl.”

“I saw one as well,” Tea said.

“Good,” Suzette said. “I’m glad I’m not the only one. I’ve been going to shrines for many times to research how they work, and at times I could notice a little girl taking note of me. Eventually I would even see her when I’m nowhere near one. Thing is, it was always after my head cleared up a bit after using this stuff, or at least a subset of this stuff. I’ve already narrowed it down to a handful of ingredients I’ve used back then and in the current blend, so now I’m trying out each component individually, filtering out any component that might cause any of the numbing stuff.”

“Are you sure it wasn’t just an entity that would actively look for us?” Tea said. Delta however stared out her window. It was night already, so there wasn’t a lot to see, yet Delta could see gowing dots, the kind of glow only ghosts would emit. Suddenly a face flashed by, spooking Delta.

“What did you see?” Suzette said.

“A face,” Delta said. “It was a face.”

“That means we have the right component, I guess.”

“What now?” Tea said.

“Now we wait.”

Tea woke up. It was still night, and the device that would emit the components was still running. It was really dark, all the lights were already out, meaning the others were already asleep. She looked around, trying to find the door. She finally found it, opened it, and went straight to the restroom stalls. After she returned, she crawled back onto the mattress, and locked the door.

“Nice place you’ve got here,” she heard. Tea looked around. There she could see the girl, glowing like a ghost, except something was different. Tea turned off the device.

“Who are you?” Tea asked.

“People call me Lyra,” she said. “I call myself Lyra.”

“You mean with an ‘o’ or an ‘au’?”

“A ‘y’”

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Is that so? At least it makes more sense than you three seeing me as a young ghost girl.”

As the stuff wore out, she could see a the true face of the little girl. Right in front of her was a creature of the night. She could see her teeth, shining in the moonlight, and her eyes glowing hot red. A long hiss could be heard from her direction.

Tea quickly turned on the light and prepared to attack.

Nothing. She was gone. Tea decided to turn the light back off.

“Do you really think you can stand a chance against a vampire?” Tea heard behind her. She could now feel her warm arms wrapped around her waist. Wait, warm?

“Don’t worry,” she said. “I won’t hurt you. If I wanted to, I would have done so long ago.”

“What do you want?” Tea said. She wasn’t sure if she should turn around or not.

“Let’s just say that I have been following you three. You are interesting cases, I’ve never seen two girls with so much animosity towards each other be united by this one individual.”

“Wait, how long have you been following us?”

“You two? Ever since you killed that wyvern. As for her, I just stumbled upon her after she started to investigate the shrines.”

“But why now? Why would you reveal yourself after hiding for so long?”

“She,” Lyra said, as she pointed towards Suzette, still holding her other arm around Tea.

“I don’t swing that way,” Tea said, taking the arm off her waist. “Just so you know.” Tea now looked at Suzette. “I really don’t see it, though.”

“Turn the machine on,” Lyra said. “But add a bit of this.”

“What is it?”

“It’s distilled vampire blood. It won’t be able to turn you, but it still has some of the powers a vampire has.”

Tea did just that, and then waited. She knew it would take a few minutes to actually kick in.

“Normally you could just ingest distilled vampire blood,” Lyra said, “but doing it this way reduces the risk of accidentally turning you to zero, and it might unlock some other senses as well.”

“Wait, senses?”

“I believe it’s already working,” Lyra said. Her voice seemed to come from a different direction than she previously was, and when Tea looked in that direction, she could see a woman with long dark hair, completely clad in purple, sitting in that corner again.

“Wait, I thought you were—”

“Behind you? I’m fast, and I already wasn’t behind you when you took my hand off you. Now take another look at your friend.”

Tea could see it now. Suzette’s body was now pulsing, but instead of the pulse being a bright color, it was completely black.

“What’s happening to her?”

“You tell me. Did anything happen to her in the past few days? Did she come in contact with dark magic?”

“Now you’ve mentioned it,” Tea said, “she was hit by a blast from a dark wizard.”

“Oh, in that case it’s not a huge deal. I mean, she still won’t survive this if it’s not solved, but it’s pretty simple to reverse the effects. Now I want you to wake up your friends.”

Tea did, and within a few seconds, Delta woke up, dazed.

“Why’d you wake me up? Is it morning already?”

Suzette was next, and for a short while, she was awake, but barely.

“Tea?” Suzette said. “I’m not feeling well. I think we should lay down on the stuff.”

“What’s happening to her?” Tea said.

“Wait,” Delta said. “Is there something wrong with—who is that?”

“She’s Lyra. With a ‘y’. No time to explain. Lyra, tell me how to fix her.”

“Let me handle it,” Lyra said. She then grabbed Suzette, and prepared to bite her.

“Wait!” Tea said. “You’re not going to turn her into a vampire.”

“In that case she’s doomed,” Lyra said.

“No, wait,” Delta said. “What’s going on here?”

“That blast of magic that wizard shot at Suzette, it’s killing her.”

“Then if turning her in a vampire would save her, why shouldn’t she do it?”

“Because it might turn her into a different person!”

“She is right,” Lyra said. “Once you’ve turned into a vampire, your old life is gone. But hey, it’s a fair trade-off, and a better deal than dying.”

“No,” Delta said. “There has to be another way. Please tell me there is another way.”

“There might be another way, but depending on how long ago she was hit, we might not have enough time.”

“What do you need?” Delta said. “Just say it, and I’ll give it to you.”

“Well, if you really want to save her, how ‘experienced’ is she?”

“Very,” Suzette said in a faint voice. “I assume you mean. . .” she lost her consciousness briefly, but she quickly opened her eyes again.

“Well, in that case wouldn’t wouldn’t mind my ‘treatment’. Now unless you two like to watch, you could give me some privacy.”

“Are you sure it will work?” Delta said.

“It might. The energy inside her needs some sort of outlet, and the fastest way is through an emotional one, however, as she’s having a hard time to even stay awake, I’ll have to do something drastic.”

“Then we’ll stay,” Delta said.

“Wait, ‘we’?” Tea said.

“You’re her friend as well, we should stay.”

“I don’t think you understand what she’s about to do to her. It involves them disrobing and—”

“I know exactly what they’re going to do, Tea, but I also know that she needs our help.”

“Wait, you don’t mean. . .”

“Of course not, we just have to watch here. I know her, she’d love it if we’d watch.”

A faint smile on Suzette appeared. “You know me too well.”

“In that case, put this on.” Tea gave Delta a scarf, one of the many Tea had brought with her after their day at the recreational center.

“What should I do with it?” Tea said.

“Wrap it around your head, cover your mouth and nose with it, and preferably also your ears. Suzette, where’s the special stuff?”

“It’s somewhere in my bag, in. . .” Another moment of unconsciousness. “Find a vial with a heart drawn on it.”

“Which one?” Tea said.

“All the ones with the heart are the special stuff.”

Tea took one, and added the contents of it to the device.

The flash of light was visible for several miles. As the light faded again, both Lyra and Suzette were lying there, exhausted. Tea turned off the device, and then wrapped a blanket over them.

"I never felt anything like this," Lyra said. "That stuff is powerful."

"I know, right?" Suzette said. "Thank you."

"Did it work?" Delta said. "And why did I have to wear this scarf?"

"So that we wouldn't be affected by it," Tea said. "I really don't want to flop around with a clear head, especially not with you around."

Suzette looked into Lyra's eyes. "Are you..."

"I'm a vampire," Lyra said.

"You don't feel like a vampire, and I've seen a lot."

"I'm special. I'll just leave it at that. You'll have to figure the rest on your own."

"So, about... Are you...?"

"I generally enjoy the presence of men, but I really don't care that much about the gender. It's the intention that counts for me."

Meanwhile, Delta and Tea were bickering.

"Look, just because you don't want to doesn't mean I don't want to," Delta said. "You should have asked me first."

"Maybe I didn't want you to," Tea said.

"That doesn't give you the right to decide for others. Besides, that stuff wouldn't kick in with me until a while after anyway."

"But I'd have to go through it all, I have to see everything. Try to look at things my way. Most normal people would be disturbed by what happens here."

"Again, it would have still been my choice. If you don't like it, don't watch. You can just plug your ears and cover your eyes or something."

"So," Suzette said. "Did it work?"

Lyra lifted the sheets a bit, and looked at her.

"Kind of. There's still some residue on you. Your body will take care of it, but..."

"But what? Is it bad?"

"Well, it's not bad per se, but, well, I'll just tell it to you straight. The magic inside your body is changing you, and as it's dark magic, I'm not sure how that would work out. Further more, since the residual energy is inside your body it might attract the magical energy you just expelled"

"Does that mean I have to keep doing this for the rest of my life?"

"Don't be silly, as I said, your body will take care of the magic. You won't die of it anymore as it would most likely come in small quantities now."

"So what's the problem?"

Suzette looked into Lyra's eyes. At first they were concerned eyes, but then they softened, as if she was relieved.

"Did you know you had a bit of magic in you already?" Lyra said.

"I do?" Suzette said. "How so?"

"Something is neutralizing the dark magic in such a way that it becomes harmless. Tell me, was your mother a magic user? A fairy or a wizard?"

Suzette was silent, but then said, "She was a witch. A dark witch."

Lyra laughed. “There is no such thing as dark witches. All witches use the same kind of magic, a neutral magic, which is neither black or white. It’s how you use it.”

“But wait, if I had magic in me, why can’t I use it?”

“That’s something you’d have to find out for yourself.”

Suzette looked at Tea and Delta, who were now starting to hit each other with stuff while bickering.

“Should we put our clothes back on or . . .”

Lyra looked at the two, and then back to Suzette. “I don’t think they would hear us anyway.”

“Are they still going on?” Suzette said.

“Yes, they are,” Lyra said.

“Seriously, they’re still not tired?”

“To be fair, neither am I.”

Both Delta and Tea woke up, both in each others arms. When they noticed that, they backed away from each other. Suzette herself was already awake.

“How long have we been out?” Tea said.

“Well,” Suzette said, “breakfast ends in an hour, so, you guys have slept for quite a while.”

“Where’s Lyra?” Tea said.

“Lyra’s gone.”

“Oh well,” Delta said. “Time for breakfast.”

When both got out of their cabin to get some breakfast though, they could hear the door locking behind them.

“Can we amplify its effect?” they heard on the other side. It was Lyra.

“Sure,” they could hear Suzette say. “I just need to add this to it, and mix it up a little, et voila!”

“Delta,” Tea said. “Let’s go.”

“Can’t we just wait for a little while?”

“Seems like I don’t have to worry about some competition.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because you’re eavesdropping on two women.”

“Wait, no. I’m exclusively into men, not women.”

“And that’s why you were listening.”

“I was just . . . We don’t have decent clothes, that’s all.”

“It’s too late to ask for those, so let’s go get some breakfast.”

“Would you look at that. Man, I’d like to eat those chicken legs.”

“Yeah, especially that one with the dark hair.”

“You get her, I’ll take the blonde one.”

Two big thuggish men came up to Tea and Delta and sat down next to them. It was clear they had intentions. Bad intentions.

“Hello gorgeous,” the one next to Tea said. “Let’s all go to our cabin, and I’ll show you what a real man can do.”

“I don’t think so,” Tea said, still eating.

The one next to Delta began to speak. “How about you and me have some fun time together?”

“No, thanks,” Delta said.

“I don’t think you understand,” a third said, “we ain’t askin’”

Two thugs began to grab the girls, trying to grab them to their cabin, followed by a pretty large crowd.

That was a huge mistake.

Tea quickly jumped loose, and started to kick her captor in the face. Meanwhile, Delta began to stomp the one who was holding her feet, and backflipped over the one holding her.

“Do we mind if some of them won’t live another day?” Delta yelled to Tea.

“That’s a stupid question,” Tea said. “Nobody may live!”

This was enough reason for Delta to break the neck of the one holding her. Tea herself then took all knives and forks used for breakfast, and began stabbing thugs in their necks before they could get to her. Delta took notice, ran to the bodies, took the cutlery sticking out of their necks, and used them herself to dispatch a few.

Just like Tea said, none survived.

The train guards entered the car just as Tea and Delta were about to throw one of the thugs out of the window.

“What happened here?”

“They attacked us,” Delta and Tea both said, “so we had to kill them.”

“Ladies, I think you’d have to come with us.”

“Can we at least eat our breakfast?” Tea said, who then got an elbow to her side from Delta.

“I can’t believe we got a lifetime pass to travel by train for free!” Delta said.

“Yeah, and we also managed to get ones for the rest,” Tea said. “Although ours are special.”

“What do you mean?”

“Look, every traveling party that travels with either of us get huge discounts, and we get the more luxurious meals, plus we get to stay at the luxurious cabins.”

“Don’t the other get that as well?”

“Well, they do get the lifetime pass and the luxurious meals, but not the group discount and the rooms.” Tea wiped the sweat from her forehead. “Man, this chest is heavy.”

“Yeah, how are we going to split all that money?”

“Well, it’s not like we both need the money that badly, so maybe we could just put it in the bag or something. I myself was thinking we should bring it back to Koki Village, get that paved road our village always wanted.”

“Oh, you didn’t know?”

“Know what?”

“They’ve already done that. The higher ups back at Zaendal thought it would be better for the trade if all nearby villages had paved roads. But, they could still use the money to expand and do other improvements. The houses could really use some patch jobs.”

They finally arrived at their cabin. Tea could still hear Suzette and Lyra. “Oh man, are they still busy?”

“It seems so. I still can’t believe though that the trains would let these scumbags on this train. I really don’t want to know how many times they’ve done the same thing to women.”

“Considering their search warrant only said ‘dead’, I’d say they did a lot of unsavory things. So, what are they going to do with the body?”

“They probably will take them to one of the cities with it or something. What we’ve got here is only a fraction of what they’ll be getting.”

“Well, I don’t care. They can’t hurt anybody anymore.”

They both sat down on the chest, which was mainly filled with gold coins. It would be enough to renovate the entire village with still some coins to spare.

“Tea,” Delta said. “Look, this journey is going to be long, we’ll be stuck together for a very long time. Now I’m not asking you to be friends with me, or even put up with me, but, I think it’s best to at least tone down our feuds. You know, for the sake of everybody, especially for Suzette.”

“I can’t promise that, Delta. I just... I don’t know. I’ll try, but only because of Suzette.”

“Well, yeah, that’s what I meant.”

“So you guys are moving to the luxurious rooms?” Suzette said, a bit sad.

“No,” Delta said. “We are going to the luxurious rooms. We all are.”

“Wow, that sounds great! But, doesn’t that pass only count for you guys?”

“We asked them,” Tea said, “and they said it’s alright. If you want a separate room, they can give it to you.”

Suzette was happy. “But, you guys won’t mind if I stay with you two, right?”

“Actually,” Tea said, “we’ll probably take separate cabins.”

“No, you can’t! I don’t wanna!” Suzette began stomping her feet like a kid, almost in a whining tone. It actually sounded pretty cute, but also as annoying as an actual kid doing that.

“Suzette, listen, if Delta and I stay in the same room, things will not go well.”

“Let me handle this,” Lyra said to Suzette. She then said a few words, or, to be precise, chants. Suddenly magical chains began appearing, and began engulfing Tea and Delta.

“Now you two literally can’t get too far away from each other, and the distance is close enough so that having a separate cabin would really be impossible.”

“Wait, what the hell?” Delta said.

“Why the heck would you do that?” Tea said.

“Suzette wanted to be in the same cabin as you two, so I made sure she can.”

“I’m not going to sleep in the same bed as hers,” Tea said.

“It’s not like you’ll get to sleep in one,” Delta said.

“Don’t make me shorten the distance,” Lyra said. “I can make it a kissing distance. The curse will persist until the end of the ride. Make sure you share the

bed, or you'll be stuck for life."

"What about you," Suzette said. "Are you an actual passenger here? If not, I don't know if we can explain your presence."

"Don't worry about that," Lyra said. "Let's just say that I have a share in Dagoncroft Export."

After they reached their destination, they parted ways. Where Lyra would go they didn't know. They themselves had to get to the Chse Shrine.

"Look," Tea said.

"So that's why Clint wanted to split up the group between men and women," Delta said.

"He did? That's typical of him."

"I don't get it," Suzette said. "Why would this be the reason for the split-up?"

"The tournament rules stated three man team," Tea said. "He took it literal, as in, three men. Clint's an idiot."

"That," Delta said, "and he needed people to retrieve Tea."

"But you said Tea would escape on her own just fine," Suzette said.

"You just didn't want to save me," Tea said, looking at Delta. "Figures."

"I can't believe we got front row seats!" Suzette said.

"Apparently word got around that we took down some infamous group of thugs," Tea said.

"Tea insisted on paying for the tickets," Delta said.

Suzette laughed. "What an idiot."

"I'm right here, you know," Tea said, a bit annoyed.

It was the final match of this tournament, an epic battle between two groups. The first team was announced, which consisted of Clint, Trent and Hank. Then the second team was announced.

"Wait," Delta said. "Is that... It is! Hey, Clayth, Aurelia!"

"You know them?" Suzette asked.

"I used to train with them back when I was a knight in training."

"Look who's here as well," Tea said.

"Garfield? What's he doing here?"

But Tea was already concentrating on her own group. She could faintly hear the conversation they had.

"For the last time," Trent said, "a three man group is different from a group of three men."

"How is that different?" Clint said.

"Clint," Hank said, "I like you, I really do, but if you don't shut up about it you'll be eating your food from a straw for the next few weeks."

Tea began to laugh.

"What are you laughing about?" Delta asked.

"Well, I was just... Well, nothing. I thought I heard something funny."

"What did they say?"

"Trent explained that there was a difference between a three man group and a group of three men, which Clint still didn't understand."

“So Hank began losing his patience, right?” Suzette said. They all laughed a bit.

The tournament began. It was a long battle, with both sides being evenly matched. Just then, though, a dragon came swooping by.

“Is that part of the tournament?” Tea asked.

“I don’t think it is,” Suzette said.

The dragon came back, and landed in the middle of the field.

“My master Lyeh’r’ehr has summoned me here to take care of you,” the dragon said to Delta’s Zaendal friends. “Prepare to meet your doom!”

As everybody fled, Tea, Delta and Suzette ran towards their own group.

“You’ve made it,” Hank said.

“I’m always careful,” Suzette said.

“We should get out of here,” Trent said. “The dragon isn’t after us, they’re after the other team.”

“I agree,” Delta said. “They’ll be fine, I’ve seen them battle stronger beings.”

“Shouldn’t we run?” Suzette said.

“Nah, we can just take it easy. No need to tire ourselves.”

“So Clint,” Tea said, as they walked out of the arena. “I heard you decided for yourself who would be on this tournament.”

“It did say three man group,” Clint said.

“Yeah, I really don’t feel like going against that.”

“Why are we waiting outside?” Tea asked.

“Because I want to see my friends again before we go”, Delta replied. “Hey look, the dragon’s been slain.”

“How are you sure they would exit on this side?”

“Wait, crap, you’re right!”

Delta ran inside, and Tea followed.

“Delta, wait! You can’t just rush back in there!”

“Come on, it will only take a few minutes!”

Suzette was also following them. “Wait up!”

“Hey guys!” Delta said. She could see her old friends turning around.

“Hey Delta!” Jules said. “What are you guys doing?”

“We’re here for the Chse Shrine to maybe get some information about Mammon Thyl’Ahn,” Delta said. “Oh, these are Tea and Suzette.”

“So you’re Tea. I have always wanted to meet the other half of the wyvern slayers. My name is Aurelia.”

“Oh yeah,” Delta said, “these are Jules, Clayth, Parker and Bohr.”

“Aren’t you going to introduce me to this lovely lady?” Garfield said, taking Suzette’s hand and kissing it. “My name is Garfield. Garfield Kane.”

“Suzette Lenoise,” Suzette said, blushing.

“So you’re Anette’s sister, right?” Clayth said. She nodded. “Your sister and I have met a few times when we went to visit Delta.”

“And what brings you here?” Delta said.

“We’re actually searching for both Rosalind and Lyeh’r’ehr,” Clayth said. “When we showed up at the mountain where she was supposed to be, we found out she already left.”

“Also, some wizard who lives there is supposedly married to a harpy,” Jules said.

“Wait,” Delta said. “We were there just a week ago. We traveled by train. How did you get here so fast?”

Jules pointed up, pointing at the various airships floating around. “We’ve hitched a ride on one of these. This place was as far as they would bring us.”

“Well, Rosa was going to find Lyeh’r’ehr herself,” Delta said. “Wait, let me get this map out. We were originally here, we three went this way, which means that Rosa would have headed. . . That way.”

“Without a horse she couldn’t be too far from that place,” Jules said, looking at the map. “If she got a horse in that town she might have gotten far, but not by a lot. Now if we take into account our own traveling speed, and if we were to take the airship to this town, we could bump into her around. . . I have no idea.”

“Bohr thinks we should look at where demon is heading,” the giant said.

“That actually makes a lot of sense,” Clayth said. “If Rosalind was chasing after Lyeh’r’ehr herself, she would probably go in a straight line towards a reference point. And that reference point is around here. Wait, let me copy that on our map.”

“So,” Garfield said to Suzette. “The Chse Shrine, eh? You know, you won’t need her, you’re fertile on your own.”

“Smooth, Garfield,” Tea said. “Very smooth. That way you will surely get the girls.”

“I so want you right now,” Suzette said.

“Let’s get going,” Aurelia said.

“Well, I’m sorry we couldn’t talk for longer,” Jules said. “I’ll see you guys another time. We’ll keep in touch.”

“No! Wait!” Suzette said. “Can’t you go tomorrow? Or in thirty minutes? I’ll be really quick!”

It was late in the evening. The huge crowd surrounding the Chse Shrine was gone. They had all the time to do what they had to.

“So, what now?” Tea said.

“This shrine is unique in that it’s actually active,” Suzette said. “Most shrines nowadays are so rarely used that they lay dormant, due to all the communication techniques we use. However, this one is really active. If we didn’t have a tangible form we could have just entered this portal, but the shrine stone keeps it from ripping a hole in the space-time continuum. However, if we would leave our bodies behind, we could all enter this portal.”

“Does that mean you’ll be using that again?” Delta said.

“No, we don’t have to. I do have incense that serves the same purpose, so we could just use that.”

“Is it safe?” Tea said.

“Yes. I made sure it wouldn’t burn for too long.”

Suzette set up the incense, and everybody was ready to go. Slowly they fell into a deep slumber, only for their souls to stand next to their bodies.

“Let’s go,” Suzette said. Then they stepped through the portal.

It seemed like a normal place. It was a big landscape with an otherworldly sky. There was something off, though, the entire place seemed to jitter at random times.

There was a small temple standing, and there they could see a woman. They walked to it.

“Chse?” Suzette said.

“Yes?” Chse said. “With who do I have the pleasure?”

“My name is Suzette Lenoise.”

“Ah, the sister of Anette Lenoise. I didn’t recognise you without your body. And I assume this man is Hank Eugene Barton?”

“Eugene?” Delta said.

“I can feel a strong connection between you two,” Chse continued.

Suzette blushed.

“And this must be Trent Demazure,” Chse said.

“My pleasure, Goddess of Love and Fertility,” Trent said.

“Clint, nice seeing you again.”

Clint waved. “Hello!”

“And you two. Delta Omi and Tea Cha.”

“Why did she name us together?” Delta said.

“I’m still not sure how she’d know our name,” Tea said.

“I’m a Goddess. I watch over all that is, from K.O. to Chakar and beyond. Now, what can I do for you?”

“I need to find Mammon Thyl’Ahn,” Clint said. “I’ve heard you might know where we could find him.”

“Ah,” Chse said. “Mammon Thyl’Ahn. The Ancient Shadow, The Melodious Silence. The Rogue Bard. Yes, I know of him.”

“And?” Clint said, eagerly awaiting an answer.

Chse smiled though. “Don’t think I will give this information for free. I will need you to pass a simple test. It’s no big deal, and the test is proportional to how much the information is worth. I might even have been generous.”

“So, what’s this test?” Suzette said.

Chse looked at Tea and Delta. “I want you two to make out.”

It took a while for Tea to realize what she said. “Wait, are you serious?!”

It took even longer for Delta to register. “With her?!”

“Come on, guys,” Suzette said. “It would only take a few seconds.”

“For a whole minute,” Chse said.

“Okay, a whole minute. But still, this is important to Clint.”

They both looked at Clint, with his puppy eyes.

“Besides,” Suzette said. “It’s only your souls that have to do this. Your bodies wouldn’t even touch. Like, literally, your bodies wouldn’t touch. I even made sure I was lying in-between you two.”

Delta and Tea agreed. At first they hesitated, weren’t sure how to initiate it. Then they slowly, carefully, moved closer to each other.

“No,” Tea said. “Move your head to the other side.”

Delta moved her head a bit. “Like this?”

“Yeah. Do we have to hold each other or something?”

“I think it makes it easier to keep our balance, especially when—”

Tea interrupted her. “Okay, let’s not stall this.”

“Wait.”

“What?”

“Tongue or no tongue?”

“What kind of question is that? No tongue!”

“Got it.”

“No wait, tongue.”

“Make up your mind, tongue or no tongue?”

“... Preferably no tongue, but if it slips we’ll just go with that.”

“Fair enough.”

The men watched in amazement, well, aside from Hank, who mostly didn’t seem to be bothered by it. Clint and Trent began high-fiving, and when they both asked Hank for a high five, he complied. Even Suzette got one when she asked for it.

“Too bad I can’t record this,” Suzette said.

“You never cease to amaze me,” Hank said in a deadpan tone. “But yes, I have to agree on that.”

When Tea and Delta were done, Chse began clapping.

“Bravo, this is what I just needed. If it weren’t for your human minds not being able to handle my true appearance, I would have asked for more, but I don’t want you to see me lose myself. Now, I did promise something, so I will keep my end of the bargain. The one you seek can be found at where the hammer keeps away the chaos.”

“That was really vague,” Delta said.

“I’d love to give you the explanation, but that would have required you two to actually go a little bit farther.”

“Yeah,” Tea, “that most certainly isn’t going to happen.”

“And either way,” Chse continued, “your time is almost up.”

“Thank you, Goddess of Love and Fertility,” Clint said.

“Oh Clint, you know you can just call me Chse.”

Clint smiled. “I love you!”

“I love you too sweetie.”

Chapter 12

Split

Slowly they all woke up. First, Clint, then Trent, Hank and Suzette, and finally Tea and Delta, who for some reason had landed in each others arms. When they realized that, they backed away from each other.

“Why does that keep happening to us?” Tea said. “We weren’t even next to each other,”

“Seems like the cosmos wants you two to be together,” Suzette joked.

“That’s not funny!” Tea and Delta both said.

“So Clint,” Trent said. “What’s up with you and Chse?”

“Well,” Clint said, “as some of you might or might not know, I grew up at an orphanage.”

“You’re an orphan?” Suzette said.

“No,” Clint said. “My parents just didn’t like me, and faked their deaths.”

“Wait, how are you certain your parents faked their deaths?” Delta said.

“It’s because I’ve looked them up,” Tea said. “It was the last I could do after I . . . Well . . .”

“That’s not important,” Clint said. “Anyway, I had this friend at the orphanage, Zooey. She was my only friend. Everybody at the orphanage bullied me. But one day Zooey just left, leaving behind half of her pendant. A few days later a woman came and adopted me.”

“And what does it have to do with Chse?” Delta said.

“Turns out, both Zooey and my adoption mother were personalities of Chse. When I got adopted, she showed me the other half of the pendant. We remained friends ever since, and I’ve been regarding her as my real mother.”

“Chse is everywhere,” Tea said. “I’m serious, I’ve met many people who said to have been saved by Chse herself, in person.”

“But you’ve never seen her yourself until now?” Delta said.

“Of course not, none of us really needed her love and care, we found our own happiness.”

At the inn, Tea walked up to Clint.

“Clint,” Tea said. “I’m really sorry for losing your necklace.”

“It’s okay, I’ve forgiven you a long time ago.”

“Wait, let me speak. I’ve been tracking it down, using both the description you gave me, the location I’ve lost it, and your body odor, and, well. . . It took me quite some months, but I think I found it.”

She gave it to Clint. “Yes, this is the one. Thanks!”

“Oh Clint,” the pendant said. “You found it again!”

“No, Tea found it for me!”

“I missed talking to you this way.”

“I missed it too, mother. But I gotta go now.”

“Take good care, Clint.”

“I will, mother.”

“Also, please stop calling me mother,” the voice said, in a kind tone. “It makes me feel really old.”

“Was that Chse?” Tea asked.

“Yeah,” Clint said. “Didn’t I tell you that before? I always talk to mother this way. But thank you, it really means a lot to me. Why did you do this?”

