

# 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.

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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.

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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.

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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.”

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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."

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"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 things 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."

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"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.

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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.

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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.”