“I really felt bad, knowing that it was the one thing you’ve got of her that you really treasured. She was your only friend. I. . . I found it a while ago, had it for a few months. I didn’t want to give it to you because, well. . .”

“What is it?” Clint said.

Tea started to have tears in her eyes. “The truth is that I hate being with you, but I also can’t leave you. I care for you, you’re like a brother to me, but this pendant was the only thing keeping me from just leaving you.”

“What do you mean?”

“It means that once this quest is over, we will never see each other again.”

Clint paused. “I understand. I guess it is time we would part ways someday. I’ve been keeping you down for so long. Did you think I didn’t notice? The fact is, you’re one of my best friends, and as a friend I’ll say that it’s best we’d part ways. So, if you really want to go, you shouldn’t wait until the quest is over.”

Tea nodded.

“Goodbye, Tea,” Clint said.

Clint looked as he watched Tea run away in tears.

“I can’t believe she’s gone,” Suzette said.

“There there,” Delta said. “It’s okay, it’s gonna be alright.”

“This is exactly what you wanted, right? Her being gone?” Delta could hear the anger in her tone.

“No, it’s not. . . Look, I’ll promise that after this quest is gone we’ll go look for her, but for now we’ll have to do this without her. I’ll swear I will.”

Suzette calmed down, then looked out the window. “Will she be alright?”

“I’m sure she will.”

She woke up. It’s only been a few days ago that she left, but there was something missing. She loved sleeping in a tree for all her life, but for the first time she’d prefer a warm bed knowing she’d be with friends, or people she’d call family, over a tree. Heck, she’d even prefer the presence of Delta over being here.

Today would be the day her friends would board the city of Order, trying to find out where Mammon Thyl'Ahn would reside. She herself would have gone there herself, even if it was just to explore the places she hadn't been to, like the gem mines, or the hot spring residing at the foot of Mt. Gavel.

Mt. Gavel.

"Where should we head first?" Suzette said.

"Well, we could go to the paladancer academy," Delta said. "Anette is teaching there."

"Sounds like a good idea, but shouldn't we focus on finding out where Mammon Thyl'Ahn is?"

"The guys are already going to the random dungeons, we could do whatever we want."

"This place is beautiful though. I've heard Anette writing about it a lot, she even sent me pictures, but I never realized how beautiful it was."

"Yeah, it's pretty great." She looked out into the big city. As much as she hated to admit it, she did miss Tea.

"What's wrong?" Suzette said.

"Nothing," Delta replied. "Come, let's go see your sister."

"Wow, did you really train here?" Suzette said.

"Yeah," Delta said.

"It's huge."

"It has to be, we're training with magic here, most can cause knockback. Aside from that, we all need space to practice dancing. Here it is."

They entered a big room with many students.

"This is the breakdancing class."

"Anette!"

"Suzette!" Anette said. "What are you doing here?"

"We're looking for Mammon Thyl'Ahn."

"Wow, well, welcome. Class, this is Suzette, she's my sister. And this is Delta Omi. She's the one who essentially created beatcasting. How many of you know what beatcasting is? Well, for those who don't, beatcasting is a type of magic where we use magic to create music, mostly by charging our weapon like a lance. She also helped us develop it further so that we could use it on other pieces of equipment. Now breakdancers have the disadvantage that we don't have a lot of equipment that can resonate, only those who can use the tonfa so far will be able to use it, which is why we don't teach it here. Those who do use it, you can always sign up for extra class, which you can still sign up for. Others can try to help us develop it, feel free to ask about it after class. Now, is anybody willing to show them what you've got? Mr. Jonas, would you like to try?"

Suzette could only watch in amazement. "Wow, sis, that was amazing!"

“Yeah,” Anette said, “paladancers are coming a long way, mostly thanks to Delta.”

“Oh, others would have come up with it sooner or later,” Delta said, blushing a bit.

“So Suzette, how’s the alchemy business going?”

“I’m currently renovating the place,” Suzette replied.

“Well, that’s good. You know, mom would have been proud.”

“I’m not sure about that.”

“Suzette, if you’re talking about your libido, mom really wouldn’t care about that. She probably already knew about that anyway when she was reading our futures. She only cared whether you’d succeed in the things you loved to do.”

“Yeah, I don’t know whether I should feel relieved or creeped out by the knowledge that she would potentially know about my lifestyle. Especially since we were very young when she died.”

Anette laughed. “Hey, I know you’d love to do magic one day, but you’re still young. When the time is right you’ll feel it. I only got to learn magic a few years ago, and it’s still mostly just defensive.”

“Thanks, sis, I really appreciate it.”

“Hey,” Delta said. “When you’re done here, would you like to hang out?”

“Well, I’d love to, but I’ve got stuff to do here.”

“That’s okay,” Suzette said. “Hey, I’ll see you around.”

“I’ll see you too,” Anette said.

“Look, they’re lifting the anchor,” Delta said. As it was her first time, Suzette wanted to see the moment the island would be moving.

“This is so exciting!” Suzette said. “Man, it’s taking too long!”

“Patience, it takes time. Lifting the anchor too fast and it might cause too many vibrations. They might not be dangerous, but they are inconvenient.”

The sun was almost setting. Lights were already burning all over the island.

“Man, I wish Tea was here,” Suzette said. “It would have been more fun.”

“Yeah, it would,” Tea said. She then hunched over, out of breath. “Sorry, I’ve been running for an entire day now.”

“Tea!” Suzette said. “What are you doing here?”

“I know where we should be going.”

“Hi,” Delta said.

“Hi,” Tea said.

“Look, next time, don’t just run off. Especially not without saying goodbye to Suzette.”

“Can I hug you?” Suzette said.

Chapter 13

Poison

“So,” Delta said. “Where do you think it is?”

“Mt. Gavel,” Tea said. “Chse said he can be found where the hammer keeps away the chaos. Order is the opposite of chaos, and a gavel is a sort of hammer. It really wasn’t that vague at all, we only had to come up with it.”

“So he’s on top of Mt. Gavel?”

“Not. . . exactly.”

“Wait, what do you mean?” Suzette said. Tea didn’t answer. “Please,” Suzette asked again, “tell me what you mean.”

“Are we sure Mammon Thyl’Ahn is human?”

“Look,” Tea said, “at the top of this mountain is a shrine, the Black Shrine. Most seem to think it’s a shrine of death, but there have been other interpretations that it’s actually about the dark, as in, something that lies shrouded in darkness. In the old civilization, black wasn’t bad per se, it was mainly used by thieves and assassins, as dark colors were great colors to wear at night when you didn’t want to stand out. This shrine is a shrine for rogues.”

“So?” Delta said. “They might have just built it to communicate with each other.”

“But here’s the thing, rogues are mostly solitary people, they don’t often work with other rogues. There’s no need for them to communicate with each other.”

“Wait,” Suzette said. “Are you saying that Mammon Thyl’Ahn might be a god?”

“Yes,” Tea said. “Which is why I returned here, to tell you this. I mean, I know I can’t dissuade Clint from going through with it, but I don’t know if you should be risking your lives for this.”

They were all silent.

“So,” Suzette said. “What now?”

“I’m still going,” Clint said. “I’ve come this far already, I’m not going to give up now.”

“I know,” Tea said, “which is why I’m coming with you.”

“I’m in as well,” Delta said.

“Delta, you really don’t—”

“Look, Tea, we might not like each other now, but there was a time we used to be best friends. I don’t want to be left behind with any regrets. I’d rather risk my life knowing I fought alongside a former friend than to watch you go into a certain doom. That and I don’t want you to hog all the spotlights in case you do survive.”

“I don’t want you two to go without me,” Suzette said. “You two are my friends. Aside from you I don’t have a lot of friends.”

“Suzette,” Hank said. “Are you serious about this? Once you go there’s no way back.”

“Yes, Hank, I’m sure.”

“Then I’m going in as well.”

“Fine,” Trent said. “I don’t want to be the only one who says no. Besides, tales of fighting elder gods will surely get me lots of chicks.”

“Then there’s only one question left,” Tea said. “We need a physical form if we would ever want to defeat him. How can we get through the portal?”

“Suzette, wake up,” Delta said. “Suzette, you’re glowing.”

“What do you mean?” Suzette said, still sleepy.

“You’re literally glowing. Look, it’s some reddish glow.”

“What’s all that noise?” Tea said, barely awake.

“There’s something with Suzette,” Delta said. “She’s glowing.”

Tea stood up, and walked towards Suzette. “You’re right, she is.”

“Tea, Delta,” Suzette suddenly said, as she began to glow some more. “I think you guys need to step back.”

Delta already began to take a step back, but Tea, still asleep, didn’t respond in time, as a wave of magic shot from Suzette’s hand right in Tea’s face, knocking her off her feet.

“Tea!” Suzette yelled. The glowing stopped. “Tea, are you alright?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” Tea said. “Strangely, only the fall hurt.”

Tea was holding her head, but then stopped, and felt her face.

“What’s wrong?” Delta asked.

“I don’t know, something’s different about my scar.”

Suzette turned the lights up, and then reached out to move Tea’s hair a bit back.

“No—” Tea said, but Suzette interrupted.

“Don’t worry, I’m only going to take a look.”

She moved her hair a bit. “Delta, could you come here for a second? Did anything change?”

“Let me see,” Delta said. “I’m not sure, but... No, I can’t see anything different.”

Suzette looked at her hands again. Did she really do that?

Tea was wide awake. It was very early in the morning, the sun had yet to rise.

She decided to take a bath. When she stepped into the bathroom though, she could see Suzette standing in front of the mirror, looking at her hands.

“Have you been awake this entire time?” Tea said.

“Yeah, need to find out what just happened.”

“Yeah, anyway, I’m going to take a bath.”

“Whatever.”

Tea began filling the bath. This was so unlike Suzette, she almost seemed like a zombie. Maybe what happened this night was that her dormant powers finally awoke? Tea sighed.

“Hey Suzette?”

“What?”

“You should definitely take a bath.”

“Whatever.”

“Yeah, you’re going to take a bath right now, after that you’re going back to bed.”

“Whatever.”

“You seriously need to relax. Your powers will come eventually, it won’t happen if you just tire yourself.”

“Whatever.”

“Okay, I think I need some help with this.”

“Delta, wake up.” Tea was standing besides Delta’s bed.

“Ugh, what is it?”

“I . . . I need your help. With Suzette.”

“What’s with Suzette?”

“I don’t think she’s been sleeping all night. I’m trying to get her to have a bath, but, well . . .”

“You need help in undressing her? You know, you can just put her with clothes and all in bath.”

“I’m not going to do that, do you know how uncomfortable wet clothes are? And besides, you’re a closer friend to her than I am.”

“Ugh, fine.”

Delta followed Tea to the bathroom, where she saw Suzette. Delta was about to undress her when she noticed the unusually high temperature of Suzette.

“Yeah, we definitely need to cool her down. Drain the tub, then prepare the bath with cold water, I need to check up some stuff.”

While Tea refilled the tub, Delta used her magic to scan Suzette for any anomalies, to determine if Suzette was just having a fever or if it was something else. When the tub was filled, Suzette was placed in the water.

“Okay,” Delta said. “I now need you to climb up and hold me upside down.”

“Why?” Tea said.

“I need to beatcast on the tub.”

“But why do you need to hang upside down above the tub?”

“Because I need to cast it from the other end, and the magic has to flow symmetrically.”

“Well, can’t you just do it from inside the tub?”

“Yes, but unless you want to join me inside the tub, I’ll have to do it the other way.”

“Wait, why would I need to join you inside the tub?”

“Ugh. Look, I can’t directly touch the tub unless there’s something between Suzette and me. When I cast magic on the tub, the magic will oscillate, move from one end to the other and back again. This magic, when released, normally has to go to somewhere outside the range of the object it’s resonating in. However, because the magic has to be cast within the tub, I need something that blocks this magic from returning to me.”

Tea paused. “Yeah, let’s just do the latter.”

Tea and Delta both got into the tub, with Tea in-between Delta and Suzette.

“Okay, Tea,” Delta said. “I need you to sit down, that way you’ll form a better barrier between us.”

“You mean like this?”

“Yeah, that’s perfect.”

“What kind of spell are you going to use?”

“An enhance magic spell. It increases one’s magical powers temporarily. Charge it high enough and your target might even be able to unlock their full potential temporary. Hopefully it will be enough for her to capture the feeling of tapping into her powers, so that I don’t have to keep hitting her with blasts. We normally don’t do this during combat, due to the time it takes to do this.”

“And this is needed because?”

“She’s burning up from the inside. She needs to release all that magical energy stored inside her. I’m not sure where it comes from, maybe from that dark wizard, maybe it’s something innate, but she needs to control it or it will kill her.”

“How does that even work? Isn’t there already enough magic inside her?”

“That’s the thing, there isn’t. It’s like an infection, the body tries to burn out this magic, but magic can’t be simply eliminated by your own body, you need to expel it. There’s... also another thing that makes her unable to cast this magic, but I’m not sure what it is.”

Delta also sat down, with her back turned against Tea.

“Now, Tea, I’ll charge it up a couple of times, I’ll give you a sign when I’m ready. Now when I do that, I need you to look very closely. The magic will flow from two sides. If the two waves of energy are about to intersect, give me a sign. It has to be at the right moment, so sign me about 0.3 seconds before it actually hits.”

“I think I got it.”

“Now, as this is beatcasting, the tub might, well... ”

“I know.”

“But as we are in water and are only touching the tub with our feet, I assume we won’t notice anything about it. But in case you do, just try to hold it in.”

Delta raised her hand and charged her magic. She had to charge as much as possible, but not too much, as it would resonate too fast otherwise. She had to do this in steps. Further more, she had to cast the magic as symmetrically as possible.

The first blast was shot, and the magic began circling around the tub, giving it a low humming sound. The next blast had to be timed correctly, so that it would line up with the current energy wave. She charged the second blast, and cast it onto the tub, which made the blast move around faster. Finally, after a third blast, Delta was ready.

Tea watched closely. She concentrated, looking carefully for the blast, which was now speeding its way in circles. The tub began shaking heavily, even began vibrating a bit, along with the water. Tea didn't pay it any attention, though, and as the blast was about to converge, she gave Delta a sign. The magic was released, and a light engulfed Suzette, who finally began looking up.

"Oh yeah!" she yelled, as she began floating in the air, still engulfed in light. Then, an explosion of light. As the light dissipated, Suzette splashed back into the tub.

"Let's try something fun," Suzette then said, her face covered by her hair. She rose out of the tub, and the water rose with her, then began engulfing her.

"If this is what casting magic feels like, then I won't ever want to stop."

"Oh crap," Delta whispered to Tea. "I think we've turned her to the dark side."

"Suit up," Suzette said. "It's time to party."

"Yeah," Tea whispered back sarcastically. "This is definitely going great."

"I think I have some of your clothing on," Delta said to Tea.

"Yeah, as if we really have any time to think about that," Tea said. "Suzette has just run loose on this island. We only have a few hours to find her."

"You mean before the rest of the island wakes up?"

"No, before breakfast ends. If this ordeal causes me to miss my breakfast, I'm going to be so cross!"

"Don't use the word 'cross'. Nobody says that anymore. It makes you sound like a dork."

"And nobody cares about your opinion about someone's choice of words."

They could see where Suzette had been. Everywhere she went, chaos started. Inanimate objects began to get more hostile, plants grew to monstrous proportions, and there was all kinds of destruction all around them.

"Tea," Delta said. "Before you say anything, just know that I'm very proficient with my lance, and I'm not afraid to use it."

"And I'm a ninja, I can deck you anytime you want. What's your point?"

"Look, I know I messed up, but I can fix this."

"What you did was necessary, otherwise it would have killed her. Besides, we both did it. Now let's just stop Suzette."

The sky was getting dark. Clouds that shouldn't even be there were appearing above them, ominously floating. As they got closer, wind was starting to blow. They could suddenly hear people coming from behind them.

"Tea, Delta," they heard. It was Trent. "What's happening?"

"Suzette is going rampant!" Delta said.

The entire team quickly made their way further, until they came upon the lookout point. There she was, at the edge of the city. They couldn't see it, but she stood there, arms wide, crying.

"Can you see me now, mom? I did it, I finally did it! I..."

She broke down, and with that, the wind began dying down.

The sun began to rise.

There she was, broken, crying.

"I'm sorry mom, I'm so sorry."

"Why is it?" Delta said.

"Come with me," Hank said. Delta and Tea followed Hank to a terrace. "What I'm about to tell you is something she herself only knows glimpses of. You know, her mother, she died when she was very young. It was an accident, that's the only thing she remembered."

"What kind of accident?" Delta asked.

"I don't know the full details, most of it is from what I've heard others talk about, and from the news pamphlets, only some of it I know first-handed. What I know is, Anette and Suzette were both really into witchcraft and other kinds of magic when they were kids. They never actually cast anything, but they did learn all kinds of spells from the many books. Heck, Suzette had shown me one during these days. One day, though, the two decided to cast a spell, just a simple one."

"It backfired," Tea said.

"Yeah, the two were hit with a full dose of a poison spell. It wasn't even a really strong one, but because they were just kids it would have killed them very quickly, and by the time they were found the poison already took over mostly. Casting a cure spell that would be strong enough would have taken too long, and there weren't any drops of phoenix to revive them once they actually would succumb to the poison. The only way to save them was to transfer the poison to someone else, so their mother did the only thing she thought she could do, transfer it to herself. She passed away, only having enough time to say farewell to her children and husband. Since that day, both Suzette and Anette had been putting a mental block in place that prevented her from performing any magic again."

"So, wait, what exactly do they remember?"

"Only that their mother died due to a backfired poison spell, although I suspect that something has jogged her memories."

"Hey, Anette," Suzette said. "We need to talk."

"What is it?"

"Do you remember how mom died?"

Anette paused. "Yes. I did some years before I decided to become a paladancer."

Suzette began crying.

"Don't cry," Anette said. "We were kids, I..."

Anette didn't know what to say anymore.

"How's Suzette?" Delta said.

"She's getting better now," Tea said. "It might be a day or maybe another week before she's better again."

"What if she stays like this?"

"Well, it isn't as if we know how to move on anyway."

"Clint is really getting restless, you know. I think he has enough of all these random dungeons."

"I know, I know. Hey, the city will be stopping at Vales soon, maybe we can send the boys out to do some treasure hunting on the ground."

"I'll go tell them."

Chapter 14

The artifacts

Three weeks have passed since Suzette's powers awakened. Nobody had figured out how to go through the portal yet, as they still needed Suzette.

"Why don't you just sleep in a tree like you always did?" Delta yelled at Tea.

"All I've asked you was to keep our room clean," Tea said. "Is that so hard to ask?"

"If you're so bothered by it, why don't you just clean it yourself?"

"Because most of it is your stuff!"

"Go pack your stuff," they heard from outside their room. "You guys are moving back in with me."

"Glad to have you back," Delta said to Suzette.

"Okay, what are we going to do here?" Tea said.

"I've rented this dungeon for the whole day," Suzette said. "Nobody will be able to enter or leave this place without this key, or until the timer runs out."

"And when exactly does it run out?"

"Like I said, this place is rented for the day, meaning it will automatically open at midnight."

Suzette then unclothed herself.

"Wait," Delta said. "You're going in naked?"

"Well, this challenge could be done in underwear, but the point is that we go in without armor. The less you wear, the better."

"Okay..."

Both Delta and Tea stripped down to their underwear.

"Look," Suzette said, "just because I said this challenge could be done in underwear doesn't mean you two can. I'm serious, strip down. This is the same challenge I had done with Hank when we were younger. It's to make us stronger in several fronts. Without armor, we won't be able to take hits from pierce or blade weapons, meaning we'd have to train our evasiveness, and because we go in without weapons, we'd have to rely on our pure strength."

"And why would we have to be naked?" Tea said.

"So that you two won't cheat. Now take them off and put them in the locker."

"You know, we've spent an awful lot of time together naked."

When they did, she locked it, hung the key to a chain together with the key leading outside, and threw them down a well.

“Why’d you do that?!” Tea said.

“Like I said. We stay here until our time is over or we reach the end. If the timer runs out, both the door and the locker will unlock, giving us our stuff back. This dungeon is twenty floors high. If we don’t die, we can reach it within an hour. I’ve also set it so that we can perform a revive when one of us is fallen. If we don’t revive within thirty seconds, we’ll all be sent back to level one. Now let’s go.”

“Wait,” Delta said. “What about magic?”

“Anything goes,” Suzette said, “although you should keep it fair and refrain from summoning weapons.”

The challenge was hard, especially for Tea. The first few floors were doable, but the further they got, the more they had to revive. The eighth floor proved to be too hard for them, several times. Eventually though, they managed to crawl to the ninth and tenth floor. After that, they got stuck at least once on every floor.

The final floor was the hardest, as it contained a wyvern.

The first time they encountered the wyvern, they were all taken care of immediately, sending them all back to the beginning. The second time, things got a little bit better, but not much. Only after the fourth things started to change. Defeating him was hard without weapons, but with each time they went through the dungeon, Suzette’s powers began to unlock more and more, until she got it at a level that was good enough to fell a wyvern.

“How much time do we got left?” Tea said.

“We’ve only got two minutes to get back to the top floor, unlock the locker and put our clothes, or at least our underwear, back on before anybody can enter. We shouldn’t forget the keys, though.”

Delta took the keys, and they quickly made their way upstairs. There they quickly unlocked the locker and put their armor back on.

“How far did you come when you did this with Hank?” Delta asked.

“We got pretty far,” Suzette said, “but it mostly had to do with Hank just being that strong.”

“So does that mean you’re your old self again?”

“I don’t know. I . . . I don’t know.”

“Well I know something to cheer us up,” Tea said.

“Why did you build a tent inside our room?” Delta said.

“The room’s sheer size would just spread the stuff out,” Tea said. “So, are you coming in?”

“I don’t know,” Suzette said. “I don’t feel like it anymore.”

“Come on, you really need to relax a little.”

“Yeah,” Delta said, “do it for us! It’s really a bore without you.”

“Well, we didn’t exactly try it together.”

“That’s because you’re a bore.”

“Yeah, anyway, you have to come in.”

“Fine,” Suzette said, “if you guys insist.”

They entered the tent. Tea took a small dish with a custom blend.

“What’s that?” Suzette said.

“Delta and I had mixed it with some components you had lying around,” Tea said.

“We read the labels before we added them,” Delta said. “We wouldn’t want to end up paralyzed for the rest of the day.”

“Delta also added some amplifying effect to it.”

Finally, after all these times, Tea laid in Trent’s arms.

“Oh Trent, kiss me.”

They kissed, as passionate as they could.

“Oh Trent,” Delta said, “that was amazing.”

“I want you,” Tea said. “I want you to take me.”

“I’d gladly take you, Trent,” Delta said.

Just then, Suzette threw a powder in their faces after she turned out the device.

“Yeah, that’s enough guys,” she said.

“Oh come on,” Tea said, as she held Delta in her arms.

“Could you please let me go?” Delta said.

“Let me take a look at what you’ve added,” Suzette said. “Let’s see, first there’s the regular stuff, then there’s a bit of the special stuff. I bet we will feel it any time now, and thanks to the amplifying effects of the magic you poured in we’d get hit hard with it. Now what else did we get? Ah, hallucination powder. Very fun indeed, especially in combination with the ‘mood’ potion.”

“Mood potion?” Tea and Delta said.

“It causes you to be in the mood, which is why you two are still locked in each other’s arms.”

When both of them realized they tried to let go of each other, but they found that neither of them wanted to.

Suzette began rolling her eyes. “Oh yeah, I think the special stuff is kicking in now.”

Both Delta and Tea then began to exclaim a big no, after which Suzette began to laugh. “I was just kidding.”

“That’s not funny,” Tea said, while moving her face towards Delta’s lips.

“What are we doing?” Delta said.

“You guys should have thought twice to just take my stuff,” Suzette said. “Oh, and by the way, I’ve shielded myself from the effects, you know, since I know magic now. Anyway, I’m going out with Hank. See you guys later.”

“No, wait!” Tea said.

“Don’t leave us here like this!” Delta said.

“Let’s never speak of this ever again,” Tea said.

“At least it stayed with kissing and hugging,” Delta said.

“Not helping.”

“It’s dark already,” Tea said, after their concoctions finally wore off.

“Yeah, I can’t find the light switch,” Delta said.

“How can’t you find the light switch?”

“You know, it would be easier if we had a small light source we could carry, perhaps even something that would emit light all the time.”

“Yeah, like Clint’s lightshow artifacts.”

They both were silent for a while.

“You know, that Lyra, when she appeared to you as a little girl, what did she exactly say to you?”

“I don’t know, something about light bringing answers.”

“The lights will give you the answers you seek.”

“Yeah, that was it. Wait, you don’t think. . .”

“I need to climb Mt. Gavel to check it up.”

The next day Tea and Delta decided to go up the mountain, to the shrine, to take notes of it. They rented a vehicle that could take them within an hour.

“Ugh, freaking necromancers,” Delta said.

“They’re not worth it,” Tea said. “Just let them do their business at the shrine and then we can have our time.”

It took a while, but after the necromancers finally left, they began their investigation.

“Look,” Delta said. “Do you think the artifacts would fit here?”

“I think so. Question is only, do we have them all?”

After exactly copying the indentations on the shrine, they headed back to the inn, and took the artifacts.

“No wait, are you sure you have to lay them like this?” Delta said.

“No, that’s why we’re trying everything.”

“Look, this artifact is bigger than the rest. I think if we, for example, take this one, and put it on that one. . . No, that’s not it.”

“Maybe the lights correspond to something. How about combining two red lights?”

“Nope, doesn’t work.”

“Okay, maybe it’s because they have to match a pattern.”

“I can’t find anything that matches the pattern of this light.”

At that point Suzette came in. “Why don’t you just try combining two lights that are the complete opposite, like, when one light is on, the other is off, and, when one light is red, the other light is cyan.”

They all three tried to find one that matched the description, and finally found one.

“Okay, now let’s make sure they’re oriented properly. Right, there you go.”

“It fit,” Tea said.

“Now we’ll do the rest.”

“How did you know this?” Delta said.

“I’m not just interested in magic, you know. Besides, it’s basic science. Red light and cyan light combined will form white light. And it just seemed logical to me that there should be a continuous stream of light.”

After some time of trying and fitting, they finally made two more artifacts of bigger size.

“So what now?” Delta said. “None of them seem to fit the shapes at all.”

“Maybe we were wrong,” Tea said. “Maybe these things mean nothing.”

Suddenly, Clint kicked the door in.

“Hello!” Clint said. “Look at what I got!”

He laid a short staff on the table. It seemed to be broken, since one end was diagonally cut off.

“Hey, I’ve heard there’s this other dungeon not far from here that has something like this. If we all hurry we can retrieve it in time.”

Night fell. The city Aelzaria above them lit up, as they entered the dungeon. It was one of the smaller ones laid between the many other dungeons. Most of them were left unexplored, including this one.

“Are you sure this is the one?” Tea said.

“Of course I am!” Clint said. “Look, I have this map, right here.”

He pulled out a ring, and when he activated it, it showed a big globe of Phandagron. They could see various dots appearing, with most dots concentrated where the city of Order was.

“Clint,” Tea said, “that’s not a map! That thing locates all artifacts that we need!”

The dungeon seemed to be empty. Only occasionally they would find wild animals, but it was mostly quiet. Too quiet even, it seemed. As they descended, the place got darker and darker, until they had to light up their own torches, and even then they couldn’t see a lot.

It was here that things got a bit more dangerous. Even though the sound of their footsteps echoed all around them, Tea could still faintly hear other footsteps and sounds, sounds that didn’t seem from this world at all.

“Delta,” Tea said. “Can you create a brief light flash?”

“Of course,” Delta said. “Why?”

“I want to see what’s surrounding us.”

“Okay . . .”

Delta held her hand up, which began to glow a bit. Then, the room lit up for less than a second. This was enough for Tea to notice that they weren’t alone at all, and that whatever was there didn’t want them to see them.

“What did you see?” Delta said.

“Have you heard of these things called ‘Elder Beings’?”

“Only from myth.”

“I think they’re around us right now.”

As she said that, they heard a very loud screech, one that no living creature could have made. As this happened, Suzette created a light orb, which allowed them to see the creatures, indescribable abominations with no real shape, but still clearly visible. They weren’t sure if these beings could be killed with human weapons, but they had to try.

All at once they began attacking the creatures, all in their own way. Tea threw shuriken while using kunai as melee weapons, while Delta used her paladancing skills to attack the beings while both giving her allies buffs. Clint used the commotion the rest caused to sneakily backstab. Trent would keep his distance while dispatching some with fire arrows. Hank just had his brute strength, and Suzette used her newfound magic skills to take care of the rest herself.

They knew they couldn't keep these abominations down, so they resorted to running until they found the artifact, after which they would run back to the surface. The road was long, with many corridors, but they finally reached a large room. They weren't sure what they saw. It was a room that contained a lot of technology, more advanced than anything even Craneus would contain. At the back was a huge portal device, or at least what was left of it. Even if they would know how this technology worked, they couldn't fix it. The arches were already falling apart, and the wires had corroded.

But on a pedestal was something that seemed like an artifact. It was yet another ring, and when Tea and Delta both picked it up, coincidentally at the same time, it showed the exact same thing as the one Clint had.

"Well that's a bummer," Clint said.

"No, wait," Suzette said. "We might need it. We need to find all of them."

"You know, this place is doing funny things with you," Delta said. "For a moment I was thinking how this would seem like something RPGs would use to pad the length."

"Crap," Tea said. "We need to get out of here. This place is turning us into wallers."

They all ran back out of the room, but when they did, they noticed the layout of all the corridors had changed. Not that it mattered much, it was still pretty much a straight line, but still.

As they moved on, they stumbled upon the room where they had fought the abominations. They could see some still lying there, and others gone. Suzette took a look back, and noticed that they were now behind them. They now really had to hurry back up.

The stairs were long, they knew that on their way down, but the way up seemed way longer. On top of that, as traveling upstairs is always harder than downstairs, they were almost at the point of breaking down due to fatigueness. In a ditch effort to help the others, Delta cast a buff to revitalize her team, thereby depleting her own energy and causing her to fall down, sacrificing herself to save the rest.

Or at least, she would have sacrificed herself if Tea didn't grab her before she fell.

"You're not going to die without my consent," Tea said. "That... was a pretty cheesy line."

Delta agreed, but could only murmur. Tea then began carrying her on her back. Delta was heavy, especially with her armor, but Tea had underwent harder training back at the academy, having to carry ogres while running.

They all made it back alive, right before the sun began to rise.

"Wait," Tea said. "I thought we left just after sunset."

"Time might have moved differently below," Suzette said. "Lucky for us it was only for a few hours."

"We've got to hurry, though," Hank said. "The city of Order is leaving in a few

hours.”

In the next few weeks they went out to collect the other artifacts. By now they figured out how to assemble the artifact, and it was now time for them to try out the portal, and prepare to leave.

They all knew that this might have been the last time they'd be together, and that there would be a chance that some might not make it alive, so they all did their own thing, just for this one time. Tea and Delta just hung out with Suzette as their home town would have been days away. They also didn't want to worry their parents. Suzette visited her sister for one final time. Trent and Hank both did the bare challenge, the one where they had to go through the entirety of the dungeon without equipment, in one of the harder random dungeons. Clint however just stayed at home. Aside from his friends, he had nothing else. Would it really be fair to risk his friends' lives just to gain a title? Was it really as worth as their lives?

“Guys,” Clint said. “I have to tell you something. Maybe it's not a good idea to do this. I just can't do this. You guys are the only friends I have at the moment. I am willing to give my own life for this, but not yours. I'm sorry, but you guys can't go with me.”

He then threw a smoke bomb, one he stole from Tea. As the smoke cleared, Clint was still there, now holding the assembled artifact.

“Well this is awkward,” Clint said.

“You're supposed to run away yourself when throwing the smoke bombs,” Tea said. “And you know me. As much as I can't stand you, you're like a brother, and family shouldn't abandon each other, no matter what.”

“Yeah,” Delta said. “I actually don't really have any problems with you myself, but yeah, you're my second family now. We all are. And we've come this far.”

“So you see, Clint, you might be the worst rogue we've ever met, but that doesn't mean we'll give up on you.”

Chapter 15

Mammon Thyl'Ahn

It was midnight. Nobody was sure why they waited until midnight, but it was. Perhaps because the mood was right, or because they wouldn't be bothered by others, but it was midnight. The artifact was now glowing bright colors.

They placed the artifact on the shrine. Almost immediately, the artifact began to become more and more transparent, until they could barely see it anymore.

"This is it," Tea said.

"Yeah," Delta said.

They didn't realize it, but the two held hands as one by one they entered the portal. Only after they reached the other side they realized what they did, and let go immediately.

It was a complete dark purple void. They weren't even sure if they were walking, falling or floating. Right there, in the middle, they could see a man.

"Are you Mammon Thyl'Ahn?" Clint said.

"Who's asking?" the man said, his voice echoing all around them and into their ears at the same time. His voice sounded very distant, yet at the same time very near.

"The name is Clint Punchkick, and these are my friends. I'm here to claim your title of rogue bard."

The man laughed. "Foolish mortal. Do you think you can just take my title?"

"I'm not afraid of you!"

"I see. Well then, are you willing to die for it?"

"I'm not planning on dying!"

"We'll see about that. Now, let's have some fun, shall we?"

As Tea, Delta and the rest prepared to move in for the attack they were all stopped by a barrier, leaving only Clint to fight the man. It was a painful battle, with Mammon Thyl'Ahn having the upper hand, beating Clint senseless. Then Mammon Thyl'Ahn pulled his dagger, and began slashing at Clint. Clint was barely able to dodge them.

"Stand back," Delta said.

"Wait," Tea said, "what are you doing? Nothing can get past this barrier, not even magic. Suzette already tried that."

"I'm not going to use magic. I'm going to cheer him on."

"That's. . ." Tea stopped, then said, "Everybody, give her some room."

Delta swung her lance over her head. She already knew how much magic she had to channel, she had done this many times at parties. As she thrust the lance down while keeping it from shooting into the void, she began twirling around the lance, doing various moves.

“Hey, can I get some help here?” Delta said.

“What song is it,” Trent said.

“Bottle Rocket,” Delta said.

“I know that song,” Hank said.

As Clint fought off his opponent, his friend began cheering him on by performing one of his favorite songs. It gave him the strength to fight back.

I said a hip, a hop it
 There something in my pocket
 It's long and it's hard
 It is a bottle rocket
 It explodes in your hand
 But baby don't you worry
 By the things that it can
 Unless you're in a hurry

Won't you see my bottle rocket?
 Won't you see my bottle rocket?
 Won't you see my bottle rocket?
 With bottle rocket I meant—

Let's fly through the milky way
 Shoot stardust upon your face
 Hotter than the sun
 Make you glow with my warm embrace
 Shooting through your tunnel
 Light you up like a streetlight
 Rock a battlezone baby
 Maybe we could start a fight
 Relax and lay back
 We can play “Hide and Seek”
 Like a ship we'll explore
 So enjoy my technique
 From the backseat of my float
 My firework slides down your throat
 Baby I ain't on a boat
 But I can make your face asplode

Won't you see my bottle rocket?
 Won't you see my bottle rocket?
 Won't you see my bottle rocket?
 With bottle rocket I meant—

As the end of the song came near, Clint finally landed a few hits with his dagger, and with his final strike the barriers dropped.

“Wow, Hank,” Suzette said. “I didn’t know you could rap!”

“I have a lot of skills you didn’t know about,” Hank said. “Besides, everybody knows the lyrics, it’s almost as iconic as Rock-A-Tear.”

“Don’t celebrate too early,” Tea said. “Look.”

From the deepest darkness, a big figure had arisen. Its claws were big enough to hold three people, and it had a slender body.

“You are strong, Clint,” Mammon Thyl’Ahn said. “Now I’ll show you what I’m truly capable of.”

A big battle ensued. Everybody combined their forces to strike down their foe, using a combination of magic and blunt force. Finally, they defeated the being.

“Are we done yet?” Delta said.

“Wait for it,” Tea said. “I’m expecting him to say something like, ‘This isn’t my true form,’ or something similar.”

“This isn’t even my true form,” Mammon Thyl’Ahn said. “Now you will see what real power is!”

The form disappeared, and from the distance, a bigger creature arrived. It first seemed small, but then grew in size, until its size was almost unfathomable.

A truly great battle ensued. Words could not explain this battle, it was grand, it was big, it was... completely unrelated to either Tea or Delta, which is why I’m skipping this battle. But really, you should have seen it, it was marvelous. The only thing you would need to know was that the fight ended in a big explosion.

“Tea,” Delta said. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” Tea said. “I think I am.”

“What happened?”

“I don’t know, where’s the rest?”

They found themselves at the shrine again. The sun was already rising.

“It’s beautiful,” Delta said.

“It is,” Tea said.

They heard a noise, as if someone was being attacked. They quickly rushed to see...

“Oh god, no,” Tea said. “This I really didn’t want to see.”

“I think we should leave them alone now,” Delta said.

They walked off, to look for Trent and Clint.

“Hey,” they heard. When they looked around, they found Trent up in a tree.

“What are you doing there?” Tea said.

“Hey,” Delta said. “You aren’t spying on Hank and Suzette, are you?”

“Of course I am,” Trent said. “Look, for the past few months I’ve been hanging with three women. Do you know how hard it is for a man to remain professional in these situations?”

“Wait,” Tea said, “All this time you never made a pass at us?”

“Well, to be fair, you two were kind of trying a bit too hard to get my attention. That’s a real turn-off, even for me.”

Tea looked around again. “Hey, did you see Clint?”

“Not yet,” Trent said.

Tea and Delta both waited, and waited, and then waited some more. By the end of the day, Tea was sitting at the edge, crying.

"Tea," Delta said. "Clint is a strong person, and extremely lucky as well. I mean, aside from the fact that he had someone like you, he's nigh unkillable. I'm sure he'll pop up someday."

"So, are you guys going again?" Tea said.

"Yeah, Suzette's going to live with me now," Hank said.

"So you two are officially a couple now?" Delta said. Suzette smiled.

"How about your, you know," Tea said.

"My 'urges'?" Suzette said. "I'll just have to keep them under control."

"Besides," Hank said, "as long as she tells me all about it, I'm fine with it. I know what I'm dealing with, and she is who she is, she can't change that."

"What are you going to do, Trent?" Delta said.

"I'm still looking for someone to travel with. I rarely travel alone."

"Well," Tea said. "You could always travel with me."

"Yeah," Delta said, "I'll be traveling with her as well."

"Since when?" Tea whispered to Delta.

"Since you're trying to seduce him," Delta whispered.

"You don't have to whisper," Tea whispered back, "he already knows about it."

"Haha," Trent said, not having heard or even noticed their conversation. "No, I think I'd rather travel with other men. They're better wingmen. I would hardly be able to pick up chicks with you two around."

This bummed out both Tea and Delta.

"What about you guys?" Suzette said.

"We're going back to Koki Village," Tea said. "We still have that reward money from killing a bunch of people on that train, and we'd like to donate it to our home town."

"And it's a nice excuse to visit our parents again," Delta said.

"Oh right," Suzette said, and pulled the chest out of her bag. "Man, this chest is heavy."

"We know," Tea said.

They all said goodbye to each other, but as Tea and Delta prepared to go back to their room, they noticed something in the distance.

"Clint?" Tea said. "Everybody, it's Clint!"

"Hello!" Clint said.

Tea ran to Clint and hugged him, with tears of joy running down her face. "Where were you?"

"I don't know, there was this explosion, and then I woke up in a giant bed. Or at least I thought it was a bed. Anyway, I was badly injured, and Mammon Thyl'Ahn kind of felt bad about that, so he helped me back to strength. Oh, and I'm now officially a rogue bard!"

"Wow!" Tea said. "How does it feel?"

"Not that different. Turns out that killing a rogue bard doesn't automatically make you a rogue bard. You'd have to work at it, and actually start calling yourself one. So yeah, I'm a rogue bard now."

Tea laughed, "Oh god dammit, Clint, that's so typical of you."

“So,” Delta said. “What are you going to do now?”

“Well,” Clint said, “I think I’ll just travel around. Care to join, Trent?”

“Sure,” Trent said. “Sounds fun.”

“Tea?”

“I’ve got other things to take care of first. Besides, we’ll meet again some day.”

Chapter 16

The binding spell

“Don’t be such a whiner,” Delta said.

“Look, all I’m saying is we could have just hired a cart to wheel this thing back, you don’t have to be such a wad.”

“You’re a wad.”

“Now that’s just childish.”

“I am not going to spend money on a cart. Don’t you know how much trouble it is to wheel it back up this mountain? It’s freaking hard!”

“Look, the sun’s already setting. We’ve only just made it down.”

“Yeah, whatever, let’s just set up camp here.”

“At the rate we’re going, it will take us at least a week to get to the village.”

“Stop! Just stop!”

The bickering didn’t end that night. They continued to fight. Eventually, someone had enough.

“I’ve been watching you two,” Lyra said, from on top of a dead tree, “and I think that thing you two got is pretty unhealthy.”

“Lyra,” Tea said. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m just checking how things are going.”

“Well, it’s going really peachy,” Delta sarcastically said.

“I can see that,” Lyra said. “You know, there’s a solution to that.”

“And that is?” Tea said.

Lyra muttered some words, and magical chains began to appear around Tea and Delta.

“Not again,” Delta said.

After the spell completed, Lyra walked away. Tea and Delta were now bound to each other through their arms.

“Wait,” Tea said. “How long does this one last?”

“Possibly forever,” Lyra said.

“What?!” Tea and Delta said.

“By the way, if any of you get hurt, the other will get hurt too. If any of you get killed, the other will die as well. If any of you even just feels anything, the other will feel it. You two figure out yourself how you can free yourselves of this spell.”

With that she left.

“Wait!” Tea said.

“How are we supposed to carry this thing?” Delta said.

“This is all your fault,” Delta said, dragging the chest with one hand.

“My fault? Who didn’t want to hire a cart?”

“You wanna hire a cart? Go get some then! Oh right, you can’t, because you’re stuck with me! Now keep pulling!”

It was a hot day, which really didn’t help them at all.

“Stupid chest is going to be my death,” Tea mumbled.

“Okay, that’s it.” Delta let go of the chest, and at the same time, Tea did the same. “Let’s settle this here.” Delta then took off her armor.

“I think it’s hardly fair. I’d beat you even if my good hand is bound to yours.”

“Yeah, wait. Let me just... wait, I think this will work... there. Now my good hand is bound to your good hand.”

“Well bring it on then.”

It first started with some slaps, but it quickly became punches, pulling hairs and pushing faces. Eventually they both began to struggle in the middle of the road, calling each other names, almost breaking bones. I honestly don’t know what they expected to achieve with this, as an injury on one would result in an injury on the other, but when you’re angry, you generally aren’t thinking straight.

The night was cold. They didn’t really get that far. They probably wouldn’t get far the next day either, they were too badly bruised. But at least neither broke anything.

“Can’t you just use healing magic or something?” Tea said.

“I could, but it wouldn’t make a lot of difference. The magic I’ve learned doesn’t exactly heal bruises, or at least it doesn’t completely get rid of them. For that I’d need more specialized magic.”

“Well, perhaps I know of a way to help each other out.”

“Well, what is it?”

“It’s a certain massage technique I’ve learned. I obviously can’t use it on myself, but I can use it on others. It would basically heal some bruises.”

“Well, how about you then?”

“Remember, everything you feel I’ll feel as well, so I’ll basically be healing myself with it.”

“If it helps then I’m all for it.”

“Okay then. Lift your shirt.”

“You mean, like, take it off?”

“No, I only need to reach your back and abdomen. You might also need to lower your pants a bit. Not entirely, but just so that I can reach your lower back a bit better.”

Tea began her massage. She first applied an oil on her hand, and began gently but firmly rubbing it in Delta’s back, massaging it until the muscles began to relax. She then moved to her abdomen, this time just gently, only applying a little bit

of pressure as if she pushed out the sore spots. As she did that, she felt her own muscles relaxing as well. She continued this until she was done.

“This feels great,” Delta said.

They both sat down, staring, thinking.

“You know,” Tea said, “I’ve never done this before with just one hand. I mean, I did practice it a few times, but never actually did it on a living being.”

“Well, you did okay.”

They looked at the stars.

“Tea,” Delta said. “When did we go wrong?”

“I’d like to say the moment you’ve betrayed me,” Tea said, “but I guess it had played for a long time.”

“Look, Tea, I didn’t betray you. I just. . . You were always the prettier one of us. Guys were always more into you than me.”

“So you showed everybody my scar because of that?”

“No. Yes. I mean, you don’t understand. Even with the scar, you’re still be the prettiest of us.”

“Bullcrap. You don’t know how horrible it looks down here.”

“Yes, I do. You can hide it all you want, but people can still see it. Heck, every boy you kissed had seen it clearly.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“No, seriously. Here, let me show you.”

Delta moved her face close to Tea, at kissing distance. “Now tilt your head. Look, see, I can clearly see the scar. I can even pull out a mirror if you want.”

“No, that’s okay. You know, why did you do it?”

“I couldn’t stand seeing you turn down all these guys or breaking up with them just because you were too afraid of them seeing your scar. I just wanted to show you that it was okay, that nobody really did mind. Men aren’t always that shallow, you know.”

“But you could have just told me so.”

“I was young, we were young. I didn’t think you’d listen, I assumed you would think I was just being jealous.”

“Were you? Jealous, I mean.”

“. . . Maybe a little.”

“Well, to be honest, I was a bit jealous of you too. I mean, I always thought you were the pretty one. That’s why I got that hair enchantment. Heck, that’s why I dated all these guys in the first place. I didn’t even like most of them. I mean, I do like guys, I’m not into—”

“I get what you mean, and I know. Remember that cute guy? What was his name? Armand?”

“Yeah, he was really cute, and pretty.”

“Well, turns out he’s with Leonard now. I’m not kidding.”

“Well, can’t say that I’m not surprised, but hey, good on them.”

“Tea?”

“Yes?”

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry I gave you the feeling I humiliated you, that wasn’t my intention.”

“And I’m sorry for not giving you a chance to explain.”

“Yeah. . . Do. . . Do you think we could be friends again?”

“Delta, things can’t be the way they were. We’ve changed too much.”

“I’m not asking for things to be like before, I just want us to be friends again. I’ve missed this, us.”

“I missed it too. Man, we’re like those two guys in that boyband.”

“Yeah, I can’t believe they’re touring together again.”

“So, what now?”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know. I really want our friendship to work, it’s just that, I feel we’ve spent a lot of time bickering when we were together, and that memory really overshadows our time as friends.”

“Friendship is something that should be worked on, it’s not hard to maintain one. And we’ll always bicker, but that’s how our life is.”

“Maybe you’re right.”

“I can’t believe you’re still a virgin though.”

“I actually was going to try with Trent. You know, because I didn’t expect us to travel together for that long. I only fought for him because you wanted him as well.”

“Yeah, he wasn’t actually worth it. Besides, shouldn’t you give it to someone you really cared for?”

“Is that the reason you’re still a virgin as well?”

“Well, yeah.”

They remained silent for a long time, only looking at the sky. Around this time, nobody would come by. Merchants wouldn’t travel at night, or rarely, and robbers and bandits wouldn’t have any place to hide, as it was mostly barren.

“Delta,” Tea said. “I was thinking.”

“And?”

“No, never mind.”

“I promise, I won’t tell or laugh or ridicule you or anything, just say it.”

“Well... I just think you’re right about what you said.”

“What?”

“That I would need to lose my virginity to someone I cared for.”

“Right.”

“Right.”

“Tea?”

“Yes?”

“I just wanted to let you know that, despite of what happened and what we did in the past few years, I still consider you as my best friend.”

“What about Suzette?”

“She doesn’t have the same history as we do.”

“Yeah, I guess so. To be honest, I hated you for what you did, but, on the other hand, I hated myself more for hating you.”

“So, are we friends again?”

“I guess so. Yeah, we’re friends.”

Delta smiled. Tea smiled back.

“I still think you wanted to say something else earlier,” Delta said.

“Well,” Tea said, “friends care for each other, right?”

“Yeah. And I guess that best friends care for each other a lot more.”

“Don’t you think that we, well...”

“I don’t know, I mean, there’s no real attraction between us, but if it’s anybody in the world, I’d rather it be you, I guess.”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah.”

Chapter 17

Goodbyes

It was early in the morning, just before the earliest merchant would leave. For the first time in years Tea and Delta didn't mind each others presence, waking up in each others arms. They were happy to be friends again, although they preferred to be at least a little bit clothed when they'd wake up.

Packing the tent was difficult when both of them only got one hand to use, which meant they had to work together.

"Delta, about last night."

"It happened, Tea."

"I know, that's not what I was going to say. I mean, if I get angry at you, it's not because I hate you, it's just that I'm still pissed off that we still don't have a car."

"Yeah, I know. Look, I know it was a bad judgement on my part, but we can do this. Heck, we can just ask someone to give us a ride or something."

"Anyway, for a wooden chest, it's pretty sturdy."

"Yeah, perhaps a bit too sturdy. It's like this whole box is made of metal or something."

"No, wait, it's the metal edges."

"Oh well, let's get going then."

"And Delta?"

"Yeah?"

"Let's not do this again."

Delta smiled, and Tea smiled back.

"Okay, we're almost at the forest."

"Hey Tea, look, an abandoned cart."

"Yeah, but it's broken."

"Can't we fix it?"

"I don't know, can you?"

"No. But there must be something we can use."

"I'm thinking. Is that pole thing strong enough to hold everything?"

"Yeah, let's not do that. This is a genuine Mordorig pole lance type 6, custom built for me. It's not something to be used as a component to fix a cart."

“I was just kidding, don’t get worked up about it. Hey, maybe. . .”

From the broken cart they could salvage enough stuff to create makeshift wheels for under the chest, which increased their traveling speed drastically. They were able to travel back to their home village within two days.

It was different. The streets were paved, but the houses were now run down. People who used to live here didn’t anymore. Tea and Delta wondered if their parents would still be living here.

“Tea!” they heard. “You came back!”

“Dad?” Tea said. She looked around, and there he was. “Dad!”

Tea hugged her father. “How’s mom? Where is she?”

“She’s not doing well.”

“Delta,” Delta heard. It was her parents, and Delta briefly hugged them.

“Delta,” Tea said. “I have to go see my mom.”

“I’m sorry, I have to go with her.”

“Why?” her mother asked.

“Binding spell,” Delta said, lifting her bound arm.

Tea rushed to her mother. “Mom, what happened?”

“Tea,” she said. “I’m so glad to see you.”

They hugged. Delta noticed Tea was crying.

“You’re dying, right?”

Her mother nodded. “Yes, I am.”

“How?”

“I’m sick, my dear.”

“Can’t anybody help you?”

“I’m afraid nobody can. No doctor or magician can help me. I’m sorry.”

“No, there must be a way. Delta, do something!”

“I’ll try, but I’m not as good as others.”

“Please, just try it.”

Delta decided to try and charge her lance with the strongest cure all magic. The sound started soft, but as she charged it more and more, it got louder. Finally, she released it onto Tea’s mother.

At first it seemed to work. She slowly began feeling better.

“Mom!” Tea said. They hugged, but Delta could see the tears in the father’s eyes. They weren’t tears of joy.

“Tea,” her mother said. “I think you should let go.”

“Okay mom.”

“No, I mean, you should let go. I’m going to die, it’s my time. I’m just thankful I could see you one more time.”

Tea’s mother began lying down, now with a smile on her face. As she closed her eyes, everybody knew it was over.

“No, mom, please. I’m sorry, I’m sorry for leaving you. Don’t go, please don’t go!”

“Tea,” her father said. “Your mom wanted you to have this. She wanted to give it to you last time you left, but she forgot.”

Her father handed her arm bracers.

“She bought them for you after that encounter with the wyvern. They’re just ordinary bracers, but, well, I have no use for them, and they were meant for you anyway.”

“Thanks, dad.”

“Tea. I just wanted to say that I’m proud at how far you’ve come. Your mother would have said the same.”

“I know.”

“Delta, take care of my girl for me.”

“She can take really good of herself though.”

“I know.”

They all said their goodbyes and farewells. As they left, they could see construction workers renovating the entire place. It seemed like their money would be put to real good use.

“Hey Tea, I know these past two weeks had been hard for you, so why don’t we just take it easy?”

“What? Heck no, we’re adventurers, baby, plus, we need to get rid of this binding spell as soon as possible. No offense, but some moments really get embarrassing.”

“She did say that whatever you would feel I’d feel as well.”

“That doesn’t mean you had to join me.”

“I see you try not joining me when I do it.”

“You... I... Never mind. I really wish we had some of that special stuff, so that it wouldn’t be as awkward.”

“Well, we could always go visit them.”

Chapter 18

The Mighty Flyfish

“Oh god dammit, Clint,” Tea said to the figure appearing from behind the walls. It really didn’t help that Hank’s mansion was set in a remote area.

The trip to the mansion took a long time, especially since both Tea and Delta had to get used to their current situation. There were times they wanted to bash each others head in, and other times when either of them would break down crying out of frustration. Sometimes they even questioned each other’s friendship, but it only made it stronger. And now they were here, about to meet up with some of their friends again, and at the same time we arrived back where we started off at the beginning.

“Really, why is it so dark here?” Delta said.

“I don’t know,” Clint said. “I was stuck in this closet for quite some time.”

“Where’s Trent?” Tea said.

“Oh, he’s out hunting again. He got bored.”

“Wait, what are you guys doing here anyway?”

“Trent just wanted to check up on them, what about you?”

“The special stuff,” Tea and Delta said.

“I have no idea what you two are talking about. And why are you two actually holding hands?”

“Binding spell.”

“Cool. So, I wanted to ask you guys something, but it kind of has to wait, because I’m starving. Where’s Trent, anyway?”

That night, everybody gathered around to have dinner.

“So I see you two are now sitting together,” Suzette said to Tea and Delta.

“Binding spell,” Tea and Delta said.

“Well, it’s still nice to see you two together. So what brings you here?”

“The special stuff,” they said in unison.

Suzette laughed. “Yeah, things can get kind of awkward when bound to each other.”

“Actually,” Tea said, “I think it’s because we just missed you guys.”

“Yeah,” Delta said. “I thought we could, I don’t know, hang around again some day.”

“Well that’s a coincidence,” Clint said. “I have just the quest for you!”

“Is it like that one quest where you needed to find the ingredients for that ultimate sandwich which, by the way, you completely botched?” Tea said.

“Hey, I didn’t know you actually needed to have some sandwich making skills! But anyway, no, it’s completely not like that. No, I’m talking about a quest of epic proportions, one that will literally make you crap your pants in pure awesomeness and terror. The best of both worlds! What we’re going to do, my friends, is hunt the most magnificent, the most majestic creature. We, my friends, are going to hunt down the Mighty Flyfish.”

“Really?” Tea said. “We’re going to hunt down a fish?”

“We’ll do it!” Delta yelled.

“Wait, what?”

“Tea, you said we wanted to go on adventures again. This is our chance!”

“But we’re hunting down a fish.”

“A mighty fish!”

“It’s still a fish.”

“Actually,” Suzette interrupted, “the Mighty Flyfish is actually not a fish at all, it’s what people call this creature who legend says is a leviathan. Some say it’s a mistranslation of its original name, but since nobody actually know its original name, the name Mighty Flyfish stuck.”

“That makes it sound a lot more interesting,” Tea said. “Where did you get this idea?”

“Actually, that would have been me,” Trent said. “I heard some chicks talk about it in some bar when I tried to use my awesome seduction skills on them. Apparently it doesn’t work on lesbians, though.”

“So what, they just randomly began to talk to each other about some fish that isn’t a fish?” Tea said.

“I have no idea, I was drunk, I didn’t really get the context of the story. All I heard was ‘Mighty Flyfish’ and ‘legendary.’”

“So I assume we’re all going to find this Mighty Flyfish?” Hank said. “In that case, we should all prepare for the journey.”

“Hey,” Suzette said, “do you want to see my new store?”

“Sure,” Delta and Tea both said.

“So, how are you two doing?”

“I think we’re doing fine,” Delta said.

“Are you two still mortal enemies?”

Tea and Delta briefly looked at each other.

“No,” Tea said, “I think we’re okay now.”

“Yeah,” Delta said, “we are. I mean, we still fight occasionally, but we respect each other.”

“We wanted to rekindle our friendship, or at least start a new one.”

“Kind of like two sisters.”

“Two sisters who use that special stuff together,” Suzette joked. “What else did you do together?”

“Nothing,” both said immediately.

Suddenly everyone was silent.

“No way,” Suzette said. “You two did something, right?”

“No,” both said.

“No, I can tell, you two... No way. No way! I thought you two were straight.”

“We totally are straight,” they said at the same time.

“Okay, don’t tell the others, please,” Tea said.

“It was just one time,” Delta said.

“It was a sort of bonding experience, an experiment.”

“Totally meant nothing significant.”

“Right, I get it,” Suzette said. “Strange that it didn’t work though.”

“What?” both said.

“Break the binding spell. I mean, why else would you two do it?”

“Oh yeah,” Tea said. “We totally did because of that.”

“Yeah,” Delta said. “We really thought it would have worked.”

“So, why didn’t it work, actually?”

“It probably is a different kind of binding spell?”

“Right, vampire spells always work differently,” Suzette said, “so there must be something else to it, I guess. I don’t know though, I have absolutely no experience with vampyric magic. Anyway, here it is, my new store.”

“It looks great,” Tea said. “Much better than how it was before.”

“My mom always wanted to renovate this building before... After she passed away, my dad took over this place until I was old to take over myself. You wanna see how it looks like inside?”

“Oh, I’d love to!” Delta said.

The entire shop was much more brighter, at least in most sections. There was one section reserved for witch stuff, which was the only dark area, but that mostly had to do with the fact that every section was color coded, and purple was for witches. The building also had multiple floors you could walk through, each manned by iron golems.

“I’ve been trying to learn some tinkering skills,” Suzette said. “I’ve been thinking of having tinkerer as a tertiary class, as it might be quite handy. No pun intended.”

“That’s a whole range of different skills at your disposal,” Tea said. “Alchemist / witch / tinkerer. I should actually start thinking of taking a secondary class myself.”

“Well, I’ve been trying to pick up a secondary class myself,” Delta said. “I’m trying to be a dual class paladancer / wizard, or palandanzard as I’d like to call it. I actually have learned some basic wizard skills.”

They all went downstairs, where they found a locked door. After trying to figure out which key it was, Suzette got impatient and just incinerated the door, then called in an iron golem to fix the door for her.

“This is what I’m working on,” Suzette said. “I know, it’s pretty advanced stuff, but it’s not all technology. I actually had to magically augment it to actually make it work. My tinkerer skills aren’t high enough to do it without.”

“What does it do?” Tea said.

“Well, I went back to that dungeon where we met those Elder Beings, of course with a huge party, together with several technomancers. It was a pretty dangerous quest, but luckily we all managed to get out unscathed. Anyway, I had the technomancers scan that final room, make blueprints of all technology in there. One of the things was that big portal we saw. Needless to say the blueprint of that

was useless by itself, but I did manage to figure out a bit how to do it, with the help of magic.”

“And this is one such portal?”

“Yeah, sort of. Turns out it’s really hard to make a portal to other dimensions, but easier to make one to somewhere nearby, or at least one that opens in the same realm or dimensional plane, especially if you have a destination point ready. I actually made a similar portal in the basement of Hank’s home.”

“Looks complicated,” Delta said.

“It really isn’t, I just need to switch this thing on and pick a destination.”

She turned on the machine, began pressing some buttons. A menu popped up from which she picked an item, and almost instantaneously after she activated the machine the portal opened. They could see the basement clearly, as if it actually was there.

“That’s incredible,” Tea said, carefully trying to touch the portal. “Is it safe?”

“Yeah, of course!”

“Have you actually tested it?”

“No. But I can assure you, nothing can go wrong. If the portal closes before you’re fully through, it forcefully pushes you out through either side.”

“Good enough for me,” Delta said, and walked straight through. Tea literally had no choice but to go through as well.

“Now I don’t have to travel this far anymore when I want to get to work,” Suzette said. “Come, let’s take some stuff from the store first.”

“So unlike last time,” Trent said, “we’ve actually got a plan. In order to summon the Mighty Flyfish, we need to travel to Aelzaria again. We need to visit a group of dungeons there, not unlike that other one we already visited there.”

“So does that mean we’d have to fight more Elder Beings?” Delta said.

“I don’t think so. Clint and I have already been there once to check it out, and while it’s no walk in the park, well, let’s just say you have to see it to believe it.”

“So that means we’ll have to travel with the city of Order, I assume,” Tea said, “which also means we’ll need to travel to Titanium City.”

“Yeah, which is why we need to get going, the trip will take us about a day, that’s without any interruptions, which will definitely be there, and the next time the city of Order stops there is in three days.”

“Then let’s move out everyone,” Clint said.

“Hey Suzette,” Tea said. “I want you to have this.”

“What’s that?” Suzette said.

“It’s a key to this house I bought while on the city of Order. I actually made this extra key for Delta, but, well, since we’re stuck together at the moment I want you to have this one.”

“You made a key for me?” Delta said. “But you must have made it before the binding spell, I didn’t even know you had purchased a home.”

“Well, I actually got the house because they said it was vacant for a long time and I had the money, and I made this key for you because, well, I actually secretly hoped that we one day would be friends again. And now I have to get a bigger bed.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because I don’t think it’s fair to let one of us sleep on the ground, and I don’t feel like sharing a single bed.”

“Wait, so Suzette’s going to sleep where?”

“Well, she can sleep in the guest room, or, depending on what she prefers, your room or mine.”

“Actually,” Suzette said, “I’m going to stay with Hank. I think it’s getting serious between us.”

“Well, I could always get bigger beds for everyone, I’ll figure it out. We could just use the house as a home base or something for the time being.”

Chapter 19

The wedding

The road was long and tiresome, especially since they didn't have time to waste, but after one whole day they arrived at Titanium City.

"Great, now we're early," Tea said.

"Tea," Delta said. "We're all tired and dirty..."

"I'm not tired!" Clint said.

"Yeah, shut up. Anyway, we're all tired and dirty, and as much as we want to be cranky, it's not going to help us, so let's just all get a room at the inn and call it a day."

"I'm not tired!" Clint said again. "We should have done an all-nighter a lot more often!"

"You know," Trent said, "it's because I actually like you, bro, otherwise I would have shot an arrow through that skull."

"Why did we have to get a room next to theirs?" Tea said.

"I don't care," Delta said. "I just miss us three hanging out."

"Yeah..."

"You miss it too, right?"

"Maybe. Yeah, I do."

"Well, at least she's having fun. I'm tired, good night. Or day."

"Yeah, sleep well."

They both closed their eyes.

"Not with the hand that's attached to mine," Tea said.

"You didn't want to switch hands?"

"That's because I don't want you to do it at all."

"But—"

"Delta, I'll ask you one thing, just one thing. I won't ask anything else from you for the rest of the day, you'll have my word. Just promise me you won't touch yourself, okay?"

"... Okay, I'll promise."

"Good. Sleep well."

“Hey, what the hell?”

“You only said not to touch myself.”

“But that doesn’t mean you can do it to me!”

“You said you wouldn’t ask anything else from me, and you gave me your word, so suck it.”

“... Fine.”

“Tea?”

“What is it?”

“Do you think I’m messed up?”

“Why?”

“Everybody around me is growing up. I mean, even Suzette is becoming more responsible, and she’s, like, a year younger than me.”

“Are you referring to earlier? In that case I’m just as messed up as you.”

“No, it’s not that, it’s just that, I still want to do all those things I did when I was younger.”

“You’re kidding right? Everybody wants to, the only difference is, you actually do it, there’s nothing wrong with that. And besides, you’re responsible in your own way.”

“You really mean that?”

“Of course I do. Now please, go to sleep. I can’t sleep if you don’t. Literally. We both have to fall asleep at the same time.”

“Okay. Sleep well.”

“Sleep well.”

“Delta?”

“Yeah?”

“Could... Could you... ”

“Sorry, too tired. Besides, you can do it yourself.”

“It’s at a hard to reach place. Don’t you feel it?”

“I do, but I’ve learned to deal with it—yeah, it’s driving me crazy.”

“Oh. Yeah, that feels good. A bit higher.”

“I know where it is.”

“Tea, how late is it?”

“I think it’s a few hours before midnight.”

“Wow, did we sleep that long?”

“Yeah, but I think there are still a few bars and restaurants open that serve food.”

“What makes you think I want to go to one?”

“I’m hungry, we’re both linked together through a binding spell, do the math.”

“Being hungry really makes you quite cranky. But yeah, let’s eat.”

“Well you two seem to be sitting here all cosy,” the waiter said.

“Binding spell,” they both said.

“Also, we’re not a couple,” Tea said. “Just so you know.”

“Oh, well in that case, my shift ends at midnight. You two wanna go to my place?”

“What my friend here is trying to say is,” Delta said, “this is our first date. It’s a blind date.”

“Yeah whatever, you two ain’t so hot anyway. Especially you. Don’t think that pluck of hair hides anything, we can see it all.”

Tea stood up.

“What did you just say?”

Delta pulled Tea back in her chair.

“Easy, Tea. He’s not worth it. We’ll just get our food and be gone.”

“Ugly dykes,” the waiter mumbled, walking off. This was the moment Delta would have decked him by punching him in the back, but fortunately for them, Clint, Trent and Hank happened to sit at the table the waiter was walking past.

“Hold it right there, mister,” Clint said. “Now they might be lesbians, but you don’t talk that way to ladies.”

“I’ve never seen him this tough,” Tea whispered to Delta.

“Cool down, Clint,” Trent said. “You’re scaring him.”

“I am? That really wasn’t my intention.”

“And now you’ve ruined it, Trent,” Hank said. He then looked at the waiter. “Listen, no matter what orientation a girl has or how she looks like, you treat her with respect.”

“And why should you care?” the waiter said.

“Come,” Clint said. “Let’s go, I don’t feel like eating here anymore. Here’s some gold, it should cover our food and that of these two ladies. Tea, Delta, let’s go.”

“Wow, I’m almost turned on now,” Delta said to Tea.

“Told you so,” Suzette said to Hank. “I’ve been here before. The owner is as big a sleazeball as that waiter is.”

“So where should we eat then?” Tea said.

“Well, I’ve heard of this new place that just opened up. It isn’t exactly in the most popular place, so it might not be that busy there. I don’t even know if it’s still open.”

“We can try,” Delta said. “Wait, where are Clint and Trent?”

“They’re taking a leak against the side of the restaurant,” Suzette said. “Real mature!” she yelled at the two.

“Welcome to KeiDom, what can I bring you?”

“Keila?” Delta said. “Is that you?”

“Delta? It’s Delta! Hey Dom, come here!”

“Why?”

“It’s Delta!”

“No way, for real?”

The three friends embraced.

“What are you guys doing here?” Delta said.

“Well, we decided to settle down here,” Keila said. “Dom discovered her true calling, which was cooking.”

“And how about you? Are you still paladancing?”

“Actually, we both still do, you know, because of my hunger to travel. We actually decided to keep this business open until the end of the high season, but things aren’t really going that well.”

“What do you mean?”

“Business is tough here,” Dominique said. “There are many restaurants, bars and other kinds of food joints opening up left and right. We decided to open up shop here, because it’s one of the few places not saturated by these things, but nobody seems to know we’re here. So far we only had one customer, and we actually ended up giving him free food. He didn’t even intend to eat here, he was just lost.”

“That sucks,” Delta said.

“If all else fails though, we can always just turn it into our home, and pay our taxes from money we’ll earn by doing adventures.”

“As long as we have each other,” Keila said. “Hey, what’s up with her? I thought you were straight.”

“Binding spell,” Tea and Delta both said.

“That explains everything.”

“You know,” Dominique said. “Keila and I tried a binding spell on ourselves once. They’re really hard to break. That one time we did it, we forgot to set a time limit. We were lucky it wasn’t the vampyric kind.”

“Just our luck,” Tea said.

“We did have fun though. Lots of fun. Like, ours was a full body bind—”

“Shut up, Dom,” Keila said.

“—and we were both completely naked.”

“Really, Dom, they don’t need to hear this.”

“Keila didn’t want to get out to get this spell broken—”

“You’re embarrassing me.”

“—because that would mean we would have to get out naked—”

“I give up.”

“—so I just wrapped a blanket around us. Took us a week to find this witch who actually knew how to free us.”

“So yeah, anyway, who’re you traveling with?”

“Well,” Delta said, “the one I’m stuck with is Tea Cha. And before you ask, we’re good now. This is Suzette Lenoise, she’s our alchemist / witch.”

“I’m also training to have tinkerer as my tertiary class,” Suzette said.

“Her boyfriend is this big guy, Hank Barton, a barbarian. The archer is Trent Demazure, and that’s Clint Punchkick, a rogue bard.”

“Rogue bard!” Clint yelled in a singing way.

“Yeah, Clint already had written a theme song for himself,” Tea said.

“Well, let me introduce us too then,” Dominique said. “I’m Dominique Teskey, and that’s Keila Lightheart. We’re both paladancers, just like Delta.”

“My specialty is ballet,” Keila said. “Hers is belly dancing.”

“Hey, does anybody here want something to eat? I can go make some if anyone’s

interested.”

“I’ll have the spaghetti with tomato sauce please!” Clint said. “Anyone want something else?”

“Actually,” Hank said, “I’ll have the same, but with ground beef as well.”

“I changed my mind, I also want the ground beef!”

“So, what are you guys doing?” Keila said.

“We’re currently searching for a way to summon the Mighty Flyfish,” Delta said.

“What a coincidence,” Dominique said, “we talked about it a while ago, before some drunk creep interrupted us. Hey Keila, we should totally go with them.”

“But what about the restaurant?”

“The restaurant was a bad idea. This is a better one.”

“I guess you’re right. You know what, let’s just do it. Oh, no, wait, we can’t.”

“Why not?”

“We’re still having this wedding planned.”

“Oh, right.”

“What wedding?” Delta said.

“Ours, of course,” Keila said.

“Wow, congratulations! When did you guys get engaged?”

“Well, about two years ago, only a few months after we graduated.”

“Yeah,” Dominique continued, “we were both, you know, doing it, and when we both hit our peak, I just pulled out my ring and proposed to her.”

Keila became red.

“That’s most likely the worst moment to ever ask someone to marry you,” Delta said, laughing.

“Don’t judge,” Dominique laughed. “Besides, asking life-changing questions during the deed actually increases the intensity, at least to me.”

“Yeah,” Keila said, “I have to admit it did give me that extra boost as well.”

“That’s how I asked Suzette to move in with me,” Hank said.

“Dude,” Delta said, “that’s just messed up.”

“I know, I’m surprised she actually said yes. Three times even.”

“You know, I was actually saying yes for completely other reasons,” Suzette said. “But yeah, I liked the idea of moving in with you.”

“Oh god, please make it stop,” Tea said.

“So, when are you guys getting married?” Delta said.

“In less than a week, actually,” Keila said. “We’re getting married in that chapel we’ve always talked about.”

“Wait, seriously?” Delta said. “We’re heading to Aelzaria and are waiting for the city of Order ourselves. Since we won’t get to Aelzaria for at least a week or two, we might be able to attend!”

“Hey Suzette,” Tea said. “Are you done here?”

“Not yet,” Suzette said. “I’m laying down the finishing touches.”

“What is that?” Delta asked.

“It’s kind of like the portal device, except this one projects the portal in mid-air instead of it being created inside a big ring. The principle is the same, and the ring is only there to show where you should not stand, and to make the portal a bit more stable.”

“Wait, more stable?”

“Yeah, portals may close if they’re not stable enough. It’s not really dangerous, unless you get stuck in the middle, in which case it will basically shoot you out in either direction. You should better hope that you won’t be shot against something hard, you know, like a wall. I’ll be leaving behind an iron golem though, so that it can work on the portal when we’re gone.”

“What happens when it’s done?” Tea asked.

“It will return to the shop, basically, probably to reorganize everything or something, I don’t know, they decide their own function when they get there.”

“So, why are you placing one here?”

“Several reasons. One, if Keila and Dominique are joining us and they feel the need to ever return home, they can do that. Two, if we need something from Titanium City, we can always use the shortcut. Three, I wanted to test this device.”

“What’s that?” Keila said.

“It’s a portal device, sort of.”

“You mean like one that allows you to travel from one place to the other?”

“Basically, yeah.”

“Cool, let me take a look.”

Before Suzette could respond, Keila already had jumped into it. They watched as Keila went through the machine.

“Okay, the device is pretty nice, but there could be some adjustments made. For example, the transistors on this side could easily be replaced by a different one, saving space for other components, like stabilizers. Some components use copper wiring, but gold might be better in certain places. And even though these lasers are fine, you could better use a different one which resonates with most magic better, so that instabilities would be rare while using magic.”

“Well, I could give my iron golem the orders for all the changes, I guess,” Suzette said.

“Wait,” Tea said. “How does she know all that stuff?”

“She’s originally from Craneus,” Delta said, “and ‘paladancer’ is actually her secondary class. Her primary is technomancer.”

“Tier 6AB,” Keila said. “I can do minor permanent adjustments to hardware and software. But I’d rather still be a paladancer.”

“Do we have everything packed?” Keila said.

“Yes, Keila,” Dominique said. “We’ve been through this already. Several times.”

“Well, it’s not like we can hop by any time we want.”

“Actually,” Suzette said.

“Don’t mind her,” Delta said to Suzette. “She’s always like that, even when she only has to be next door. It’s why she became roommates with me and Dominique.”

They all gathered at the boarding platform. Once they were complete, they all ascended to the city. Even though the transporting platforms were quite fast, it was still a long trip. Still, it was always a great sight to see the world below you get

smaller while the city itself would come closer, with eventually seeing its skyline.

Before most of them were heading to find an inn, they all wanted to see Tea's newly purchased house. Once they arrived though, they came upon an unfinished building in the middle of a bunch of ruins.

"Where's the roof?" Delta asked.

"I have no idea," Tea said. "They said this would be a good investment."

"Wait," Keila said. "Let me see the deed."

Tea reached into his back pockets until she found the deed to the house.

"Wait, you didn't just purchase this house, you purchased an entire piece of land. You literally own this entire village."

"I wouldn't call this a village," Delta said. "There's barely any house left standing. How much did you pay for this?"

"About a million IPC," Tea said.

"A million?! That didn't tip you off? A decent house at most would cost about a thousand IPC, roughly a ten thousand gold. You basically spent the equivalent of a thousand houses!"

"Look, I'm an outdoors person, I'm not that good at economics and real estate. I barely even sleep in a house."

"Can't you get a refund?" Suzette said.

"No, they're already gone with the wind."

"Hey," Clint said. "Maybe we could salvage building material of these old buildings!"

"Yeah," Delta said, "anyway, how much money do you still got left?"

"Not much," Tea said. "Aside from some silver and copper, I might have gotten about ten or twenty thousand IPC."

"Well, I think it's more than enough, and even then I've got plenty on my own account, so I guess we'll be able to renovate this place."

"Hey guys," Suzette said, "Clint is right, we could always just scavenge what's left of the other buildings, see what's still usable. Things that are still left standing we could just use as a foundation for other buildings, but loose things could either be used in the construction or be sold off."

"Yeah," Keila said, "maybe we could help modernize it a bit."

"Why don't we all just check what this one looks like inside," Dominique said.

They all stepped inside the one house that was still somewhat standing, and were pleasantly surprised. Even though from the outside it looked like a wreckage, from the inside it wasn't really all that bad. The place was already furnished, and like Tea said before, there were three bedrooms ready on the second floor with beds. The main things missing were a kitchen and a bathroom, at least as far as Tea was concerned.

"I assume there's no third floor?" Delta said.

"There is," Tea said, "but they did say that the roof needed some fixing."

"It needs more than just some fixing."

"You know," Hank said, "I could help with fixing up this place. I know a few people here on the city of Order who can at least turn this place in a cozy home for a reasonable price."

"I don't think the problem is the house though," Delta said. "It's the entire piece of land. I mean, how far does it really stretch?"

Keila looked at the deed. "According to this deed, it's a pretty big area. Look,

there's an attachment."

"That's a really big area," Delta said.

"Yeah, but what am I supposed to do with all this land?" Tea said.

"I don't know, it's not my problem."

"Okay, I've figured it out," Tea said. "We can extend the building to a fourth floor, maybe even a fifth. All we need to do is reinforce the building with adamant to support its weight."

"Those weigh a ton," Delta said, "and it's uncertain if it can even hold its own weight. You'd be better off importing concrete from Landbox."

"But then I'd have to reinforce it with steel anyway."

"You could just reinforce with adamant, it's much cheaper."

"That's what I just said."

"But you didn't say 'use concrete'."

"Well, yeah, but that actually also is a good idea."

"So, how many floors do you think it needs?"

"At most five, we don't really need more. Three also might be enough, but I want there to be enough room for all of us."

"We could just rebuild all those buildings outside, you know."

"Anyway, what's the state of the basement?"

"It could use a lot of work, but it can be used. I actually want to go to the city to get a crystal powered generator, so that we could provide the house with some energy."

"Well, we might just get a couple more just to be sure."

"Why? One is adequate enough."

"Just in case we need to power the other buildings. Hey, we have all this land now, might as well just use it."

Tea gave everybody a task. Suzette was to set up a portal, and create a portable one that could be set up quickly, so that they could place one in one of the dungeons in Aelzaria. Keila offered to help out with her technomancing skills. Clint and Trent were sent out to get some food products so that Dominique could prepare it, while Hank would browse for both a kitchen and a bathroom, as well as bigger beds. Tea and Delta themselves would first take care of the generators, after which they went to the contractors.

The bathroom was the first to be built, as well as the lighting over the two floors that already were standing. In all, it took two days to install everything, including the tiling. The kitchen was next. They did have a stove to prepare food on, but that one was replaced with a more efficient and modern one. Dominique had recommended Hank to get this one. She also asked if she could have some other kitchen equipment, and Delta happily obliged.

Within the week, the third floor was standing, and the floor of the fourth was being prepared. During that time, since they couldn't do much else, they either went through the random dungeons or went to the surface to go on short adventures there. It did help Tea earn back money. It wasn't just for that though, Tea and

Delta wanted to catch up on that lost time together, and even though they bickered just as much, perhaps even more so than before, they still liked these moments.

It was one of the strangest bachelorettes party they have ever seen. Both brides were present at this party, which exclusively had women. Even the strippers were women. Aside from Tea, Delta and Suzette, Anette and a few others from their time at the paladancer academy were present.

“I don’t know how to feel about this,” Tea said.

“Relax, Tea”, Delta said. “Nobody’s forcing you to do anything you don’t want. At least not yet. Besides, most here either know we’re both straight or think we’re a couple.”

“Hey, hotness,” one of the patrons said to Tea. “You wanna go dance with me?”

“Can’t,” Tea said, holding the bound arm up. “Binding spell.”

“Oh come on, Tea,” Delta said. “I’ll go dance with you.”

“Yeah,” the patron said. “We can dance together. I’m not here to steal you from your girlfriend, just wanna have some fun.”

“She’s not—” Tea said.

“Oh come on, I’m just kidding, I’m straight myself too.”

Tea looked at Delta, who was now laughing. “This is Regina, she’s our local troll. Almost literally even, she’s a half-troll.”

“Wait, how does that work?” Tea said.

“My mom was very flexible,” Regina said. “Only explanation I need. Actually it might have been some body stretch potion or something.”

“It’s called a turn rubber potion,” Suzette said, overhearing the conversation, after which she continued her activities.

“Wow, I almost wouldn’t be able to tell that it was Anette’s sister. From the stories she told me I’d imagine her to be much tamer.”

“Reggie!” Keila yelled from the other side of the room, completely wasted. “C’mere!”

“Yeah, that’s why we never give her alcohol,” Regina said, “Anyway, see you guys again, maybe later tonight.”

“So, Tea,” Delta said. “Wanna get out? I know you’re not really feeling comfortable in a large crowd.”

“No,” Tea said, “I’m fine. You know what, yes, let’s dance.”

It was a long night, but after everybody went home, Tea and Delta both took a little stroll through the city.

“You know, I’ve been here for quite some time,” Delta said, “but I’ve never been to one of those arcades before.”

“Well, we could go there if you want,” Tea said.

“No, I don’t know if I should.”

“Oh come on, we’re still young. We are allowed to have a little fun.”

“Wow, you’re really loosening up, aren’t you?”

They spent the rest of the night at the arcades. As it was really late, they were pretty much the only ones there. The only things there were iron golems keeping an

eye on the place and on the two of them. Eventually they both went home, with a good memory that would most likely stay with them for the rest of their lives.

“Crap, how late is it?” Delta said.

“Oh crap, we’re late!” Tea said.

They quickly dressed up, getting ready to attend the wedding.

“Crap, where is everybody?” Tea said.

“Hold up. I think we need to go to the bathroom.”

“Crap, you’re right. I go first.”

“No way, I go first. You always stink up the place. Learn to flush when you’re done.”

“Don’t you know how much water that spills? I’d rather wait until everything’s out.”

“Yeah, if we hurry we’ll be in time for the wedding.”

“Hey, where were you guys?” Keila said.

“We had to go to the bathroom,” Delta said. “We ended up going at the same time.”

“Right,” Dominique. “I’m into a lot of things, but that ain’t one of them.”

“How does that even work?” Keila said.

“You don’t want to know,” Tea said, looking at her feet.

The wedding was beautiful. It wasn’t particularly long, but that didn’t seem to be a problem for the brides. This wedding was kind of like the most epic battle you’ve ever seen, except there was less blood and gore. It’s just indescribable, and no words can do it justice. Needless to say, tears were shed.

The reception itself was also equally beautiful, except it was also pretty much standard. There’s really no reason to discuss it. There was a buffet, a dance, music, all these things. Hank and Suzette might have been a little frisky. Nothing you wouldn’t expect. It made Delta want to get married as well eventually.

“Hey, the new furniture has arrived!” Delta said. “Now we need to get it to the third floor.”

“So does that mean we can finally stay here?” Keila said.

“Do you really want to stay here tonight?” Dominique said. “I mean, there’s nothing wrong with this place, but I thought you wanted a bit more privacy to, you know.”

“What? Oh. Oh! Wait, I think it’s best we’d check up on our home, see if the portal works properly, and pack up some other stuff, we’ll be sleeping here tomorrow. Is that fine with you guys?”

“Sure,” Delta said. “We would have to assemble the furniture first anyway, and it’s already getting late.”

“You know,” Tea said, “I thought the iron golems you brought along would have done that by now.”

“I don’t trust them with assembly.”

“That’s bull, you let them fix machinery.”

“That’s mechanical. This is all wood.”

“Hey,” Hank said. “Do we need to move this inside?”

“Yeah,” Delta said. “Anyway, I’m beat, let’s go to bed.”

“Yeah right, Delta,” Tea said. “You know that’s—oh. Wait, no.”

“Come on, Tea, I’ve held back for, like, a few days.”

“I said no. I really feel embarrassed when you do that.”

“I know you want to. Don’t deny it.”

“Okay, yes, I want to, but I’m not going to, and that’s final.”

Chapter 20

To summon a vampire

It was the day of their arrival at Aelzaria, and they were now ready to deploy the portal device. The house itself was already beginning to take shape, and it was decided to extend the house at the bottom floor, giving it more space. This house wouldn't just be for Tea and Delta to live, this would be their official headquarter. They also decided to dig an extra floor below the basement where they could display their loot. It wasn't difficult to get a permit to do this, in fact, they could actually dig a lot deeper before they actually had to ask for permission. Delta contemplated on whether or not to add a personal recreational room, but Tea decided against it, as they'd most likely be adventuring most of the time anyway, and considering they wouldn't be able to place a portal device anywhere they'd go, they were just better off with what was necessary, or at least for the moment.

They had to place the portal device at a safe location, so it was decided to not just place it at the dungeon Trent and Clint recommended, but to hide it in such a way that it would perfectly blend in with the rest while still making it visible enough for the group to know where it was.

However, before everybody embarked, Tea and Delta had something to say.

"Guys, listen up," Delta said. "Tea and I decided to not come with you, at least not while the binding spell is still active."

"Basically, we're pretty useless in this state," Tea added. "We know, we've tried our skills together several times in the random dungeons, and we always barely made it to the fifth floor on the easiest dungeons. We're pretty much dead weight when we go with you guys."

"But what are you two going to do?" Suzette said.

"We'll be staying here, make sure everything is fine," Tea said.

"We've talked to them," Delta said, "and Keila and Dominique have agreed to fill in for us."

"But guys," Suzette said, "it's no fun without you two."

"I know it's hard for you, Suzette, but we don't want you guys to get in trouble because we can't fight. This binding spell is really hindering our ability to do so. Besides, you can still have lots of fun with Keila and Dominique, especially once you get to know them."

As the group took off, Tea and Delta had other plans. Both knew what they said was nonsense, they were still as effective even with the spell, perhaps more effective due to their teamwork, but they had to find a way to break this spell, as both have found out many disadvantages to their predicament. Aside from their linked lives, where just one mistake of one of them could possibly result in the death of both of them, they were also both sick of actually feeling everything the other felt. This meant that when one would be sick, the other would feel it as well. Even a simple touch, like a pat on the shoulder, was felt by both. There were only a few things not shared, like emotions.

That's why the moment their friends were off to the dungeons again and the island stopped at a different city, the two decided to silently leave. It would most likely be a few weeks before they would find their way back on the city of Order, at which point the house might be finished anyway.

"Do you think they will find it?" Delta said.

"The note? Yeah, I placed it on the table. So where are we going?"

"I think we should go find the hardest thing on the list first, a deathworm. Hey Tea."

"Yeah?"

"How do you think Suzette will take this? I mean, us leaving just like that."

"I don't know. I really don't know. I mean, you know her more than I do, and if you don't know it, how am I supposed to?"

"We really don't need the book, Delta, we have this list."

"But maybe it could tell us more about what we are looking for."

"No, it doesn't. There are only recipes in it, witches recipes, might I add. In order to properly brew a potion, we may need to find a witch."

"Yeah, one that is willing to summon a vampire. Who even wants that anyway? 'Oh hey, we need your help in brewing a potion that could lure a certain vampire, but don't worry, she doesn't suck your blood as far as we know.'"

"If you say it like that it does sound stupid."

It was a day ago that they left the city. They didn't really know which way to go, all they knew was that they had to find a deathworm. They did do some research, and it was known that the creatures could be found near cemeteries and burial grounds. They were quite rare, but would appear more frequently the older the graves were, especially if they were untouched for a very long time.

Delta did have one in mind. The journey would take them a week if there weren't any interruptions, but she knew there would be many stops and sidetracks. On their way they could pick certain things up that were also on the list, so that they didn't need to backtrack.

"When the time comes and we don't have anybody, I can learn some witching skills," Tea said.

"And be, what, ninja / witch? That really is an odd combination."

"Not as much as paladancer / wizard."

"At least they have something in common. Paladancers can use spells. Kind of."

"Exactly, kind of."

"Well, how about becoming a samurai? You could call yourself, like, a roninja."

“Yeah, that’s . . . not a bad idea, actually. Well, except for the name, that’s just stupid.”

The grass was tall and yellow, and the wind was blowing. There was something off about it though, or at least Tea felt that way.

“I could have sworn I heard something,” Tea said.

“It might just be your . . . No wait, duck.”

“Can you hear it too?”

“No, but if *you* hear something we have to be careful, there might actually be something here.”

“What if it’s just a rabbit?”

“Even better, we’d have food for the night. Now be quiet.”

For a long time nothing could be heard, at least to Delta. Tea however heard various things moving through the tall grass. At that point, in a swift move, she grabbed something from behind and quietly threw it on the ground.

“Are you alone?” Tea said as quietly as possible. The stranger shook his head.

“With how many are you?” Delta said. The stranger held up five fingers.

“That’s including or excluding you?” Tea said.

“Ask it more specifically, he can’t nod if you give him two options.”

“Including you? Excluding? Excluding. There are four others here.”

“I know that, I can count. Now where are they?”

“I think there’s one over there, and one over there. I can’t hear the rest. What should we do with this one?”

“Question him. Okay, what do you people want? Quietly.”

“We’re just simple robbers, man!” the man said.

“Bullcrap,” Tea said. “You people were trying to kill us.”

“No, man, I swear, we—”

“More quietly.”

“We were just going to ambush you, force you to pay up money. We—”

Just at that point, two men grabbed them from behind, holding a knife to their necks.

“What took you so long, man?”

What they didn’t count on was that Tea already anticipated on them, as she was already holding a kunai, and gave one to Delta herself. On Tea’s cue, they both stabbed the men in their necks at the same time.

“Oh god, man, that’s sick!”

“That’s the risk of being a felon,” Delta said.

“Those were my brothers, man!” He stood up, and drew his knife.

“Well, prepare to join them, then,” Tea said. At that moment, the two remaining men, both bigger than the two of them, began attacking, distracting them, allowing for the man with the knife to easily hurt the two girls.

At least they thought it would have been that easy. Delta threw her kunai to the chest of her attacker, then immediately summoned her lance, while Tea used hers to fend off the other two attackers, juggling it between both her hands. Delta then dispatched her attacker by impaling him, and Tea ripped open the chest of her own attacker. This would only leave the fragile man, now furious, thinking he could take the two on.

“You have two choices,” Tea said. “Run now, get your revenge another day . . .”

“Or die here,” Delta said. “The choice is yours.”

The man took a wise decision, and ran off.

“Well, at least they dropped some good loot,” Delta said. “Maybe we should take it to the nearest town, see if there’s anything we could return to people.”

“You know the chances of you getting money from it is really slim, right?”

“As a paladancer, I can’t simply take stuff from robbers and claim it as my own. Most of this stuff belonged to someone. It’s against my code of honor to do so, it would make me no different than these people.”

“And yet you kill off human beings.”

“That’s a huge misconception. Paladins, and by extension paladancers, aren’t against killing bad people or people in general. I mean, aside from the dark paladins there are enough paladins who are hired assassins. Heck, some are dual classed as paladin / assassin. In fact, most paladins are also trained in offensive magic. Paladancers don’t often get to learn them because we mostly focus on motivating and buffing our allies.”

“That’s seriously messed up though.”

“It really isn’t, I mean, I don’t just casually kill people. I only kill bad people, and in this world, keeping dangerous thugs alive isn’t generally that good an idea. Sometimes we need to set an example to other thugs, and that includes killing them.”

“Yeah, anyway, I’m keeping the golds and silvers.”

“Well, yeah, so do I. There’s no proof any of that belongs to anybody anyway.”

“Isn’t that just double standards, though?”

“Maybe, I just call it convenience. Instead of having to stick around to solve the issue of who had what, I just avoid the issue altogether. Trust me, I’ve gone through that in the first month of me doing adventures, and it really isn’t fun when two adults start mashing each others faces in just for some silver. Adults who still have a fortune, might I add.”

“How about those who really need the money?”

“I’ll mostly divide the coins equally to them. Most of the coins these bandits carry aren’t from the town I’m returning the stuff to. They travel, just like us.”

It wasn’t a big village, but it was a wealthy one. It was so wealthy even, most inns just outright refused them just for looking less than wealthy. They did find one that would accept them though, one that was specifically set up for adventurers and travelers like them.

After getting dinner and tidying themselves up a bit, they decided to just lie in bed. Neither of them were really tired, but there was nothing else for them to do.

“Hey Tea, I was thinking. Do we really need to break this spell?”

“What? You don’t want to be separated from me?”

“Well, it’s not like it’s really all that bad.”

“Really? I can’t really ‘help’ myself while I’m still bound to you, now can I?”

“Well, you can, and it saves me the trouble.”

“Okay, how about when I get sick?”

“Well, then we’re sick together. It’s not like it would matter a lot anyway, since we’re both this close together all the time we might as well be sick together.”

“And how about dying then?”

“Well, at least we wouldn’t die alone.”

“What if I wanted to be intimate with somebody? I mean, I assume that

eventually I find somebody, and eventually I want some private time with that somebody.”

“Well, what if I never actually find someone? I mean, most guys look at you, Tea. They still do, despite your scar.”

“Maybe it’s because they can’t see the scar.”

“They can see it. And you can’t hide it forever either. One day when you do find that man, he’ll have to know about it.”

“Wow, Tea, when did that happen?”

“When you were half asleep. It was really hard doing this though, since I wasn’t really awake myself when I did.”

“Well, it does look good, and that scar really gives you that battle chick feeling. You have no idea how many fall for that.”

“At least I can see through my right eye again. Do... Do you really think people won’t think different of me?”

“Yeah, I’m sure, and even if they do, you don’t need those people around you.”

Delta was right, the change in her hair didn’t affect the way people looked at her. To them, she was just another adventurer with a battle scar. It even seemed as if she received more lustful eyes from the men and the occasional woman. Not that it made her any more confident, though.

“This was a bad idea,” Tea said.

“No,” Delta said, “it’s good. Don’t you see how much attention you are getting?”

“Yeah, and that’s why it’s a bad idea.”

“Lighten up, you’ll learn to love it.”

They traveled for days, trying to get to this ancient burial, and each night they slept at different places, sometimes in a tavern or inn, at other times out in the open, sometimes in the woods or in a cave. They didn’t mind, it’s the life they chose and wouldn’t want it any other way.

“Hey Delta, do you think there’s life beyond our star?”

“Well yeah, haven’t you heard about that twin planet that was discovered a few decades ago?”

“Twin planet?”

“Yeah, it’s actually two planets fused together making a big, oddly shaped planet. Apparently these planets weren’t even originally from our world, but from a different dimension, or, what did they call it again? Parallel universe.”

“So, what, they just happened to bump into each other?”

“Actually, it’s more complicated than that, the two planets for some reason got transported to our world at the same time, merging them together.”

“Wait, was that the planet that kind of looked like a dumbbell?”

“An oddly shaped one, but yes, that’s the one.”

“I think I’ve heard about it back at the ninja academy. Apparently it was some ditch effort on both worlds to save their respective planets from a universe-wide annihilation. I’ve also heard that Landbox cartoons are the hottest things there.”

“You mean like Kane Animations?”

“Yeah, like those Katy Cat cartoons, or, what’s she called again, Debbie Duck.”

“Wait, I just realized.”

“What?”

“Kane Animations is a subsidiary of Kane Corp. We traveled with Gabriel Kane, right?”

“Right. Oh. Oh! He’s the son of Adrian Kane!”

“Wait, what is he doing here then?”

“Beats me, maybe he really liked this world or this setting.”

“Or maybe he’s trying to industrialize it here. You know, set up a Kane Corp. factory or something? A research lab?”

“Or, maybe he just genuinely prefers to adventure?”

“Okay, S.U.N. or Special Team Starling?”

“The live-action or animated series?”

“Animated series? Which one had one?”

“They both had animated series. Didn’t you hear about those?”

“At ninja academy, we only got these film rolls with live action series, including S.U.N. and Special Team Starling. They really love them, as there’s a lot of stealth in both series.”

“Well, which did you like most?”

“Personally I preferred Special Team Starling, although it was getting a bit silly starting with season three.”

“Well, they did need to find a reason to replace Judy Sumner.”

“Why did she leave the series anyway?”

“I’ve heard scheduling conflicts. In the animated series, her character was entirely skipped over.”

“So it’s like a continuation of the series?”

“Not really, it’s a complete reboot. It even had a different title to reflect on that, Special Team Starling MAX. It was more aimed at girls though.”

“So wait, did they just skip over the entire body altering saga?”

“Well you have to admit, in the series it was pretty gruesome, even though you didn’t actually see a lot. I mean, essentially Cameron died, and Cassandra was just cloned from her genetic material or something.”

“I remember some of the younger students there having traumas because of that scene. I mean, the first moment you see Cameron dissolve, and sure, it was clear it was just a mannequin, but still.”

“Did you see the movie that was made after the series ended?”

“Of course I had.”

“What did you think about the revelation that Heather and Delia always had a thing for each other?”

“I don’t know. Originally I thought they just shoehorned it in because of fan responses, but on the other hand, there was always this undertone between the two.”

“I never seen that.”

“Really? Are you kidding me? I mean, out of all the characters, the ones who had the biggest rivalry were Heather and Delia, even though Delia also hated Naz and Cam, and of course later Cassie.”

“That really doesn’t say anything, S.U.N. also had such a similar rivalry between the main characters and a recurring character.”

“This one was different, though. Almost every episode where either Delia or Heather had a boyfriend, the other would just try to steal that boyfriend from the other, only to drop that person when they do manage to steal the guy.”

“That still doesn’t say a lot.”

“Well, how about the episodes where they both either lose their memories or are brainwashed? They would always be seen together a lot.”

“Wait, you’re right. Remember that one episode where they both lose their memories and become really close friends, doing lots of things together, and then, after they both get their memories back, they told each other to never talk about it again, even though they did nothing really significant that wasn’t already seen by many other people?”

“Yeah, I always wondered what the deal was with that, until I realized they also had a sleepover. Without pajamas.”

“Wait, seriously?”

“Yeah, the next morning they could be seen in their lingerie. I always wondered why two grownups would have a sleepover anyway.”

“Oh my god, you’re right, it would first of all make no sense that they would have a sleepover otherwise, and it would explain why they’d end up in lingerie. I mean, I always thought it was because of fan service.”

“Well, they probably were desperate. I mean, the quality of the series went down since season four. They probably tried to attract more men.”

“They did the right thing during season six though by focusing more on the female audience.”

“Yeah, I think that was a great send-off season.”

“What did you think about the Samurai Orc series?”

“I love it, I’ve read every issue and have seen every movie back at the academy. I especially liked Samurai Orc vs. Ninja Ogre.”

“Why? Ninjas are mostly portrayed as bad-guys.”

“Actually, Kirvu only wanted to kill Yosuk because he thought he killed his sister.”

“Yeah, the revelation that Kirvu’s sister was Yosuk’s wife was something nobody expected.”

“Well, except if you read the comic, where it was known for a long time that Yosuk was married to an ogre.”

“You’re such a nerd, Tea.”

“Shut up.”

Even though it was a really old burial, it still smelled like death. The mists surrounding the area didn’t really help at all. Tea had to stop to listen if there was anything. Nothing. No crawling, no burrowing, nothing. This place was as dead as all the corpses lying deep under ground. They doubted if there even was something like deathworms.

“Does the deathworm have to be alive for this?” Tea said.

“It doesn’t say so,” Delta said.

“Well, let’s start digging then.”

They did so, but as they did, Tea began hearing sounds of something crawling, or rather, clawing, as if something deep underground was trying to get out. The sound got louder the deeper they got, until they hit a coffin.

The sound came from inside the coffin.

“We need to fill the hole,” Tea said.

“Why?”

“Just do it!”

They did, and after they filled it, they started to run.

It wasn’t enough to keep whatever was inside the coffin inside, but it was enough for them to get to a safe distance. Right from under the ground, the horrible howl could be heard. It wasn’t a howl of something that could have existed in their world. When the howling stopped, they could see it. Right there where they had dug was the living corpse of a necromancer.

He had deathworms on him.

“Oh hell no,” Tea said.

“We need to kill it,” Delta said, “he has deathworms!”

“Well, do you have any idea how to deal with him?”

“I do, but I need a distraction, and quick.”

As Delta thrust the lance into the ground, Tea began throwing smoke bombs at the undead conjurer. She wasn’t sure if the necromancer could summon the dead, but she did know that what he couldn’t see he couldn’t kill. At the same time, began throwing special shuriken that would explode on impact. Of course they weren’t enough to take down the necromancer at this time, but that was alright, she just needed the time for Delta to do her thing.

And that was to shine a light as bright as the sun. It was a similar spell Garfield once used back when they first started out as adventurers. Now they were both ready to take the necromancer head-on. Within moments, the necromancer was down again. They quickly took a deathworm with them, and ran.

Chapter 21

Of royal blood

“What’s next?” Delta said.

“We need a sleeping flower, and I know just where to get it.”

“Well, where is it?”

“It’s too far to go by foot. It would take months to get there.”

“Our last trip took a month, why would it matter?”

“Because our friends might need us again, so we can’t waste too much time. We need to take the city of Order.”

Tea estimated that the floating city of Order would take about four days to arrive where they needed to be. They didn’t know for certain if they would just run into their friends, so they decided to just meet up with them again.

The trip to the nearest city was long, but in order to not miss the window, they had to move quickly. They couldn’t afford any interruptions, even if it meant that they would need to travel during the night as well. Finally, they arrived at the city they needed to, exhausted, suffering from sleep deprivation, but in time.

“What happened to this place?” Tea said.

“I have no idea, but I didn’t think our friends had the money to do this. I mean, look, they even repaved the road here.”

“I know, right?”

They entered the house. They didn’t know what to expect there, but the place turned out beautiful. They quickly ran to their bedroom. Even though it was clearly theirs, the place looked much better.

“Wait, did they just decide for us that this would be our room?” Delta said. “I mean, like, permanently?”

“I guess so,” Tea said.

“Yeah, we really need to talk about it with them.”

“Weren’t you the one who didn’t mind us being stuck like this forever?”

“Yeah, but it was just that one time. I so totally want to break this spell now.”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah.”

It was getting night already, and there was still no sign of their friends. They wondered if they were alright. Finally, they decided to go to the basement, where the portal would be. The basement was unusual dark, though, and the lights didn't seem to work.

"Should I use magic to shed some light?" Delta asked.

"Yeah," Tea said. "I have a bad feeling about this."

When Delta did, though, they could see the room was filled with strange otherworldly creatures. They were nothing like they've seen, yet they all felt familiar, like poor imitations of creatures they knew. Slowly these creatures moved towards them, ready to kill, and slowly, Tea and Delta backed out, until they found themselves inside their living room, and finally outside the house. They would still follow, though, but at least now they both had enough space to combat them.

"Okay, that fire scroll I got you in one of those villages," Tea said, "did you read it?"

"Yeah," Delta said, "but I'm not sure if I can do this."

"You wanna be a paladanzard, right? Then do it."

Delta concentrated, recanted what the scroll said, and made large hand motions. Finally she thrust her hand forward. Only a small spark appeared though.

"See, I can't!"

"Try again."

Delta repeated her steps. This time, a bigger flame appeared.

"Again!"

With each time she did it, the flames got bigger, until they finally incinerated the group of creatures. All that without destroying their house.

"Let's get back inside," Tea said.

They hurried to the basement again. Tea found the problem of the basement. Somehow the crystals inside the portal were knocked out, and some wires of the generator weren't connected to the lights in the basement. They quickly fixed the portal, and did their best to rewire the basement lights. Shortly thereafter, the portal opened.

Suzette was the first to come out. "Tea, Delta? It's you!"

After that, the rest of their friends came out.

"What happened?" Tea said.

"I don't know," Suzette said. "One moment we were traveling back to one of the harder dungeons in Aelzaria, the next we were unable to return, the connection to this portal went down, so we had to travel to a safer location. We actually waited in Titanium City to hitch a ride back here. But what are you guys doing here? Aren't you trying to find a way to break the spell?"

"We are," Delta said, "but we needed to go to a certain place."

"Where?"

"Well, I don't know, Tea knows though, but she wouldn't tell me where it was."

"Well, I'll go with you."

"I'm sorry Suzette," Tea said, "but I can only bring Delta along. Where I'm going, they don't trust outsiders. They do know me well enough, and they'd understand why Delta had to come along."

They were deep in the jungle, and even though everything seemed to look alike,

the path was familiar to Tea. She had walked this path many times before to get the latest Samurai Orc and Ninja Ogre comics, she could even find her way blindfolded. Literally even, she once did just that.

“Quiet,” Tea said. “I hear something.”

They both stood still. Suddenly, Tea dragged somebody from out of the bushes.

“Suzette?!” Tea and Delta both said.

“What are you doing here?” Tea said. “Didn’t I just tell you to stay behind?”

“Well, I had to go with you,” Suzette said. “You forgot the instant portal device.”

“We have it right here,” Tea said, taking it out of her pocket. “Wait, do *you* have one with you?”

“... No...”

“Then even **if** we forgot to take one, it wouldn’t be of any use for you to be here, right?”

“Well, you can’t return me now. The city of Order is already gone, so I need the portal device to get back.”

“Well, why shouldn’t I send you back now then?”

“Because, like I said before, the device has only enough energy to make a single trip.”

“Suzette,” Delta said, “for once I have to agree with Tea. This could be dangerous.”

“Well, not dangerous per se,” Tea said. “But they don’t really take kindly of outsiders.”

“You’re going to the academy, right?” Suzette said.

“Wait, what?” Delta said. “Oh, right! Why didn’t I think of that! It all makes sense now! The sleeping flower, originally called the sleeping powder flower, is a flower that is used to make sleeping powder. The same sleeping powder that’s used by your clan.”

“Yeah, and if you both can be quiet, I—”

Suddenly they heard a big noise. It came from the sky.

“Is that a space ship?” Delta said.

“It’s not just a ship,” Tea said. “It’s the Urudo Royal Ship. An orc of royal blood is coming to visit the academy.”

“Tea Cha!” Kalek yelled. “What a surprise!”

“What’s happening?” Tea asked.

“Princess Liandre is visiting the academy again. She’s looking for an escort.”

“Can’t she just ask their samurai warriors for that task?”

“It’s mostly a diplomatic escort, something symbolic, to show that there’s goodwill towards us Oukora, or ogre. But tell me, who are your friends?”

“They’re Suzette Lenoise and Delta Omi.”

“I see. Welcome, visitors.”

“I thought they were very strict here,” Suzette said, mockingly.

“We were,” Kalek said, “but since the death of my father, a lot has changed. My father told me his wish for this academy to be more open to outsiders. He felt that our knowledge was too stiff, it needed to evolve. The only reason it hasn’t happened before was because he himself was too stuck in traditions, he thought that

a younger person would be more capable of doing this switch.”

“Did it lead to a lot of resistance?” Tea said.

“Yes, a lot protested, and threatened to leave our clan, but in the end, I convinced everyone it was for the best.”

“And is it?”

“We can’t complain. So far we didn’t have a lot of candidates from outside, mostly because they’d fail our initial test.”

“The test of nobility.”

“Yes. I myself have made changes to it, so that this selection would be more strict, requiring a higher score. All of the existing members passed this test.”

“How about me?”

“You don’t have to worry. Most of us didn’t even need to retake the test as they scored above the new average. This includes you.” Kalek looked at Delta. “So I see you found yourself a girlfriend. I thought you were more of a men type.”

“Binding spell,” Tea and Delta said. “And we’re not dating.”

“I see.”

“Greetings, Princess Liandre,” Kalek said.

“Oh please, Kalek,” Liandre said, “how many times do I have to tell you I’m just Liandre?”

“Greetings, Liandre,” Tea said.

“And hello to you too, Tea.”

Liandre was a strong woman, but beautiful, even by human standards. Even though you could see she had the typical muscles, she still had a feminine shape. From the looks of her face you wouldn’t even be able to see that she could and would crush your bones with her bare hands if given a reason.

“I thought you were straight,” Liandre said.

“Binding spell,” Tea and Delta said.

“Seriously,” Delta said. “We should consider just introducing us with ‘Binding spell,’ that way we’d be done with it faster.”

“And who might your friends be?”

“This is Delta Omi,” Tea said. Liandre already began giving her an angry eye, but Tea calmed her down. “We’re cool now. We’re friends again.”

“Very well. And who might you be?”

“I’m Suzette Lenoise.”

“So Liandre,” Kalek said. “We have a large selection of students you can choose from. They’re all very skilled, and—”

“All I’m interested in is you and Tea,” Liandre said. “You know, for old time’s sake.”

“I’m sorry,” Tea said, “but I can’t stay for too long. I need to get back to my friends after I’ve gotten a sleeping flower.”

“Very well, but please do stay for the ceremony,” Liandre said. “I assume there will be a welcoming ceremony.”

“Of course,” Kalek said.

“Good! Be there.”

There was lots of food. Both Suzette and Delta were invited to dine with them during the ceremony, which consisted of dance, music, demonstrations and comedy, and even Suzette was allowed to sit at the same table.

“What exactly brings you here?” Tea asked, while shoving some chicken inside her mouth.

“I’m here to search for a mate,” Liandre said. “More specifically, I am required to find someone of royal blood to be my spouse.”

“Well that sucks,” Delta said. “Can’t you just marry someone you love?”

“I can, as long as that person is of royal blood.”

“So why do you actually need a ninja escort?” Suzette said.

“I don’t need a ninja escort, all I need is an Oukora escort. Ever since the last of the royal bloodline of the Oukora died out, there has been a lot of unrest back at Chakar. The Oukora and Urudo are at the verge of war again, so our bloodline, the prime bloodline, needs to show that we don’t want to rule over the Oukora, that we want to work with them to build a better planet.”

It was night. Tea and Delta couldn’t sleep, although it was mostly because of Tea. Suzette however was already snoring. Even loud noises couldn’t wake her up.

“Hey,” Delta said. “What are you thinking about?”

“Nothing,” Tea said.

“Something’s bothering you.”

“No. Yes. It’s just that, I know them. I know Kalek and Liandre. They belong to each other, I just feel it.”

“What makes you think that?”

“The last time I saw Liandre, I mean, before this time, but the last time I saw her, I heard them argue, that what they had was wrong.”

“Who said that?”

“Kalek. He knew about the Urudo laws of the high bloodline, and especially the prime bloodline. It wouldn’t matter what race she would pick, as long as it was of royal blood.”

“What’s a high bloodline?”

“High bloodlines are bloodlines that date back from the beginning of the Urudo existence, or at least close to the start, with the prime bloodline the oldest that is still present, and the one that rules over all of the Urudo race. Once that bloodline dies out, the next in line will be stepping up. So far it only happened twice, and there are probably hundreds of high bloodlines there. Apparently she rejected them all.”

“So are all members of a high bloodline royalty?”

“Yes, they inherently are, but only if they’re pureblood, meaning, both parents need to be of a high bloodline. Once one of them isn’t, even if the other is royalty, they won’t count, although they do keep their royal status. The only exception is the offspring of the prime regent, who will still be the prime regent candidate.”

“Either way, I bet she’s still not over Kalek.”

“I assume so. Funny, if we both weren’t straight I would probably have made a chance.”

“Why? You’re not of royal blood.”

“Yeah, but that harpy queen sure thought otherwise. I’m pretty sure I have only one soul, aside from the soul inside the. . .”

“Inside what?”

“Kalek,” Tea said, storming in his bedroom. It was then that she noticed that Kalek had female company. The company of Liandre. Liandre quickly pulled the sheets over her body, although Tea and Delta had a feeling wasn’t out of shame.

“It’s alright,” Kalek said, “Liane already said she would step down as the prime regent candidate and forfeit the throne.”

“Oh I don’t think that’s necessary. Look.”

Tea pulled out her pendant.

“That’s my father’s soul gem. What’s the matter with it?”

“Kalek, please,” Tea said. “Could you please put on some pants. I don’t need to see that.”

“I’m sorry. But please tell me, what is your point?”

“I was once kidnapped by a harpy queen who was enchanted with a spell that allowed her to detect the soul of a royal. Now I’m pretty sure I’m not some secret princess or something, and the only other soul that I carried with me was your father’s.”

“I’m sorry, Tea, but you’ll have to come with proof.”

“We have the means to prove it,” Liandre said, “but it will be deadly to those who are not of royal blood.”

“What is this?” Delta asked.

“It’s the Trial of Kings and Queens,” Liandre said. “It is a simple trial. You enter the room, you leave the room alive.”

“What happens if you don’t leave the room alive?”

“An other-dimensional beast will rip you apart.”

“And what if someone tries to cheat the system?”

“Oh, there are many who have tried, and all of them failed. You see, it isn’t an other-dimensional beast for nothing. Even when you leave the room alive, it will get you eventually.”

“That’s gruesome.”

“It indeed is. I have heard of a case where one was shredded to pieces while copulating with a concubine. The concubine survived.”

“Aw, gross!”

The trial began. A cage was rolled up, with Kalek inside it.

“Wait, why is Kalek inside a cage?” Delta asked.

“It’s by his own request. He doesn’t want to flee when it turns out he does not possess a royal soul.”

Slowly, the cart with the cage was rolled in front of the entrance of the room, after which the cart was pushed with a long stick. A rope attached to the cart allowed people to reel the cage back in. The door then closed.

It took half an hour before the doors opened again. Slowly the cart was pulled back. Finally, the cage appeared. It was broken.

Liandre was devastated, she couldn't believe her one true love was dead. However, Tea had faith, and as Liandre looked back at the room, Kalek emerged.

"Kalek!" Liandre said, running towards him. They hugged, Liandre now having tears of joy. "What happened?"

"The beast did not like a caged king, so he released me. He also showed me my family line, proving that I really am of royal blood."

"Wait," Delta said, "if the beast is this articulate, why is he called a beast?"

"To make it sound more fearsome," Tea said.

Chapter 22

Stronger than love

It was time for the three to go back home, or at least to their house on the city of Order. They all bid their farewell, and as they stepped through the portal, the Urudo ship returned to Chakar to prepare for the wedding.

Back at their home Tea and Delta prepared the stuff they needed, and decided to pack their bags again.

“Where are you going?” Suzette said.

“Like we said, we’re going to find out how to break this spell,” Delta said.

“And what do you guys need for that?”

“Wood burned by a phoenix, actually,” Tea said. “That’s the only thing we need.”

“And why would you need that for?”

Tea and Delta sighed. Delta decided to speak. “We’re trying to summon the vampire who did this to us.”

“Oh, you’re just doing the vampire summon spell, the strong one that 100% guarantees you’d get the vampire. Well, charcoal made out of wood and the heat from a phoenix seems to be good enough, and I have just the thing. Now give me the ingredients, let’s go summon Lyra. It was Lyra who did this, right?”

“Wait, you know how to do this?” Tea said.

“No, but there has to be a first time for everything, right?”

They all stepped outside with the ingredients, on a clear and barren section of land. From out of her bag she took a small kettle and, after creating a small fire, began to heat it. After the empty kettle was hot enough, she quickly added the ingredients, stirring them. The entire place began to smell.

“Are you sure you don’t need any water?” Tea said.

“Shush, the spell doesn’t require water.”

“It really is beginning to stink here,” Delta said.

Finally she handed Tea and Delta a piece of paper and a chalk made of the charcoal they needed.

“Now write the name of Lyra here and put it in the kettle.”

They did so, and when they did, a puff of smoke came out, engulfing them in a very thick smoke. They all coughed, and after the smoke cleared, they all looked inside the kettle.

“Where did everything go?” Delta said.

"I have no idea," Suzette said, "this is my first time after all."

"Wait, so you botched the spell?!" Tea said.

"No, I swear, I did everything right! I think? Wait, what exactly did the spell say?"

"It just said to add all ingredients," Delta said, "and then heat it."

"Wait, so I first needed to add the ingredients and then heat it? I thought it didn't matter."

"What are you guys looking for?" Lyra said.

"We're trying to figure out where the vampire summoning potion went," Delta said.

"Cool, which vampire are you guys trying to summon?"

"Lyra," Tea said. "Wait."

They all looked up, and noticed Lyra standing.

"Lyra! You're here!" Suzette exclaimed in excitement.

"Slow down there," Lyra said. "Nice to see you too. I can sense you found your one true love. Now, what did you summon me for?"

"This," Tea and Delta said, raising their bound arms.

"Oh, right, the binding spell. I thought you two would have figured it out by now."

"Figured out what?" Tea said. "We both made up, we're friends again, if that's what you meant."

"No, that's not what I meant. Let me check you guys out, see what you've been doing." Lyra rolled up her sleeves, and then took their bound hands, after which she closed her eyes. "Hmm... Interesting... Uh-oh."

"What do you mean, 'uh-oh'?" Delta said.

"It seems there's an unforeseen factor keeping you two together. I can see you two have shared something, how do you say it, emotional."

"You mean we had sex," Tea said.

"Yes, if you need to put it so bluntly. Yet, I get conflicting messages here. On one hand this act has somehow strengthened your bond, permanently connecting you two together through a single deed, sharing something genuine, something emotional. On the other hand, there was no actual romance. I don't understand this."

"Wait, what do you mean?" Delta said.

"This spell should have been broken the moment you two would have realized you were in love with each other, but now I can see that this might never happen. I'm sorry, but there's no way I can release you two."

"Wait, what?" Tea said. "But how?"

"You see, there are various forms of love. There's the love between a parent and its children, or the kind you find in any friendship, best friends even. In a lot of cases there can be an overlap. However, no matter how strong a friendship is, the feelings between two individuals will never be as strong as true love. Tea, Delta, what you two have right now defies this, because what you have is something that is stronger than the purest, the most truest of love, yet it isn't love, at least not in a romantic sense."

"But why can't you break this spell?" Tea said, a bit angry.

"The spell was set to only break once you two would fully realize what kind of relationship exists between the two of you, which in your case isn't exactly possible. There shouldn't be a friendship that's stronger than love but isn't love at

all, therefore you are unable to break free of this spell. Unless. . .”

“Unless what?” Delta said.

“No, this isn’t an option. Or wait, it is. You two both have to die.”

“What?!” Tea and Delta said.

“The moment either of you die, the other dies. However, once that happens there’s no use for this spell anymore, since neither of the parties are alive, and so the spell gets lifted.”

“That’s not an option!” Tea and Delta both said.

“Well, either way, hanging out with you guys is fun, it’s exciting. No offense Suzette, you’re a mighty fine woman, but seeing these two is pretty amusing. I’ve never felt such an emotional energy, not even a room full of people making the truest love can give me this thrill.” Lyra began to shiver.

“What is she saying?” Delta said to Tea. They were lying in their bed. Originally they wanted to contemplate their predicament, but then they got distracted.

“‘Can I watch?’ Yep, Hank said no. Now Suzette’s begging. I think she’s doing her puppy eyes. Okay, I think Hank’s giving in.”

“Man, I wish I could have the same hearing as you,” Delta said.

“It isn’t always fun,” Tea said. “I can literally hear anything within a certain radius. Have you ever heard ogres doing it?”

“I think I had before you stormed in that room.”

“You stayed outside their room to watch them finish.”

“Yeah, but I’ve never seen an orc and an ogre in action.”

“It’s pretty much the same as regular humans.”

“Yeah, I know that now, which is why I left early, but I just wanted to see if it was any different.”

“Yeah, and now I’ve had to hear really clearly two of my friends doing it raw.”

“Couldn’t you hear them from our room?”

“Yes, I could, but that way I could at least pretend that it wasn’t them. Which is why I’m going to get earplugs tomorrow.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t need to hear Hank and Suzette doing it. Ah no, now Lyra is joining them!”

“Oh please, can I go see it?”

“It’s exactly the same as humans doing it.”

“But I’ve never seen a threesome happen before.”

“You know what, fine, let’s go.”

Tea began dragging Delta to the room where Suzette and Hank stayed.

“Delta and I were just going to sit here and watch you three doing it, because Delta had never seen a threesome. Are you happy now?”

“Now you’re just making this awkward,” Delta said.

“Yeah,” Hank said, “I really don’t feel comfortable doing it now.”

“Oh come on, Hank,” Suzette said, “They’re our friends.”

“And that’s why I don’t feel comfortable.”

“They’re just going to watch. Please? Please?”

“No, Suzette, I’m sorry. I’m willing to do a lot for you, but this is just getting too creepy. Guys, could one of you throw me my pants?”

"I'm not touching your underwear," Delta said. Tea then begrudgingly passed Hank his pants.

"Look, Suzette, I really don't mind if you do it with other people, like I said, I know how you are, and I don't want to change you. I can see it really makes you happy. But I can't do this, I'm not like that."

"But Hank, I love you."

"I love you too, baby, and we will always be a couple, but when it comes to this stuff, I'd rather stick to the regular. Now you guys have fun here."

"Hey," Tea said, "I'm not... We're not..."

"Have fun, Tea."

"I said I... Yeah, I'm going to bed."

"Yeah," Delta said, "it's not that special now."

"I'm going to bed as well," Suzette said, a bit bummed out.

It was the first time Tea and Delta would come along with them, they didn't really know what to expect.

"Are you ready?" Keila said.

"Of course we are," Tea said.

"Well, here we go then."

The portal opened, but what they see they didn't expect. Instead of seeing dark hallways, they found the portal had opened up in a bright forest. It still did seem very alien, but it was of such a beauty neither of the two had ever seen. When they stepped through the portal, they could finally see the magnificence of this land.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Keila said. Tea and Delta could only stare in amazement. "And this is just one of the many dungeons that are basically like this."

"Don't let looks deceive you," Trent said. "This place is as dangerous as it is beautiful."

"So wait," Delta said. "You're saying each and every dungeon is a self-contained world?"

"Some dungeons do eventually lead up to each other," Keila said, "but you'd have to really travel distances, which is why we placed portals all over this place. This one's near a dungeon we have to go to."

"Yeah," Dominique said, "who could figure there would be a dungeon inside a dungeon?"

"Sometimes even a dungeon inside a dungeon inside a dungeon. But we don't go to these. While almost all dungeons that directly lead to this world, the dungeons inside these realms often will lead to horrible places, with each subsequent dungeon being more dangerous than the one above it."

"Unless you're really sure about your life, I wouldn't go in those."

"So what are we trying to retrieve?" Tea asked.

"Basically it's a tablet," Suzette said, "one that contains clues on where to find the artifacts to summon the leviathan. We've already got a bunch of them, but apparently some were duplicates, and since we're pretty much stuck, we just try every dungeon we haven't been to."

"Well, at least it seems to work."

"Yeah, but I think the main problem is that most of these tablets might not even reference the Mighty Flyfish, or whatever it's supposed to be called."

“Did we already translate some tablets?”

“I haven’t gotten around it yet.”

There they were, in front of the entrance of a dark dungeon. There was an air of dread hanging around, and when they got through, they felt a sudden chill, as if it was freezing. Yet, when they continued further, they noticed that they were all walking on a stone bridge hanging over what seemed to be an endless sea of lava. The bridge itself was really wide, almost as wide as a jousting arena, yet the lava stretched out far enough that they could still see it even from the center of the bridge. It even seemed to be going upwards in both directions, as if it was an entire bowl made out of lava.

“I really don’t like this place,” Tea said.

“Well, get used to it,” Suzette said. “This appears to be one of the more tame ones.”

Suddenly, out of the ground, a being began to materialize, like ooze seeping through the cracks, forming a creature.

“I take it back,” Suzette said. “This is worse than the last one.”

“What is it?” Delta said.

“Our deaths if we don’t hurry before it completely forms.”

They all ran, none of them looking back or trying to fight it. They just ran to the other side of the bridge. At some point, Tea stumbled, and Delta quickly had to pick her up so that they could continue their way. It was around that time the creature began running towards them, first slowly, then fastening its pace until it only needed a few leaps before it reached them.

The bridge was long, very long, and it was soon enough that the being had gained in on them. Luckily both Tea and Delta proved to be agile enough, and while Tea began throwing smoke bombs behind her in the hopes of confusing the abomination, Delta began gathering power to fuel a light spell. When she finally found it strong enough, she unleashed it at the creature, causing it to flinch and stumble, giving them more time to escape to the other side.

The creature got back on its feet, and began its pursue again. This time they reached the other side, where they all one by one walked through an opening small enough that the creature couldn’t fit through.

They were all out of breath, and since it seemed safe they decided to take a short break here.

“Hey Suzette,” Tea said. “Are you going to set up a portal here?”

“Are you kidding? Of course not, it’s not safe here. It’s even less safe than the beautiful world dungeon, and that one is pretty freaking dangerous. At least in that world, most creatures are still from our own world. In here, there are countless of different creatures that apparently are drawn to the crystals that power these portals. That’s why our portable portal devices can only be used once, we use regular batteries for them.”

“Okay guys,” Clint said, “let’s go!”

“It still surprises me how he can still be this cheery despite us being this close to death.”

Tea smiled. “Trust me, Suzette, we’ve been in a lot of dangerous situations. Not even a flesh-eating ghost demon that looks like a rotten corpse can scare him.

I know, because I nearly fainted when I saw one. Heck, most of the warriors we traveled with quickly called it a day just by hearing the description of said ghost demon, and they were the really masculine kind.”

“Wow,” Delta said, “I really would love to hear some of your adventures with him.”

“I’ll tell some when we get back, looking back they were actually pretty bad-ass.”

What they brought back from the dungeon wasn’t a tablet. After they arrived at the place the artifact was hidden and defeated the being lurking there, they brought it back home. It looked like some kind of horn, but they weren’t sure what it exactly did. Suzette did speculate that it could be used to summon the leviathan, but then again, it could have done anything and was possibly even unrelated to the leviathan. Either way, it didn’t seem to be working, as it was missing several components.

“Maybe one of the tablets could tell us what it is,” Dominique said. “I mean, some do have pictures. Maybe we can find one that kind of resembles this.”

“But we still need to find someone who could translate it,” Keila said.

“I could,” they all heard. “Where are the boys?”

“You’re still here?” Tea said. “I thought you’d have left by now.”

“Who is she?” Dominique said.

“My name is Lyra,” Lyra said.

“With an ‘o’ or an ‘au’?” Keila asked.

“With a ‘y’.”

“You know, that really doesn’t make any sense at all,” Dominique said.

“Anyway,” Delta said, “they guys are out drinking and picking up girls.”

“And what about her boyfriend?” Lyra said.

“Hank’s making sure they actually get home when they pass out drunk,” Suzette said.

“I doubt Clint would ever get drunk though,” Tea said. “He consumes alcohol like it’s water.”

“I see,” Lyra said. “So, what do we have here? That’s some really ancient writing, I haven’t seen this in a long time, but I’m sure I can figure out something.”

“Hey Tea,” Lyra said to Tea, while the rest was outside making a bonfire. “There’s something different about your face.”

“Do you mean the hair?” Tea said.

“I was talking about your scar. It seems to be loaded with magical energy, even more than when I last saw you.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Maybe it’s that blast you took in your face back when Suzette accidentally unleashed her powers on it,” Delta said.

“Yeah, but that was some time ago.”

“Well,” Lyra said, “that must be it. Why don’t you two join your friends outside? I can handle it here.”

They went outside, and saw that there was already a small fire starting.

“Hey guys!” Suzette said. “Could you give me a hand? I’m having trouble keeping this fire hot.”

“Sure, no problem,” Delta said, as she began her fire spell. When the fire burned high, the girls celebrated in joy.

“Hey,” Suzette said. “I wanna try something.”

She took a bag with a certain powder, and threw it on the fire. It then spewed a mist around them.

“What’s in that?” Delta said.

“It’s the stuff, except I took out the component that caused a numbing effect. Basically it contains mostly brain stimulators.”

“Does it also contain the special stuff?” Tea said.

“No, I’m through with that. Ever since I’ve been dating Hank I’ve been thinking, maybe I’m ready for a more serious relationship. You know, no more casual sex and stuff.”

“I admire your stance,” Delta said, “but really, that’s not you. I mean, Hank knows that’s not you, you’ll always miss that.”

“I don’t know, it just doesn’t feel right. Basically, every time I’m with another man or woman without him, it feels like I’m cheating on him, even when I tell him afterwards.”

“He sure doesn’t feel that way,” Lyra said. “Can I join you? I just want to catch some air. Wait, is that the stuff you guys have been using floating around me?”

“It lacks the mind numbing components,” Tea said.

“Does it have the special stuff?”

“No, it doesn’t.”

“Too bad, I would have loved to see Dominique and Keila be affected by it.”

“Hey, Suzy,” Dominique said. “What is she talking about? What’s this special stuff?”

“It makes you climax,” Delta said, to the embarrassment of Suzette.

“Oh come on,” Tea said, “back in the days you didn’t shy away from mixing it in without us knowing about it.”

“Well, those were different times,” Suzette said.

“That was barely two years ago. Less even.”

“I see,” Lyra said. “You’re not the free spirit that you used to be.”

“Maybe I never was a free spirit,” Suzette said. “Maybe I became one after my mother died. Maybe I was promiscuous because I couldn’t cope with her death otherwise. Maybe I was—”

Suzette stopped as Lyra said a certain phrase. Then she began to talk again. “So, should I get the special stuff, or . . .”

“What did you do to her?” Tea said to Lyra.

“I temporarily locked all her memories away, and replaced them with the memories of another version of her, where her mother never died.”

Lyra said a different phrase, returning Suzette’s original memories.

“What was that?” Suzette said. “Why would you do this?”

“I just wanted to show you your true nature.”

“What, that I’m a slut?”

“Suzette, darling, just because you like casual sex doesn’t mean you’re promiscuous. How many of these encounters really were meaningless?”

“What do you mean?”

“We’ve been following you your entire life, me and. . .”

“And who?”

“Let’s say that she’s a mother to me. The thing is, we know about your love life. You would only do it with people you at least cared about, even if it were just one time. Your first was Hank, and even if it was just a casual thing, there was still something between you at that time.”

“But what about those people I would only see for one night?”

“You always showed more interest in who they were, which caused them to want to get to know you better. And sometimes it was the other way around. The thing is, you never treated them as your toy for the night, but always as a person in his or her own right.”

“You know, that pretty much sounds stupid and lame, and a sad attempt at getting it on with me.”

“Say all you want, but maybe you’ll realize soon enough. Hank didn’t fall for you because of your looks, but because of who you are. You have an empathic ability, something that can’t be learn through a class, but something you’re born with. Yours just happens to result into sex.”

“Yeah, I have to admit, that does turn me on a bit.”

Lyra smiled. “Well then, let us indulge in the most addicting of stuff.”

Lyra pulled out a bag, and in that bag were a whole bunch of marshmallows.

“Bring in the sticks!”

They all celebrated, now even more, because no fire would be complete without marshmallows.

“You know,” Dominique said, “it’s kind of nice not actually thinking about doing it.”

“Well that’s a first time,” Keila said, smiling at her spouse.

Tea and Delta both shared a stick. Mostly because they actually ran out of sticks, but also partially because they both felt like sharing.

“You know,” Delta said, “we never done this when we were kids.”

“That’s mainly because of the fire hazards,” Tea said.

“No way, all the other kids were doing it. I think we were still a bit too scared for fire after that wyvern encounter. Hey, what’s that crawling on your shoulder?”

Tea picked it up, with Delta watching.

“Is that a deathworm?” Delta said.

“No,” Tea said. “It doesn’t seem like a deathworm to me.”

The worm-like creature began to wiggle in her hand, and then, all of a sudden, began opening its maw, letting out a loud shriek, hard enough for everyone to hear it. The creature began wiggling out of Tea’s hand, and jumped straight to her face. Tea let off a huge scream as she tried to take the creature, but it already seemingly buried itself in her face.

“Why doesn’t it hurt?!” Tea yelled. “It crawled in my face, yet it doesn’t hurt!”

Lyra quickly went to her. “I don’t know what’s happening, this is the first time I’ve seen it.”

“What’s happening?” Delta said.

“Please, help me,” Tea said, scared. You could clearly hear the fear and desperation in her voice. “It’s inside of me. It’s in my face. Oh please, somebody.”

“It’s changing something inside her,” Lyra said. “It’s eating.”

Delta's instincts kicked in, as she began charging a healing spell and cast it on her face.

"It stopped," Lyra said.

"Did it work?" Tea said.

"I'm not sure," Delta said. "It did something, though."

Both Dominique and Keila walked over.

"Oh my god," Keila said.

"What's wrong?" Tea said.

Suzette quickly pulled out a mirror. There she could see it. Where her scar used to be was something that still resembled her scar, except it wasn't as big, not that much smaller, but it was also cleaner, more smooth. The places where her scar was really dark now shone like amethyst.

"How did that happen?" Tea said. "I mean, it's all still my skin, I can feel my fingers touching."

Lyra explained. "What I was trying to say is, the worm-like creature that found its way into your face wasn't actually eating your face, it was eating the magic inside your face that prevented everybody from healing it."

"But what about that shiny part of my face? Or those parts that haven't healed?"

"I don't think they can be healed, and it seems the creature has now been integrated inside of you."

"What was it?" Delta said.

"It's an Elder Being aligned to Chse."

"Wow," Delta said. "So you basically got your full beauty back."

"Oh, Delta," Tea said. "You don't have to get jealous now."

"I already was jealous of you, now it's only stronger."

"But why? You're beautiful in your own right. I mean, not everybody falls for dark haired chicks. Besides, you have blue eyes, and not even the generic kind."

"Thanks, but the fact is that you're still more beautiful."

"Really? Back in my school days I've gotten asked by guys who actually wanted to date you, but were afraid to ask."

"You're kidding, right?"

"She's not," Lyra said. "Sorry, I couldn't help but overhearing you two."

"Man, I really wish we had a bard here," Suzette said to Dominique and Keila. The three laughed.

"I see they really have gotten along," Delta said.

"Just like you said. She won't forget you, though," Tea said. "You're still her buddy."

"We both are," Delta said.

"That's actually a good idea," Keila said to Suzette, after which they went inside.

"Hey, what are you guys doing?" Delta said.

"We're going to use that special stuff mix again," Suzette said. "Are you guys coming?"

Delta looked at Tea. "No, we're fine."

Tea looked back at Delta, and smiled. "Let's just go with them. I know you really want to hang out with them more."

"But what about that whole resisting thing?"

"You know, I just realize that if you care for someone, no matter in what way it is, you'll help each other out."

"You just want it as well don't you."

"Yeah, who am I kidding, let's just go."

Their lips were locked together, in a mutually spontaneous act. It was as passionate as it could get. They then let each other's lips go, with only a slight disappointment in their face.

"Nothing?" Tea said.

"Nothing," Delta said.

They weren't talking about their bounds, though. Something as simple as that couldn't have worked anyway. No, that wasn't the source of their disappointment. They felt nothing. Not before, not during, not after. It would have made Lyra's words a bit more easier to take, it would have been easier for them if they in fact were in love with each other.

And yet there was another reason for their disappointment, because the moment their lips touched, they did feel something, but at the same time this feeling felt far away. It was as if they were longing for that thing the other had, but they couldn't get. They were so close together, yet it was too far for them. It was that same yearning feeling that they felt when they did it back near Zaendal, a longing for each other, yet not for the person they were with. It felt so eldritch that it was maddening.

They both looked at each other, and a tear appeared on Tea's face.

"Tea, please," Delta said. "You don't have to cry. We'll find something for it."

"I just don't understand this," Tea said. "For some reason, my mind longs for you, but at the same time, that same mind doesn't want you, not in the same way at least."

"I know, it's the same as what I feel. You know, let's just get in there, forget about it."

They entered the room. Suzette was just getting ready to turn the machine on.

"Great!" Suzette said. "You guys made it anyway! Hey, do you mind if Lyra's here as well?"

They didn't mind. They just wanted to relax, forget about everything.

"Hey," Lyra said, soft enough so that the others wouldn't hear it. Not that they would, anyway, as both Keila and Dominique were making out, Suzette was cheering them on. "I know what your problems are, and I think I know a temporary solution."

"What's that?" Delta said.

"I can put you both in a spell that would temporarily make you two fall in love with each other."

"And how are you sure it works?" Tea said.

“Trust me, I have fallen in love many times, I’ve even found true love. I’ve done this spell on myself before, and it feels exactly like real love, without any flaws. Most vampires use it to trick people into getting turned, or torture people with it.”

“Can’t the power of true love just break this?”

“No, it can’t, it will only cause an internal conflict within that person. That person genuinely loves her real partner, but also genuinely feels the same about someone else, albeit temporarily. It really feels like love because it is love.”

“And how long does this spell last?” Delta asked.

“That depends on the person, like its magical resistance, all that stuff. When two people are put under this spell to fall in love with each other, it will wear off at the same time for both.”

“So it won’t work indefinitely?”

“It indeed won’t. No vampire has this much power.”

“Do it,” Tea said. “I don’t care anymore, just do it. I need to know. I need to know how it feels like. It’s driving me insane, knowing there is this longing, yet there’s nothing actually there.”

“But Tea,” Delta said, “it’s temporary. Who knows what would happen if the spell ends? You might just fall into a depression, losing something you once had.”

“It’s still better than to never have experienced it, Delta. Aren’t you curious?”

“Yes, but—”

“Then what are we waiting for?”

“Delta?” Lyra said.

“She’s right,” Delta said. “We have to know.”

As they both agreed, Lyra began casting her spell. Dominique, Keila and Suzette all remained oblivious throughout the process, and as Lyra spoke the final words, both Tea and Delta began kissing. It was the greatest experience they ever had. Never had they felt something this strong. All they wanted now was to be together forever.

As the particles of Suzette’s special stuff began doing its job, Tea and Delta were quivering in each others arms. They both shed tears. Tears of sadness, knowing that this feeling wouldn’t last forever, but also of joy, of finally being together at last. It was as if the souls of two lovers have finally found each other again.

To them the rest of the world didn’t exist anymore. It might as well be, as their friends were too wasted to notice them anyway. They left the room and went back to their own, slowly, gently stripping each other down, and then laid in bed.

Chapter 23

Separation

“My head,” Tea said, still a bit tired. “Oh man, this is awkward.”

“I know, right?” Delta said. “How the hell did we get bound there?”

“I have no idea. How are you feeling?”

“Normal, aside from being stuck to my best friend at the groin. Wait, let me just. . .”

“No, don’t move.”

“I know, Tea, I can feel it as well, but we can’t stay like this.”

“Okay, so, how about we both move an arm there, and then. . .”

They finally got stuck at the arms again, and began dressing up.

“Remind me to never do this while I’m bound to someone,” Delta said. “Especially not to a guy.”

“Yeah, actually, that would be pretty hot.”

“Seriously? You’re into those things?”

“Yeah, it’s mainly the risk of pregnancy. Hey, don’t judge me, I bet you have your own thing, so let me have mine.”

“Well, actually, you wanna know mine?”

“Sure, why not?”

“I actually fall for men that are generally seen as below the standard when it comes to looks.”

“Like what?”

“Well, I dunno. . .”

“Like Clint?”

Delta began blushing.

“Oh my god, really?” Tea began laughing. “Oh man, that’s great.”

“Hey, you want me to respect your thing, so you’ll have to respect mine. Besides, I bet you’d love to be stuck to him.”

“That’s sick, man, he’s like a brother to me.” Tea then smiled. “And yes, I would.”

After several weeks and expanding their little village some more, they finally figured out how to find the Mighty Flyfish, but it wouldn’t be an easy undertaking. They’d have to stop at the Milon City harbor, take a boat from here and travel at the

right position, where, after the re-assembled artifact would be activated, an island would rise from the depths of the ocean, finally bringing them to the leviathan's realm.

"This is it," Clint said. "This is the moment we've been waiting for. Are we ready?"

Everybody yelled. "Yeah!"

"Then let's do this!"

They entered the dungeon that resided on this island. It was something strange, as the dungeon immediately lead up, even though there shouldn't have been room for it to. Then they went down, after which they found themselves at an exit. At first it just seemed to be the very same island they were, but then they noticed the sky. It was the darkest sky they've seen, and all the stars there were bright. Was it already night? No, there was something really odd about this plane. Right there in the sky they could see a ring around the planet, something that wasn't on their own.

"Shall I activate it?" Lyra said, who for once had joined them in their quest.

Clint nodded. The artifact was activated again, and this time, the entire island began to rise, showing that they were on top of a big tower in-between a sea of spires. As they looked at the water, they finally noticed something big moving. It wasn't just big though. The spires themselves were big enough to reach far above the clouds, even beyond the highest point of Mt. Gavel. Whatever was swimming would have been at least twice as long.

Then the spires began parting, floating away like beacons. It was then that they realized the size of this beast. As it emerged, giant waves crashed against the spires, causing them to bob, as if they would almost topple.

The Mighty Flyfish wasn't just a leviathan. It appeared to be a sea serpent, but longer than you could imagine. However, there were many things that were off, that didn't seem right. Whatever it was, it began stretching far into the sky, and as the tail left the water, it was flying across the sky.

The battle that ensued was tough. At any point in time they could retreat, but none wanted to leave until this mighty beast was slain. They've defeated Mammon Thy'l'Ahn before, a being that was literally bigger than any man could fathom, this flying snake wasn't even near his size. And even if it meant having to ride the leviathan, they would do anything to slay it. They've come this far.

And as the day went by, the beast grew weary, but so did our heroes. In an effort to turn the tides to their side, Tea and Delta decided to mount the sea creature and attack it directly. Finally our heroes would prevail, and as the leviathan, the majestic Mighty Flyfish fell, so did everything else around them begin to crumble.

"Quick, get back to the surface!" Clint said.

They all ran inside, first up the stairs, then down. But something was amiss. Clint quickly ran back, upstairs, downstairs, to find both Tea and Delta, leaning against the exit, exhausted, but also mortally wounded.

"Tea, Delta, you'll have to get out of here, now!"

"We can't," Tea said. "We're dying."

"It got to us," Delta said. "The moment we stepped on that beast, we knew we were going to die."

"What are you saying?" Clint said.

"Look at us," Tea said. "We're wounded. Did you really think it would let anybody ride him without some safety measures?"

Both coughed, and both coughed blood.

“I’m not going to leave you here,” Clint said, and took both on his shoulders. Slowly, the island began to sink, so he had to hurry upstairs. After a certain point, the water would stop rising, but he also knew that the island on the other side would also eventually sink again, and he was right, on his way down, he heard the yelling of his allies.

It was then that they realized what was happening. Tea and Delta were dying. When they jumped on top of the leviathan, they didn’t realize its back was barbed, with needles as big as swords. Both of them got impaled on several locations, but both managed to hold on just long enough to help slay the Mighty Flyfish.

They all helped them on the boat, and as they did, the island sank again.

Suzette was crying. “Tea, Delta, no. . .”

The last thing both could say was, “Thank you.”

“Look,” they could hear Dominique say, echoing in their head. “Come quick, I think they’re waking up.”

“It worked!” they heard Suzette say. “Lyra, it worked!”

They both got on their feet, but quickly stumbled back to the ground. Something was different about them, they knew it. Tea looked at her hands, and at first, she didn’t see it, but then she realized it.

“The spell’s broken?” Tea said.

“I think it is,” Delta said.

“Where are we?”

“You’re back at the mansion,” Clint said. “I’m still not sure what to call this place, the TeaDelta Mansion? The DeltaTea Mansion?”

“I already told you Clint,” Suzette said, “we should call it something more generic, like the Fellowship Headquarters or something?”

“How about Punchkick Mansion?” Tea said. “What do you think, Delta?”

“I think I’ll have to agree,” Delta said. “Clint’s the one who brought us all together.”

“Hey, what exactly happened to us?”

“You died,” Lyra said. “I time-froze your bodies, delaying the decomposing process until we all finished our latest quest. It’s probably why the spell also has been broken.”

“Your latest quest?” Delta said. “What do you mean?”

“The only way to revive you two was to find the drop of a phoenix,” Suzette said. “In distilled form, it’s potent enough to grant immortality. In diluted form it can revive a person and add quite a few years to someone’s life.”

“Wait, why do you have to distill it in the first place?” Delta said.

“It’s phoenix poop, isn’t it?” Tea said. Everybody was quiet. “Yeah, I’m going to take a shower.”

“Yeah, do you mind if I take one with you? I really don’t feel comfortable now.”

“Normally I would decline, but after knowing we both have been sprayed with poop, I wouldn’t want to come near you if you didn’t wash first.”

It was time for everybody to go again. They waved everybody goodbye. First Suzette and Hank, then Dominique and Keila, then Trent, who decided he wanted to see more of the world on his own before coming back, and finally Lyra. Only Clint stayed behind.

“Are you guys sure about this?” Clint said.

“Definitely,” Tea said. “We both have things to do.”

“Well then, I wish you two good luck on whatever you’re doing.”

“Take care of the house,” Delta said. “Stay out of our stuff.”

“So Tea,” Delta said. “Where are you going?”

“I’m going to find someone to train me.”

“I thought you already were an excellent ninja.”

“I don’t mean as a ninja. I’ve been thinking about becoming a ninja / samurai dual class like you suggested, but I need to learn how to become a samurai first.”

“That sounds great.”

“How about you?”

“Well, there are still a lot of wizard skills to be learned. I mean, the only thing I can conjure is fire.”

“I wish you good luck.”

“Thanks. Well then, see you around again.”

“See you around as well.”

It would be a year before they would meet again. They never realized how much they would miss each other. There were enough moments they could have met each other, but didn’t, because they didn’t want to be distracted from their training.

A lot has changed too. Due to the Awakening that affected the entire Digit-5 system everybody became more aware of the true nature of the five extra planets circling the star, and began seeing planet K.O. Ken in a different light. But what’s more important, every planet changed, and not just the attitude. Geographically all planets weren’t the same anymore. The biggest effects were seen on Warget, which turned from a desert planet into one that now began to have oceans. But that didn’t mean changes on Phandagron were less significant.

The less obvious ones were the dungeons. All of a sudden a lot more appeared. Not that they would suddenly be everywhere, but they were more frequently found. But tied to that were the new landmasses that began rising from the big empty ocean. A large part of Phandagron used to be only ocean, to the point that the city of Order never even bothered traveling to the other side of the planet. Of course the majority was still ocean, but at least now people had a reason to travel and explore the vast seas.

New land masses however came with new dangers. Because there was no real reason to travel far, none had seen the bigger dangers. The ocean was filled with numerous leviathans, not as big as the Mighty Flyfish, but still large enough to destroy a large ship. One of such were what they would dub kraken, large creatures with numerous tentacles, mostly related to the octopus. These were mostly heard of in stories mermaids would tell, but most found that these tales about gigantic octopuses sounded pretty ridiculous.

Aside from the dangers though there were also other new and exciting creatures, and even new races, like the mermunicornicons, kind of like unicornicons, half human half unicorn, except they were also part merfolk. They always lived in the oceans of Phandagron, but only after the appearance of the new land masses they were actually seen. But there were also some races new to Phandagron, like the ancients, goblin-like creatures with a very high intelligence and a much better understanding of magic. However, they weren't exactly strong.

Tea had a busy year. The first few weeks she spent searching for someone to train her as a samurai, but before she could actually become one, she needed a katana. Originally she planned on just purchasing one or try to find one in certain dungeons, but in the end she decided to go to a blacksmith and learn how to craft one herself. She didn't pick the strongest metal, but one which fit her. It was a light metal, which was suitable for stealthy people like her, one that was durable but also malleable, and at the same time was rough.

She traveled long and far, until she finally stumbled upon a man named Atlus, a young man who nevertheless had a lot of experience as a samurai. Initially she didn't even realize he was one, he just seemed like a normal adventurer, though very silent most of the time and not appearing to actually do any adventuring.

Atlus wasn't just some samurai, he was actually trained by orcs since he was very young, and even spent an entire year on Chakar for more intensive training. Tea only discovered he was a samurai when she accidentally stumbled upon him when he was walking past her tree and was attacked by bandits, which was a huge coincidence.

At first, Atlus didn't feel like training her, believing she wouldn't be disciplined enough to become one, but after he heard about Tea's own life as a ninja, he took on the challenge. It wasn't an easy year for her, but after a few months, Atlus felt like she was at least ready to call herself a samurai. She'd have to train for herself to actually become skilled, just like she did when she became a ninja.

During that year, Tea began to have feelings for Atlus. She knew what it was, she had felt it before, and even tried to pursue her feelings. She also knew that Atlus had these feelings himself, however, nothing lasting came from it. In the end, they parted ways, knowing that it would never be. Tea considered staying with him, knowing that there could be a possibility that she would be happy with him, but eventually decided to just return home.

Delta's year went pretty smoothly. Her wizard training went really well, and it did help that she was a paladancer. It began at wizard school, where she was allowed to get taught in the arts of magic. It wasn't one of the best, but it didn't discriminate, everybody was allowed to learn magic there, regardless of whether they actually had magical capabilities or not. That was the main reason she went there, not only could she learn from the experienced, but she could also learn from those who had to learn magic from scratch.

After only a few months she gained her first wizard rank, and after a few more months, she gained her second. She originally thought that these were equivalent of

at most half an actual wizard rank, until she realized that the ranks she got here were officially sanctioned.

She made lots of friends there, and even had some short relationships, but never anything lasting. Most she broke off with because she realized they were only after her body. They also didn't realize just how strong Delta was. This did scare off quite some men, but she didn't mind, because she also knew the ones who really wanted something meaningful would still ask her out eventually, and she was right, those were the relationships that lasted the longest.

Eventually she ended her education there with four ranks. It wasn't really high, but it was good enough for her. She knew she could always just go back, she would always be welcome. She felt that she had to go back home, though, she missed the adventuring, she missed traveling, she missed. . .

That year was also the first time both been with a man, and both were on the night before they headed home, around the same day and the same time.

Tea's was naturally with Atlas. The night was cold, and they were both at the edge of the jungle. This would be the final night they'd be traveling together. They were both getting ready to go to sleep, when Tea walked over to him.

"Atlas," Tea said. "Do you love me?"

Atlas responded, "Yes."

"Then why won't you be with me?"

"I can't. The less people I have around me, the less I will have to say farewell eventually. My life isn't an easy one. There will always be death surrounding me."

"I can take it. I'm strong."

"So was my brother. So was my wife. So was my son."

Tea understood.

"If you won't be with me, at least let me give you my body," Tea said.

"Tea, I—"

"Please, just this once."

And as she gave herself to Atlas, so did Delta give herself to her boyfriend. He wasn't exactly the most handsome person she had met, but he was sweet. Not just to her, but to everybody. Initially, they didn't really feel anything for each other, but as time passed, they grew closer. But in the end, she too had to say goodbye to him.

"I have to tell you something," Delta said. "I'm going home."

"What do you mean?" he said. "Are you breaking up with me?"

"I'm sorry." Tears began flowing down Delta's cheeks.

"I understand," he said. "I don't know where your home is, but whatever or whoever is there, it's really important to you."

They both hugged.

"Well," he said, "what do you want to do for our last night? Do you want to go to dinner with me?"

"I want you," Delta said.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, I want to do you."

"Well, that's not really necessary."

"Let's just see it as a farewell present from me."

“That’s very generous, but, do you really want this?”

“What do you think I am? Of course I do. I love you.”

“I love you too. If this really is what you want to do, then we’ll do it.”

Chapter 24

Time together

Both went home with mixed feelings. On one hand they really missed the ones they had to leave behind. On the other hand, they knew they missed something bigger, and there was nothing more they wanted to share it with than their friends.

“Tea?”

“Delta?”

It was kind of a strange reunion, where both would meet up in the same city at the same time, both waiting for the city of Order to appear. They hugged each other, and began telling each other about their own adventures.

“I missed you,” Tea said.

“I missed you too,” Delta said. “Next time, we should do this soul exploring together. That Atlas guy sounds like a nice person.”

“He is. It’s just a shame he’s still troubled by the murders of his friends and family.”

“Yeah, I can’t imagine how hard it would have been for him.”

“Hey, so you’ve had a long relationship with somebody.”

“Well, it’s not really all that special, I had many relationships there that lasted a few weeks.”

“Yeah, but only one where you actually did it.”

“And you did it with that samurai.”

They both smiled at each other. It was nice to talk again.

That night they slept in a local inn. Even though it had already been a year, they still couldn’t get used to the fact that they weren’t bound to each other anymore, that one could just fall asleep without the other having to fall asleep as well.

“Tea, are you still awake?”

“Yeah.”

“Are you having a hard time sleeping as well?”

“Kind of. But it’s still early for me, I’m already used to sleeping short.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because we always slept outside, we had to take shifts to guard our stuff.”

“Makes sense. Were you ever attacked?”

“There were some occasions. One group of bandits was dumb enough to think I was helpless, thought they could just get their way with me. I dispatched them all without waking Atlas up. Needless to say, I often got free coins.”

“And you got to keep them?”

“Not all of them, some. Atlas was a very noble person, he didn’t really care for material things. If people wanted to give him things as gratitude, he’d only accept food.”

“That’s actually pretty bad-ass.”

“I know, right? I wish more people were like that.”

“Well, we could be like that.”

“Heck no, I love money.”

“Money isn’t everything.”

“So, what about you?”

“What about me?”

“What’s your reason for not being able to sleep?”

“Well, I don’t know. I still think about him.”

“Well, why didn’t you stay?”

“I’m more of an adventure person. He himself want to train to become a teacher somewhere. It’s not really my thing.”

“I can see how that would conflict.”

“Did I say I missed you?”

“You’re saying it as if we’re in a relationship or something.”

“I’m just saying. Didn’t you miss me?”

“Of course I did, but I always knew we’d meet up again.”

They lied there, silently, both still awake. They both didn’t know what to do anymore with their feelings. They were torn. On one hand they both wanted to go back to the ones they loved, on the other hand, their feelings for them weren’t strong enough to give up all the things they loved to do, but also, they didn’t want to give up on each other.

“What do we do now?” Delta said.

“We just travel, see what time brings us,” Tea said.

“I just hoped that our time apart would make me forget. Forget that I once felt something, it’s like it’s been ripped away from me.”

“I know, I feel the same way. But we also can’t stop meeting. That feeling’s just worse.”

“Well, what now?”

“We’ll do what we always had to do.”

“Hello!” Clint said. He was standing at the door opening when they arrived. It might have just been a coincidence, but they liked to believe he’d been there all this time. It actually was just a coincidence, though.

“Hey,” Delta said, “Trent is here!”

“Hey you,” Trent said.

“What are you doing here?”

“Well, it’s funny. Only a few weeks after you guys left I came back to get some stuff. Suzette and Hank happened to be there with Suzette’s sister Anette. They all just happened to visit Suzette’s store to do some stuff, I don’t know, anyway, the moment I laid my eyes on Anette I knew she was the one.”

“You mean you just wanted to get it on with her,” Tea said.

“Yeah, initially, but then I got to know her, and some things happened, and now apparently I’m in a relationship.”

“Makes sense,” Delta said.

“So, how was your year? Did you two have wacky adventures?”

“Actually, we went our separate ways,” Tea said.

“Well, that’s also a way.”

Just then, they heard noise from the basement. Tea and Delta went to take a look.

“Hey, you’re back!” Suzette said.

“What did we miss?” Tea said.

“Nothing much. Well, Anette and Trent are now in a relationship.”

“We heard,” Delta said.

“But aside from that, things are pretty normal. Oh, and Hank and I decided to go watch the K.O. Cup.”

“You mean on television?”

“No, we actually went to K.O. Ken! We even got to see the Awakening happen on Zholhu while we were there!”

“We’ve got it on camera,” Hank said. “For a planet that used to be hated by many, they do have a lot of advanced technology. And of great quality to boot.”

“Yeah,” Tea said. “I myself don’t know why people hated that place, despite nobody ever going there.”

“Initially we weren’t planning on going either,” Suzette said, “but there were rumors that Backslash was going to be there.”

“And,” Delta said, “was he?”

“He totally was! Hank even took a picture of us.”

“That’s great! And, how was it?”

“It was awesome. Once we got on K.O. Ken, I never wanted to leave again, but yeah, I had to go home because I still had a store here and I had friends here, and—”

“We bought a house there,” Hank said. “But, we do come back to Phandagron frequently, especially after the Awakening.”

“So,” Delta said, “is there a portal to K.O. Ken?”

“Yeah there is,” Suzette said, “and, believe it or not, it’s totally allowed! It was always allowed on K.O. Ken anyway to have interplanetary portals, I mean, there are many of them that have a direct connection to Chakar, but since the Awakening, interplanetary portals are now allowed everywhere in the Digit-5 system, as long as you pay the proper taxes for it.”

“So does that mean we can visit the place?” Tea said.

“Of course! We can go now if you want. Well, not right now, we’re still waiting for Keila and Dominique, who can be here any moment. Yeah, I expected them to pop in just when I said that.”

“You know, that only works on television.”

“So, how have you two been? I’ve heard you didn’t travel together this time.”

“Yeah, we needed to take some time apart.”

“Mostly to reach our goals.”

They both briefly told their stories, and finally, after some minutes, Keila and Dominique did arrive, both having packed their bags.

“So, when are we going?” Keila said.

Chapter 25

One last trip

It was the first time for them being outside of Phandagron. They've heard stories of other planets, what they looked like, how people lived. They've seen them on television, and on pictures, but they've never been on one before. And now it was actually happening. Both Hank and Suzette wore different clothes, to blend in some more. Not that people on K.O. Ken cared about what you wore.

The first thing Tea and Delta did when they got there was get new clothes. Wearing armor all the time was tiring. Dominique and Keila tagged along, as they too didn't have any clothing. Hank and Suzette however stayed behind to prepare some food, and if that didn't work out well they had to be home for the pizza.

"K.O. Ken sure is different than Phandagron," Delta said. "I mean, look, they have cars! I've never seen a real car in my entire life!"

"I sure would love to one day drive in one," Keila said. "You know, just like in the movies."

"If it's like in those arcades," Tea said, "then how hard could it be?"

"It's not like in the arcades," Dominique said. "It's, like, I don't know. We should try for a driving test or something, get an official license."

"I've heard they now give out two kinds of license," Keila said, "ones that are valid on Landbox and one that's valid on every planet. Apparently the driving test here is stricter."

"Always aim for the better one," Tea said.

They had a great time on K.O. Ken, but both Tea and Delta felt like something was missing in their lives. After only a few days, they went back to Phandagron. It was time they embarked on another adventure, and this time, they would do it together.

After saying goodbye again to their friends, they both got off at the next stop. They knew their end destination, but this time, they'd do it in their own tempo, no matter how long it would take.

"So we'll be landing here in Arctum," Delta said. "We could go straight through the mountains, or we could take a detour here."

"I've always wanted to go to the Arctum ruins," Tea said. "I heard there are a lot of things that haven't been discovered yet."

“You already got me with ruins. Okay, so after the ruins, where do we go next?”

“You know, how about that village there?”

“You mean Old Arctum? That place is abandoned for a reason. Which is why we really have to go there.”

“Is it haunted there?”

“I have no idea, it might as well be.”

The ruins were the big attraction of Arctum. Many would go there just to see the ruins. Despite that though there were many places nobody has gone before and which were open for adventurers. Tea and Delta had lots of fun there, and even though they didn't find an artifact to take home, they did see a lot.

The only rooms available that night were in a fancy hotel. Even though they didn't need to, they did want to sleep in something comfortable. It would be the start of one of their greatest adventures, they just knew it. And sure, there would be times when they had disagreements, maybe even had fights, but they also knew that they'd stick together until the end, and maybe even beyond.

“Hey Tea,” Delta said. “Did you have fun today?”

“Yeah, I did.”

“So did I.”

“I know you're lying. Nothing actually happened, and I know you love some action.”

“Well, at least I was with my best friend again.”

“Yeah, you were. Hey Delta, are you really sure you want to do this? Once we get there and we go through this, there's no way back.”

“I'm sure. Besides, nothing much would change.”

“Wow, this place really is abandoned,” Tea said.

“I know, right?” Delta said. “Let's go into these buildings, see if there's something there.”

“Should we split up, cover more ground?”

“Heck no, what if, like, a zombie appears, or worse! Maybe a necromancer! And not even one of these undead ones, I'm talking about the living kind.”

“In that case we'd run.”

“Why run? I mean, I am a rank four wizard. I'm a paladanzard. And you're, like, a roninja.”

“Ninja / samurai.”

”Ninja / samurai, whatever. Plus, it will be a few hours before it's night.”

“We should still be careful around necromancers, though.”

What they found inside these houses was nothing, not even a hint of what made people leave in such a hurry. They decided to just leave this place and continue their journey. When night fell, though, they both looked back at the old abandoned village. Out of the buildings strange eldritch creatures appeared. They quickly ran off, terrified but giggling. What was there was scary, possibly deadly even, but they did feel like little children sneaking off.

“This has possibly been the worst idea we've had in a long time,” Delta said.

“Possibly just the worst idea ever,” Tea said.
They laughed, as they continued on to a safe place.

The sun hadn't come up yet, but Tea and Delta were awake already. Days of traveling had finally paid off, as they found a nice little lake with a waterfall, and behind that waterfall was a small cave they could hide in. It did have an alternate entrance, but they did have to find it first, as it was hidden behind a thick layer of growth.

Tea stood up, and began undressing.

“Are you taking a bath?” Delta said.

“Well, yeah,” Tea said.

“Then I'm going as well,” Delta said.

“Not that I'm complaining, but why'd you want to take a bath at the same time as me?”

“Because then we can leave sooner. If I'd wait for you, you'd have to wait for me as well. Now we only have to wait for each other.”

“You strike a good point there.”

The water itself was cold, but it was nice enough to swim in it.

“This water really wakes you up,” Delta said.

“You know what else can wake you up?” Tea said. Tea then began to splash water, which began a splash fight.

“You know,” Delta said, after they were done with that. “This would have been less disturbing if we actually had at least some form of clothing on.”

“Oh come on, it's just something playful, doesn't matter if you're naked or not.”

“You know,” Delta said, “I'm glad we've bought these bathing suits on K.O. Ken, otherwise we'd be walking around naked.”

“Or we could have waited there until we were dry again.”

“It was cold outside. Moving around helps. That and we don't really want to waste time now, do we? Either way, I think next time we should make sure the towels are dry before we do something like this again.”

“Anyway, I think we're dry again. Could you help me with this?”

“Can't you just wear it under your clothes?”

“They're really only comfortable without any other clothes over them. That, and my clothing requires me to wear special underwear, otherwise you'd be able to see the seams. Why do we have to hurry again?”

“Today's the annual lantern festival in Alvesia, near Lake Origin. I really want to see it.”

“You've never seen one before?”

“No, but I've heard they were beautiful.”

“They are. I've seen some during my travels. Hey, if we stick around for a few days we might also catch the fireworks show.”

“I love fireworks!”

It took them a year to finally get to their destination. They've shared both hard times as well as easy times, plunged themselves in one adventure after another. They've met various people, encountered many creatures and found pretty awesome loot. But eventually the day would come that they had to confront her.

The sun had set. Like the last time they visited this place, everybody had gone, and they were the only ones left. They only had to figure out how to contact her, and this time it would be harder, as they had no means of entering the portal. They had to get her to come to them.

"Are you ready?" Tea asked.

"When are we ever ready?" Delta said. "So, how do we do this?"

"We'll do like everybody else does, we pray to her."

They both kneeled in front of the Chse Shrine, and then waited. It seemed like an eternity, but they both persisted, they wouldn't leave until Chse would appear in front of them, until she heard their pleads.

The night grew colder, and it seemed she would never come. Tea and Delta grew tired, but nevertheless didn't want to give in. The wind began to pick up, and a thick mist began to appear.

"What is it that you request?" Chse said, as she appeared in front of them.

"Great goddess of love and fertility," Tea said. "Hear our calls."

"Oh cut the crap," Delta said, "just say what we came here for."

"Goddess, we're here to ask you for help. My friend Delta and I, we don't know what to do."

Chse began nodding. "Ah, yes, I see, the ones with the bond stronger than the truest love, but which isn't love. What about it?"

"We don't know what to do with it," Delta said. "It's like this longing that we can't pursue, even if we wanted to."

"I understand. Unfortunately there's nothing you could do about it, something in your nature prevents it."

"But can't you do anything about it?" Tea said.

"Yes, I can, but like everything, it comes with a price, and it isn't guaranteed that it will solve anything."

"We'll take the risk," Delta said.

"Just give us your options," Tea said.

"Very well," Chse said. "Remember, though, once we have come to an agreement, there's no backing out. Now your first option is to let me wipe both of your minds, remove any memory about the time spent together, both the bad times as well as the good times. You won't be able to remember each other anymore. However, you will both keep that longing feeling, as a reminder of what you've given up.

"The second option will be to turn either one of you into a male. There is no guarantee that you will both fall in love, but the probability will be higher.

"The third option is also the most severe, and will come with an equally high price. I will enable you two to fall in love with each other in your current form, they way you are now. However, to ensure it is true love that you both will feel, you will both have to relive your lives separately from each other. You will forget about all that has happened and all of your experiences, except you wouldn't have met. You both have until today to meet, fall in love and meet up here again. After that period is over, you will live the rest of your lives in that reality. However, if you succeed, I will restore you to this world, with all the experiences you had in that other reality."

They both didn't have to think for long.

"I'll take the third option," Tea said.

"We take the third option," Delta said.

"One last thing," Chse said. "If you really do take my offer and do pick the third option, regardless of how you two end up, after your deaths, your souls belong to me for eternity."

"We don't care," Delta said. "Let's do this."

"Very well then. I'll see you in another life."

Chapter 26

Missing time

But I think I'm moving a bit too fast here. Let me start from the beginning, in a small village, on a small planet called Phandagron, situated between Warget and that other planet we should never mention ever. It was several decades ago, when the floating city of Order wasn't as popular as it is now, where times were... pretty much the same as they are now, but it was earlier than now. Obviously.

It was in Koki Village where a girl called Tea Cha was born and raised. She was only a young girl when she decided to become a ninja, ever since she read the Ninja Ogre series. As a child, Tea refined her skills as a ninja, and, being the reckless girl she always was, got herself into a lot of problems, even hurt and maimed at more than one occasion. Eventually her parents felt she needed to do something more productive with her life, so they sent her out to follow her dream. It wasn't something Tea had planned for, but it was something she went for wholeheartedly, and after saying her farewells, she went on an adventure.

Eventually she found herself at an Oukora Shrine. Before approaching it, she pulled her scarf up, so that if there was something she shouldn't be breathing in, she would at least have a little bit of extra protection. It was something her mother would tell her, especially after that one time she almost suffocated from poisonous gasses while out exploring in one of the small caves. As she approached the shrine, she felt like something was about to happen. She stopped and looked. Apparently this place was primed with traps. She looked around. Everywhere around her she could see dart shooters. For all she knew she already triggered them all. Slowly she looked down, and noticed she actually was standing on the trigger. The moment she let go, the traps would all be activated.

With a swift movement, she lifted her foot, jumped up, and with a backflip narrowly missed the first dart. She then quickly dodged every other dart coming her way, using branches laying around her to aid her in catching some. Finally, the darts stopped shooting, and she rejoiced. As she wiped the sweat from her forehead she noticed that her scarf was already hanging loose, and she was about to pass out. When she woke up, she was greeted by an old ogre, who she would later call Master Kou.

Now, let's go back in time again, to around the same time as Tea's story began.

In Zaendal a young girl named Delta Omi was sitting alone. She wasn't a particularly brave girl, but she always wanted to show her worth. To her, paladins were a perfect role models, due to their courage and their bravery, and so she made it her goal to also be one. That's why started out as a young squire, as a preparation to become a knight, where she met and befriended fellow squires and eventually knights Jules, Clayth and Rosalind.

Around the time Delta was about to start her knight training, Rosalind was ordered to travel the lands in order to evaluate the various barracks that would train knights, to assess the quality of the training as well as the equipment there. She took along Jules and Clayth, and, with some persuasion, Delta also joined them. It allowed her to discover her qualities, and she found out that she might have lacked the strength a paladin required, but she did have agility. At that moment she began reconsidering her path.

It was only until after they returned to Zaendal that she figured out what to do. While taking a break from knight training, she decided to visit the city of Order. It was there that she found out what her true calling was. Back in Zaendal she broke the news to her friends, who all were very supportive. From that day on, she would continue to train her strength, but she would put more focus on her agility, which also reflected in her equipment, which consisted of lighter armor and a pole lance. From that day on she would aim to become a paladancer.

Two years have passed since then. After her master Kou passed away, Tea decided to travel on her own, trying to find her own style as a ninja. She took various jobs, but eventually found Clint Punchkick, with who she would eventually form a brother-sister relationship. They both traveled with each other for a long time, and even though Tea initially didn't like Clint's ways, she eventually mellowed down, especially after Trent joined them in their endeavors.

Tea would go on many adventures with Clint, Trent, and her two new friends Suzette and Hank, at first helping Clint into becoming a rogue bard, later aiding her friends with the hunt on the Mighty Flyfish, one of the most majestic leviathans. The latter nearly became her death, but through the use of a drop of a phoenix she survived. After that though, she started to travel alone, hoping to become a samurai. She finally stumbled upon Atlus, with whom she traveled for about a year. He was also the one she lost her virginity to, and was her first true love. But they both parted ways, and Tea headed home, back to her piece of land on the city of Order.

During that same timespan, Delta, now a full-fledged knight, took on various jobs, mostly adventuring jobs, in order to afford going to the city of Order to become a paladancer, but sometimes she'd also go into the mines to get crystals which she could later sell. She finally became a full paladancer, and even impressed everybody by creating a new paladancer technique called beatcasting, charging objects with magic in a certain rhythm.

Delta wasn't sure what she wanted to do, so after she graduated, she initially wanted to stick around with Anette, another paladancer, until she heard about what

happened to her friend Rosalind, and was shocked to hear that Rosalind actually was the princess of Zaendal. Together with Jules, Clayth, Aurelia, Parker and later Garfield they went out on what initially was a rescue mission, but turned out to be a mission to save the world. However, she stayed with her fellow paladancers Keila and Dominique, after she discovered that her inexperience could possibly kill her friends. Eventually Delta went to wizard school, where she would gain four ranks, and where she lost her virginity to her last boyfriend. She went back to the city of Order though to finally aid Anette as an instructor.

“Tea, don’t you think you should try and get over him?” Clint said.

“Maybe,” Tea said, still looking out the window.

“Look, you can’t just stay here and mope. Why else would you become a roninja?”

“I don’t know, perhaps I just felt like I wanted to be more useful?”

“I’d’ve become a samurai for the sword.”

“It’s called a katana, and it’s always about the weapons for you.”

“You know, it might help if you’d go out on an adventure, meet new people. I’ll stay here and guard the house. Besides, Trent is also staying here, mainly for his new girlfriend.”

“Yeah, I can’t believe he actually got into a serious relationship.”

“Hey Delta, could you help me?” Anette said. “I want to show my students how one specialty isn’t necessarily better than the other.”

“So what, I need to spar with them?”

“Yep.”

“Cool, I’m down with that. Helps me get my mind off him.”

“Why exactly did you leave him?”

“I’m an adventurer, he’s the kind of man who’d rather stick to one place.”

“And yet you’re staying here.”

“Just for the moment, until I figured out where to go.”

Tea was ready to leave. She had her bags packed for her trip around the world. After the Awakening she was ready to see new lands, places she’s never been to, possibly also places others haven’t been to. Tea was ready to leave when she saw Trent arriving with his girlfriend, who was moving in with him.

Delta was planning the same thing. She wanted to do some soul searching, gain experience, become a better paladanzard. She would travel the world, go to places she’s never been to, and to places she always wanted to go to. Before she left, though, she wanted to help Anette move in with her boyfriend.

“Hey, that’s Tea!” Anette said. “This is the one I’ve been talking about.”

“Hi guys!” Tea said. “Hey, my name’s Tea Cha, nice to meet you.”

“I’m Delta Omi,” Delta said. “So I’ve heard you’re a ninja / samurai. That’s actually pretty cool.”

“Thanks. Clint by the way calls it a roninja. I know, it’s silly, but it kind of stuck. And I assume by your clothing that you’re a paladancer?”

“Well, paladanzard. I’ve also learned some wizarding skills.”

“Sounds pretty awesome. What’s your specialty?”

“I’m, well... I’m a pole dancer.”

“There’s nothing to be ashamed of. I’ve heard a pole dancer had discovered a new paladancing technique, something called beatmancing?”

“Beatcasting, and, well... ”

“Oh, Tea,” Anette said, “that’s the one I was talking about.”

“Wow, that’s amazing!” Tea said.

“So,” Delta said, “I see you’re going out on a trip?”

“Yeah, once the city stops, I’ll be getting off to go on an adventure.”

“Where to?”

“I don’t know, I think I’ll just wander around.”

“Well, if you want we can travel together. Who knows, it might be fun.”

“You know what? Sure, let’s do it.”

Arctum, the city known for its ruins. It was a very touristic spot, mostly because it gave a glimpse in the past. There were uncharted sections which people were free to explore at their own risk. It was something that Tea and Delta wouldn’t pass on, so they decided to stay for the ruins and then get a room in an inn.

“So,” Delta said. “Have you done this before?”

“What? Adventuring? Yeah, I’ve done it a lot. And you?”

“I used to, although never really on my own. Look, what’s that?”

“I think it’s some ancient artifact. Most likely just some old mug they used to drink out of. It’s not worth much, but a willing museum might pay a few bucks for it.”

“Wow, these ruins are pretty empty.”

“Most already have been raided before, the rest just got destroyed, mostly by the weather. Come, we might find something of value.”

“Well, I just think it’s nice to walk around here.”

“Yeah, it kind of does. You’d almost forget that a lot of people had to have died here for it to become ruins.”

“Or they could have just moved out.”

“A ruined city this big? Not a chance.”

Night already fell when they arrived at the inn.

“We’d like to have a room, please,” Delta said. “With two separate beds.”

“Sorry, we don’t have these anymore.”

“Well then, how about two rooms?”

“We only have one room available.”

“Wait, let me consult with my traveling partner. Hey Tea, they only got one room with just one bed.”

“Most other inns are already full, so, it’s your call.”

“We’ll take it.”

They took the keys, and went to their room. What they found slightly disappointed them. The innkeeper didn't mention the bed being just a single bed.

"So," Delta said, "what now?"

"Well, unless you'd like to lie in a cramped bed, one of us might have to sleep on the ground."

"Yeah, I don't think—"

"Fine, I'll sleep on the ground."

"No, what I meant was, there's still enough room in bed for the two of us, and it wouldn't really be fair if either of us had to sleep somewhere else."

"You know what, fine, but if you do so much as keeping me awake, I'll kick you out of the bed."

"Deal."

It pleasantly surprised Tea that she had a good night's rest, and the same counted for Delta. Tea was the first to wake up to take a shower, and after she was done, Delta would take one as well. They both then decided on their route.

"If we go through Old Arctum, we can get to Alvesia before the lantern festival starts," Delta said.

"Well, it's definitely great to go to when you're sightseeing, but as adventuring goes, I don't know."

"Oh come on, can't we just have some fun? I've always wanted to see it."

"I'm not saying we shouldn't go, I mean, I love these lantern festivals, but we also need to plan on doing some adventures as well."

"And we're going to, I promise, but I just really want to see certain things before I'm getting too old to travel."

"Well, you can list the things you'd want to visit."

They've laid down the entire route, going from Arctum to the Chse Shrine. They traveled past Old Arctum through smaller villages, through forests, traveling for days. Eventually they stopped at a small lake with a waterfall, and a cave behind it. They luckily found a hidden entrance, so that they could keep their clothes dry. During these travels they actually got to know each other better, slowly forming a friendship that only got stronger. Even when they had a disagreement, they weren't willing to just give up on each other.

It was here, at this lake, that Delta's view on Tea changed. It was the morning after they set up camp in this cave. Delta was just awake when she noticed Tea had undressed, and was ready to take a swim in the lake. When she approached the lake and Tea noticed her, she called her over to join in. Initially Delta hesitated, but she eventually did get in.

"Don't you feel uncomfortable swimming around naked with other people?" Delta asked.

"Not when it's just women," Tea said. "When two women take a naked swim, it isn't always something sexual. There are public baths, and women there aren't ashamed of themselves either. I mean, that would just be weird."

"Yeah, it would," Delta said. In her head, though, things began playing. She was certain she was straight, that she only fell for men. But why did she feel this

attraction for her new companion? And more importantly, how about Tea? What does she feel about her?

After their swim, they headed back to their camp to dry off. Because they traveled fast they had a few extra days to get to Alvesia they could afford just taking it easy, so they decided to dry off in the sun. Tea was glad she met Delta, she didn't think it would have been fun without her otherwise. She also couldn't believe they hadn't met before. She looked at Delta. There was something about her that gave her a tingling feeling in her stomach. She quickly dismissed it though, she realized that even straight women can sometimes just find other women attractive.

"Hey Tea," Delta said. "Where did you get that scar?"

"Oh that? I got it from an attack of a beast. It tried to claw my eyes out, but luckily it didn't succeed."

"Is that why you wear your hair like that?"

"Initially, but after a while it just grew on me, so I kept it. It does make me look kind of hot, don't you think?"

"Yeah, I think so too, although those purple highlights might also do the trick. How do you even manage to keep them without having to reapply them?"

"Actually, those highlights are permanent. When I was a kid I always wanted to have purple hair, but my mom didn't want me to, so I secretly collected money from our nearby forest to get my hair enchanted so that it would only grow out purple hair."

"And what happened next?"

"I only got enough money to get highlights."

"That's it?"

"That's it. My mom was furious though, but the spell was irreversible, or rather, it wasn't really free to turn it back, so she allowed me to keep them."

"My mom didn't really care what I did with my hair, so I let it grow long."

"You know, that has to be the most boring hair-related story I've ever heard."

"Hair isn't supposed to be exciting."

"It can be."

"I just think it's too much of a waste of time."

"And yet you spend time to fix up your hair."

"Well, it doesn't mean I don't want to look pretty."

They made their way to Alvesia. It wasn't until the night after that the lantern festival would take place, so they had some time to do other things. After getting a room early, so that they wouldn't miss out on the rooms with two beds, they both decided to do their own thing. Tea was going to find a supplier of weapons, while Delta was going to stock up on food. Later that day they gathered in their room, and decided on who to carry what, to evenly distribute their goods. After that was dinner.

"So who was your first?" Delta said.

"My first what?"

"The first you did it with, of course!"

"That's kind of a personal question, isn't it?"

"I just wanted to ask."

"Well, since you asked, my first was Atlas."

“You mean your mentor?”

“Yeah. He was also the only one I did it with, actually. How about you?”

“My first time was with my last boyfriend. You know, as a sort of farewell gift, and yes, I know it’s a stupid reason, but I actually couldn’t wait any longer, you know what I’m saying?”

“Yeah, kind of.”

“Do you believe in true love?”

“Not really, I mean, I do believe in love, but love is just something that’s fleeting, it comes and goes. Besides, do you really want something like true love? What if the other just dies? You’d be left alone, with no hopes of ever finding a love like that again.”

“Wow, that’s pretty depressing.”

“I’m just looking at it realistically.”

It was the day of the lantern festival. It was really crowded, and unfortunately there was no way for Tea and Delta to get to the front. It wasn’t really a good start for Delta, as she really wanted to see them up close.

“Hey Delta,” Tea said. “Are you afraid of heights?”

“No,” Delta said. “I don’t think so.”

“Then follow me.”

Tea grabbed Delta by the hand, and they went away from the crowd into the woods. Delta didn’t know where Tea would take her, but she felt that going into the forest wouldn’t really help their cause. Then Tea jumped up, taking Delta with her, until they found themselves on top of a tree, where there was a good view of the lake.

The sun has set, and slowly, the first lantern was lit and let up, followed by many more. The sight of them was breathtaking, especially their reflection in the water, as if you were looking at a sky full of stars. Tea had seen it before, several times even, and yet it still amazed her. Delta noticed that, and began smiling.

As the final lantern extinguished, the crowd dissipated, but the two were still sitting in the tree.

“Have you seen anything this beautiful?” Delta said.

“I have,” Tea said with a smile. “Well, I’ve been to some before, so obviously I would have seen something as beautiful. It’s also why I know where the best places are to see these things.”

“Surely not all lantern festivals are wonderful?”

“They are. Trust me, they are. And they’ll keep getting more beautiful the more you see them.”

Delta couldn’t sleep. She didn’t really know why, or actually, she might, she wasn’t really sure. Or was she? It was all too confusing in her head. It might just have been because she fulfilled one of her wishes. But she had more wishes, and one in particular.

She turned around a few times, and then closed her eyes. Maybe if she would think of something else? Something that would ease her mind. Her mind was going

in all directions, there was no way she could think of something. Or could she? How about that waterfall?

She thought back on that day near the waterfall, and closed her eyes. Eventually she fell asleep. When she would next wake up she would forget what she would dream, but she did know that what she dreamt was wonderful, a dream about... Well, it wasn't important anyway.

Tea and Delta both left the day after the fireworks show, something Tea really wanted to see in her life, mostly because she was also fond of things that exploded. It really didn't fit the lifestyle of a ninja, who would always be silent and stealthy, but Tea was really into explosions.

"Man, next year I'm definitely coming back!" Tea said.

"You know," Delta said, "back in the city of Order we also sometimes hold firework shows, mostly at the end of a carnival or something. The shows are often a bit bigger, and the music is heard almost everywhere you can see the fireworks."

"Really? I most definitely have to see that then."

"Trust me, your face will melt, I'm sure of it."

"So, where are we?" Delta said.

Weeks have passed since they were on Alvesia. They've been on the road for quite some time, and now it was time to get some money.

"Well," Tea said, "this is the entrance to a bandit's hideout. I've been here before with a friend of mine. I'm not sure if it's still full of treasure, but we can always hope."

They both went inside, through a crack, and into the hideout. Tea could still remember the corridors. All traps that were here were not non-functional, which would imply that the place had now been abandoned. But Tea knew this wasn't the case, as all the torches were still burning.

Softly they approached the hidden bridge. Tea pulled the lever to reveal the bridge, and then, after crossing it, closed the bridge. She knew that next up would be the crates. They were all still there, and all still with various treasure. They quietly began sneaking through the maze of boxes.

Finally, they both found themselves in the main treasure room. The place where the artifact laid was still empty. What was going on here?

"Where's your rogue friend?" they heard from the treasury entrance.

"Who's that?" Tea said.

"Don't you remember me? I'm the guy that had his entire gang slaughtered and chased off by a simple rogue and a ninja chick. Now it's payback time."

"Really? You've waited, like, three or four years? Dude, you could have just gotten yourself a better crew."

"Well, I was too distraught to find a new gang, but that's not the point, you're toast!"

He was toast. With their combined force, they managed to beat the old bandit leader to a pulp. He fled before he was hit with more hurt.

"I'll get you next time, ninja, and, pole dancer!"

“It’s paladancer!” Delta yelled after him. “It’s completely different!”

“Your specialty is pole dancing!” he yelled, which was faintly heard by Delta.

“Well, you’re stupid!”

“That’s a crappy insult!” he was barely audible now.

“Okay Delta, let’s take some of those coins.”

“We should focus purely on the gold, that way we can carry more.”

“Good idea.”

And that’s how they both got pretty rich. Or at least more rich than they already were.

That night they set up camp outside, far away from the entrance or any path, in case the bandit would actually return with a crew.

“Hey Tea,” Delta said. “Just a question. Say you met this person, say, a woman, and she were to fall for you, what would you say to her?”

“Is this one of those hypothetical questions that mainly apply to you? Well, anyway, if I was actually into that person, I’d just say that I like that person as well. Not that it’s likely that it’s going to happen, I mean, I haven’t met a woman I would fall for yet, so I guess I wouldn’t know, but anyway, in the case that I’m not into that person I’d just give it to her straight. Does that answer your question?”

“I guess so, I did get it before you went on a tangent, after that I kind of lost it.”

“Basically, just say what’s on your mind, but do say it carefully if it might hurt the other.”

“Got it.”

Gugenimm. Tea had already been here before. It was basically the beginning of the group when Clint and Tea met up with Trent. It wasn’t a particularly special village, but one where many adventurers would go to. There were various defenses laying around, including a wall around the village, which were mainly meant to keep trolls out.

Delta herself did pass this village once, but never really bothered to visit it properly. It wasn’t really that they wanted to visit this place, though, but they did need to rest for a bit. Again they decided to go for one room.

“Hey Delta,” Tea said. “Do you mind if we sleep in the same bed? It’s a double sized bed this time.”

“Sure,” Delta said.

It had been a busy day, so after dinner, they went to bed.

“Do you like traveling with me?” Delta asked.

“Yeah, of course,” Tea said. “You’re my friend now.”

“So you really don’t mind going to the Chse Shrine with me?”

“Why should I? It’s still an adventure.”

“Well, I just wanted to know. Good night.”

“Good night, Delta.”

Tea was fast asleep, but Delta was still wide awake, looking at Tea. Could she really have feelings for her? She couldn't. As far as she knew, she didn't fall for women, and she's been hanging out with a lot of women before. Keila and Dominique surely would have picked up on something.

At times, she could hear Tea mumble. Sometimes random things, but every once in a while, she could faintly hear familiar words. They were still mumbled, and she could have literally said anything, but Delta loved to believe she said certain words.

Did Tea mumble her name? Delta wasn't sure, but the thought alone made her heart race. She calmed down again though, it was just mumbling, random words strung together, probably not even real words. But now she knew. Now she knew how she felt for Tea. It was frustrating for Delta, the one person, the one woman she would fall for and it happened to be a straight woman, a really good friend even. And the Chse Shrine would still be months away from here. Delta knew she just had to hold on, keep it together. After they would get there, they would no longer have any reasons to stick together, as Delta would return to the city of Order to be an instructor.

Months did pass, and despite trying, Delta's feelings for Tea kept getting stronger. Luckily there were a lot of distractions, like when they were on Mt. Magnus. They were going for a treasure, when they stumbled upon a wyvern.

"Don't kill it!" Tea said. "It's Clint's pet!"

"How can a wyvern be someone's pet?"

"Look, she knows me!"

Slowly, Tea approached the wyvern. Initially, the wyvern showed hostility, but then it remembered her. Instead of getting killed by her, she was spared, although wounded.

"There you go, Lizzy. Good girl. You know what happens if you try to double cross me, right? You'll get some more stab wounds in your skull, and I'm sure you're not going to like them. Okay, Delta, hop on."

"Are you sure it's safe?"

"I'm very sure. Clint and I have visited her a few times, and I made sure she stayed docile."

They were quickly brought to a hidden treasure, after which Lizzy was sent back to her mountain. After they took what they wanted, they went back down. Delta would never forget this day though, as this was the day she had flown on top of a wyvern.

There was another time when they both went to the lair of a dark wizard, to rescue some girls trapped there. They silently went in, freed the girls, and then tried to get out as silently, but then they were stopped by a dark wizard.

"It's you again!" the dark wizard said.

"Oh, hi," Delta said. "How's your wife?"

"Well, she's expecting, so it's going great, and what do you think you're doing here?"

“Oh, I’m just breaking out some girls. Why’d you need them anyway?”

“I’m evil, I don’t need any reasons.”

“I guess we’ll have to fight for their freedom, eh?”

“Yeah, no, just go. My wife would kill me if she found out I’ve been stealing girls. Like, she’d literally kill me, eat me whole and all, typical harpy queen stuff.”

“Okay, see you another time!”

“I’ll send you a postcard when the baby gets here.”

“That was bizarre,” Tea said. “I mean, I never heard of a man marrying a harpy, let alone a wizard marrying a harpy queen.”

“Well, how else would new harpies be born?”

“I seriously did not need to think about that.”

They had a great time together, but eventually things had to end, and so they finally reached the Chse Shrine. It was really busy there, and Delta was really nervous. She knew what she wanted to ask Chse, but wasn’t sure how to ask it to her. Of course there’d be no way she’d answer her, she was just one of the many reaching out to her, although her fight with Lyeh’r’ehr might have given her some bonus points.

“Hey, if you want I can go with you,” Tea said.

“No, I’ll be fine. Our journey together has been done.”

“Well, maybe we can do this one together. Final day, right?”

“Right.”

It did comfort Delta that Tea would come with her, but it also made things more complicated for her. Her feelings for Tea were stronger as ever, but she didn’t want to ruin their friendship, mostly because she knew that Tea wouldn’t feel the same. Tea was always so calm to her, so casual, like a true friend. Delta began to cry.

“Hey,” Tea said. “Don’t worry, we can wait until tonight, so that we could just spend the time together in the mean time.”

“No, I’m fine.”

“I insist. You know, I might just settle for a life in the city of Order, so that we could hang out some more. I mean, I do have a house there.”

“No, you don’t have to change your plans for me.”

“Actually, I have been thinking a lot, and maybe I should take a break from adventuring. I mean, the house isn’t nearly done yet, and the rest of the land I own is pretty bare, so I really need to work on it. We could be best friends forever. How does that sound?”

“Yeah, that sounds great.”

Chapter 27

The ninja and the paladancer

It was late in the evening. The huge crowd surrounding the Chse Shrine was gone. They had all the time to do what they had to.

“So, what now?” Tea asked.

“I’m not sure,” Delta said.

“Well, what did you want to do here?”

“I actually wanted to, well, talk to Chse. Ask her for advice on things.”

“Back at the academy when I needed some advice and couldn’t talk about it to anyone, I just went to the shrine and began praying there. You know, just close your eyes and think hard about your question, and if that doesn’t work, just say it out loud. Who knows, maybe Chse will hear you.”

“Do you really think Chse would hear me?”

Tea smiled. “Trust me, she will.”

Delta began kneeling down for the shrine, and held her hands together. She tried to concentrate on her questions, but all she could think of was Tea. It was all she could see. She didn’t want to live like this, going around without telling Tea her true feelings. It was now or never. She stood up, and faced Tea. Then she took a deep breath, and closed her eyes for a moment.

When she opened her eyes, she’d walk over to Tea.

“Tea, I have to tell you something. I don’t know how to tell you this, but, I think I’ve fallen for you. No, I’m pretty sure I’ve fallen for you. I can’t hide it anymore, I just needed to tell you this.”

“Delta, I . . . I don’t know what to say. It’s just that, I don’t fall for women. I’m sorry.”

“I understand,” Delta said.

Or at least that’s what happened in her head.

She opened her eyes, but when she did, she noticed Tea standing right in front of her.

“Tea, I—”

Before Delta could finish what she wanted to say, though, Tea grabbed her, and kissed her, tears flowing down her face. Delta didn’t see it, but she felt it, she felt it as she herself started to cry. It was a strange feeling. Delta couldn’t have felt more happy, but she knew that Tea didn’t know she felt the same way about her.

Their tears rolled off their cheeks, but like magic they’d flow together, forming

bigger teardrops, as if they were meant for each other. As their kiss went on, the world around them faded away into a very thick mist, indicating that Chse, the goddess of love and fertility, would soon arrive.

“Delta, I love you. I always did, from the moment I first laid eyes on you, and it hurts me, it really hurts me if you would leave me alone.”

“I won’t ever leave you, not like this, not ever. I don’t ever want us to be apart. I—”

They both stopped, then looked each other in the eyes. Delta could see that Tea’s scar began to change, but something else was changing as well.

“What—” Tea said, confused about what went on around them. She knew Chse was coming. She met her before, when she was traveling with Clint and the rest, but... Did they do this before?

“Tea, marry me,” Delta said, in a spontaneous action. Even though it just popped out of her and it was entirely unplanned, she really meant what she said.

“What? Are you serious?”

“Yes, I am. I’ve never been this serious before. I mean, we’ve only known each other for—”

“Yes, yes I do! I...”

They couldn’t see it, but they could feel it. Things were changing, they just weren’t sure if it was a good thing or a bad thing. Even their feelings didn’t tell them anything, as they felt both fear and comfort at the same time. All they knew was that the world around them wouldn’t be the same anymore... No, it would be, but...

“What’s happening?” Delta said.

“I don’t know!” Tea said.

The wind began to pick up, and as everything around them began to turn and the storms were picking up, they held each other tight, never wanting to let go. And even though the wind began to blow harder and the mist made it hard to see around them, things became more clear to them.

“You know, I think we made it,” Tea said.

“I think we did,” Delta said.

Tea looked into Delta’s eyes, still holding her, and smiled. “So, where do we go from here?”

“Well, we are engaged, technically, so we should tell the rest. I bet Suzette will be thrilled.”

“So we’re still getting married?”

“If you want to. I mean, we don’t have to do it now, and I understand if you don’t ever want to marry me, but if you want to...”

“Then yes, we should. I mean, if only for taxes.”

“I can’t believe we spent an entire life so far away from each other.”

“Two lives. It’s not like we could love each other before in this lifetime.”

“I guess we’re back to our original world then. But why can I remember that other world as well?”

“Maybe to remind us that what we have is real, or maybe it’s because all that actually happened. I don’t know, I’m not from Craneus or anything.”

The wind began setting, and in front of them appeared Chse.

“I see you both made it in time,” Chse said. They noticed a smile on her face. In a way it was the most beautiful yet also the most creepy smile they’ve

seen. It wasn't meant to be creepy, but it might have been because she was still an otherworldly deity.

"So, what are we supposed to do now?" Delta said.

"Get married, of course."

"Well, I guess we could give it a shot."

"Sounds great," Tea said. "But where should we have this wedding then?"

Chse smiled, this time it corrected itself. It wasn't as beautiful, but beautiful nonetheless.

"Why, here of course!" Chse said.

"Well, we'd love to, but isn't it quite busy most of the time?"

"I don't mean later, I mean now. Right here. As I'm a deity, I can officially wed you as well."

"Wait, hold on," Delta said. "Isn't this going a bit too fast?"

"What do you mean? You've spent one life together as true friends, and another discovering your love for each other. I'd say it's a perfect time."

"But how about our friends? How about our family?"

"You don't have to worry about that, honey," Delta's father said as the mist was clearing up, revealing the rest.

"Mom, dad, what are you doing here?"

"Well," Delta's mom said, "we all had this feeling we had to go somewhere important. . ."

"And that thing apparently is your wedding," Tea's father said.

"Dad!" Tea said, as she embraced him.

"Tea, Delta!" Suzette yelled, running at them, hugging them, with tears. "I'm so happy for you!"

Everybody was here. Clint, Trent, Suzette, Hank, Anette, Keila, Dominique, Jules, Clayth, Aurelia, Parker, Garfield, even Atlus, everyone that mattered to them was there. As they gathered, they congratulated the couple, but eventually, Chse wanted some silence.

"Now before I begin, there are a few things I want to point out. First of all, this marriage is binding. Once the marriage ceremony is complete, you will forever be bound to each other, your souls intertwined. This marriage can therefore never ever be broken.

"This also comes with the price that your lives will forever be linked together. Whenever one gets hurt, the other gets hurt as well. Whenever someone feels something, the other feels something as well. And when one dies. . ."

"The other dies as well," Tea and Delta said.

"We get it," Delta said. "We'll be bound together again, except this time it's forever."

"And this time, the bounds will hold even after death, so you won't be able to cheat your way out of it this time. But, to allow you two to have some space, I will leave the distance you can walk from each other up to you.

"One more thing. The only thing I have done is that I've lifted the restricting factor preventing you two from falling in love. This however does not prevent you from falling in love with other people, though."

"Should we be worried about that?" Tea asked.

Chse smiled. "There might be men that either of you might fall for, but there will never be a love as strong as yours."

“Then we’ll do it,” Delta said. She looked into Tea’s eyes. “We’ll do it.”

“We’ll do it,” Tea repeated.

“Then let the ceremony begin,” Chse said.

The ceremony was long, but the night seemed longer as well. Tears were shed, all tears of joy.

“You know,” Trent said, “I wouldn’t mind marrying someday.”

“Yeah right,” Anette said. “And with who would that be?”

“Well, maybe with you.”

Anette tried hard to contain her laughter.

“Suzette, please,” Hank said, “behave yourself.”

“But weddings always make me feel nervous,” Suzette said.

“A wedding ceremony performed by a deity,” Kalek said. “Why didn’t we have one?”

“Would you have preferred that the beast would have wed us?” Liandre said.

Finally, as the ceremony came to a close, two rings appeared.

“These rings will bind you two,” Chse said, “now, tomorrow and until eternity, in the land of the living and that of the dead.”

Tea and Delta each took a ring and put it on each other’s finger. It immediately disappeared afterwards.

“And now the ceremony has been complete.”

With these last words, Chse disappeared.

Tea woke up. It was still early, the sun hadn’t come up yet. She looked beside her. The bed was empty. Did any of it all actually happen? She felt her face. It did feel like that scar the beast had made. She walked to the bathroom, to check herself out. She turned on the light, and for a brief moment, she saw the scratch.

“Tea, are you awake yet?” Delta said. When Tea turned back to the mirror, she noticed it. Somehow the scar from that other world began manifesting itself in her current scar, not entirely replacing it, but adapting to it.

“I’m coming!” Tea said, and as she said that, she stormed out of the bathroom, where Delta had opened the door, leaping into each others arms.

“I can’t believe we made it,” Tea said.

“Hey, aren’t I supposed to be the emotional one?” Delta said. “But hey, Clint asked us to come over. It’s very important.”

“What were you doing so early anyway?” Tea said.

“Well, this is kind of embarrassing. I carried you to this room, because you were completely wasted, so I went outside to get something before going to bed, and then I just fell asleep right there. Eventually Clint woke me up.”

“And what does Clint want us for?”

“I don’t know, he said to wake everybody up.”

As Delta was about to knock on one of the doors, Tea stopped her. “I wouldn’t do that if I were you, you don’t want to know what I’m hearing.”

“Are Suzette and Hank at it again? This early?”

“I assume it’s been going on all night. Oh, and don’t knock there either.”

“Not Keila and Dominique as well. Well, might as well just skip the rest then.”

“Hey, what are you doing? We still need to wake up Trent.”

“Right, out of all people here, Trent is the only one not getting busy?”

“I don’t think Anette is that kind of woman. Besides. . .”

“Well, to be fair, we were both pretty wasted and exhausted.”

They all gathered around Clint, some tired, some very tired.

“Guys,” Trent said, still very much asleep. “Next time try to keep it down. My girlfriend and I were trying to get some rest.”

“So, what did you need us for?” Tea said.

“Actually, I’m not the one who called for you,” Clint said, as he held up his pendant.

“Greetings,” Chse said. “You might all wonder why I have brought you here. Well, first of all it’s because you were all close to my dear Clint, as friends but also proximity-wise. I have called you here for a special mission. I myself am to get wed, and I need you to get the artifacts to turn my love immortal.”

“Wow, you’re getting married?” Clint said. “Can I come to the wedding?”

“You may, but before that, you will all need to gather the artifacts. I noticed you already had certain stone tablet that describes where you can find the proper artifacts.”

“And where would we need to bring these artifacts?” Suzette said.

“They need to be gathered at Zholhu, at the lost city of Lyeh’r’ehr, but don’t worry, when the time comes I’ll take you there. You do need to travel to various places, not just on Phandagron, but also the many worlds found within. You might even find yourself on Chakar to find what you’ll need. I’ll be sending you one of my daughters to translate the tablet. Now do know that this is a dangerous task. If I could I would have retrieved them myself, but only mortals can hold these artifact.”

“Why us though?” Dominique said.

“Like I said, you all have a certain bond with each other, one way or another, and it requires a strong bond to allow for the retrieval. But, like I said, it is a dangerous task. There is a high possibility some will not survive. I wouldn’t blame you for not participating.”

“Well, you know I’m going,” Clint said. “So, who else wants to go with me?”

“Can’t we just think about it?” Suzette said. “You know, just for a few days?”

“Sure, we’ll just meet up at Tea and Delta’s.”

“Well, Tea,” Delta said. “What do you think?”

“What do you want?” Tea said.

“I don’t know, we still need to go on a honeymoon trip.”

“Keila and Dominique’s was that one adventure.”

“Yeah, I don’t know, I mean, don’t you want to go someplace else instead? I mean, we could always join them later. I assume they’d use our house again as a meeting point. And aside from that, we’ve seen pretty much everything of Phandagron.”

“Well, she did mention we might visit Chakar. I know you’d like to go there once.”

Delta smiled. “I do, but only if it’s with you. You know, they have the most beautiful sky.”

“How beautiful?”

“I don’t know, but I bet it’s not as beautiful as you.”

Tea laughed. “Yeah, right.”

“So, do you think we should go?”

“Are you kidding me? We totally should go. This is our life. We don’t need to take a break, that’s not like us, we’re adventurers. We go on quests to retrieve stuff, or just explore places. And you know, the most important thing is that we’re together now, as friends. . .”

“And as lovers.”

