

Prim in "A Scaly Tale"

By: Wyland

"Another girl taken," the tavernkeep of the Happy Harpy said grimly as he returned from the door, where a boy had delivered the news. An older fellow, a farmer by the looks of him, shook his head sadly.

"Come again?" Prim asked, her fork pausing midway toward her mouth. "Is there a problem?"

"Is there ever," the tavern master said. "Third girl gone missin' this year."

"I hear more were taken up Greymeade way," the farmer added.

"I hear tell some traders were hit, too," another patron said. Everyone nodded in sympathy; however, talk of valuables were quickly drowned out by concerns over the missing maidens.

"Surely the Lord's knights will take care of the matter?" Prim suggested.

The locals shook their heads again. "Too much trouble with those boffers off east," the farmer complained.

"Aye. Normal folk take second to noble's games," another local at a nearby table said. There was general agreement around.

Prim frowned. This explained the poor reception to her performance earlier. She had felt she was stealing dinner after getting hardly more than extremely perfunctory applause. More importantly, she had felt she was losing her touch. Now she knew better, and this explanation for the low spirits made far more sense than the possibility of a shoddy performance by Prim!

She finished her meal, listening to the men grimly discuss the town's woes. When she finished, she hitched her fiddle case onto her shoulder and walked over to thank the tavernkeep – and surreptitiously slip a few coins into his pocket to pay for the meal. She then walked outside.

As usual, she had set up camp outside the town. She walked casually, enjoying the night air, but also taking steps to ensure she was not followed. An unwanted sea voyage had taught her to always be wary.

At her camp, she dug out her gear. She eyed the armor warily, still unconvinced it was a good idea. The clerics had taught her how to wear it effectively. Her friends at the bard college had taught her how to wear it quietly. Still...

The scales shimmered red in the moonlight, though they almost appeared to have an internal light of their own. The magic of the dragon from which they had come still shone dimly.

She sighed. "I hope this is a good idea," she muttered to no one as she started changing. She preferred her dancer's silks, but the armor had been a gift for ridding a city of a dragon problem. Save a princess, get some dragon scale armor which is supposed to protect from fire.

Well, she had had a little help. They all got their gifts, too. But they were a greedy lot, unappreciative of all the artwork they had recovered from the dragon's horde, merely tallying market values. Prim had parted ways with them gladly after that. Grimacing at the memory, she eyed the ancient bracelets she had claimed with their intricate patterns of leaves and flowers of silver and gold. Not all the art had been sold.

After donning the armor, she gathered up her belongings, cleared the camp, and set off toward Greymeade, pulling dragon scale gauntlets over her hands and bracelets.

It was pathetically easy to locate their camp, Prim thought, shaking her head. Two days of searching, and she had found a hidden trail. Her ranger friend had taught her a few tricks to finding such trails. Following it led her to their camp. She had walked not on the trail but several yards to the side, thus avoiding any lookouts. The trees were her home, so keeping an eye on the trail had been easy for her.

Surprising the lookout was child's play. He was extremely careless. Without question, he thought their efforts to hide the trail was sufficient protection. Stripped and bound to a tree, gagged, he had plenty of time now to ponder their poor security.

Having swung around to the side, she was now examining the camp. It was comprised of five wooden buildings in a clearing, with a fire pit in the center between the buildings. Strangely, three poles with unlit beacons on top were positioned around in a triangle to the side of camp. The ground was barren in that area. Perhaps that was where they celebrated when trading their captives to the slavers.

For Prim presumed they were slavers. For some reason, they were always slavers. She sighed and grabbed a sturdy enough stick nearby.

She carefully crept to the buildings, picking one at random. Lifting herself up, she peered into a window. A few fellows in dark robes were playing a game of cards around a table. Beds in the room told her this was a barracks.

She quietly dropped back down. Cultists, not slavers. Thrilling. The beacons were for their crazy rituals, no doubt. Keeping to the shadows, she checked the next building, finding more of the same.

As she crept to the third building, a door behind her opened. She froze -- movement now would be a giveaway. A pair of cultists laughed as they headed to the woods. They must have been gathering fuel for the fire. Once they were clear, she approached the third building. Checking inside, she saw three women tied to chairs, a cultist lounging on a bed as guard.

She walked around to the front door, opened it, and walked inside, closing the door behind her. The guard struggled to his feet. "What the--?"

"You are a sorry lot, you know that?" Prim asked, dashing over and leaping up. She brought the stick down on his head before he had so much as drawn his blade.

"Pathetic," she scolded the unconscious man, dropping the stick next to him.

A few minutes later, she had the missing maidens freed. "Remember, follow the trail, cross the second stream, a quarter mile after is the road. Turn left, keep going," she explained, pointing to the trail.

After many hugs, the trio set off. Prim watched them reach the woods, then waited ten minutes more. Finally, she strode toward the largest building. "Time to go straight to the leader," she thought. "And end this nonsense quickly."

It was a fine thought. Too bad she failed to notice the pit trap. Really, now, who would expect such a trap in the heart of a cultists' camp?

Prim coughed in a cloud of dust and debris. "Piss biscuits," she muttered, employing her Ranger friend's favorite expletive as shadows appeared at the rim of the hole.

Two cultists held Prim by either arm. Another ten formed a half-circle around the beacon poles, which were now lit. The leader of this cult stood in front of Prim, facing the center of the beacon triangle, a stack of golden plates beside him.

"So, am I to be your honored sacrifice, Daft Leper?"

He turned and shouted. "For the last time, you are to address me as 'Dear Leader'!"

“Whatever, Dafty. Is this where you strip me, tie me up, and dance around like loons before sacrificing me? If so, let's get on with it.”

“You insolent –”

“Of all the moron cults I have encountered, yours is the filthiest.”

“You dare –”

“And I mean that literally. You clearly do not worship soap. I'm surprised any maiden survived the stench in order to become your sacrifice.”

The leader sighed and turned his back to her. He examined the skies. “You'll soon be quiet, little one.”

“Right, I'm little,” Prim said with a sigh. “Try being original, Dafty.”

And then she saw it. A large creature, flying toward the beacons.

“Perhaps I underestimated your stinky little cult, Dafty,” Prim said as the dragon approached.

Dafty turned back to her. “Cutting a deal with a dragon has its advantages,” he said with a wicked grin. “It does make disposing of would-be heroines convenient.”

“Doubtless,” Prim said as the dragon landed, its red scales glimmering in the light of the beacons. The “cultists” all bowed low.

“What have you signaled me for?” it promptly demanded.

Dafty straightened. “Oh great and wondrous one, we offer you this treasure and this lovely gnome as a sacrifice. We do this to honor your glory!”

The dragon snorted, eyeing the plates and then Prim. Its eyes narrowed. “Interesting armor, little one,” he told her, eyeing the scales she wore.

“Oh, you would not have liked him,” she said disdainfully. “He was *such* a philistine. Absolutely no appreciation for art. Can you believe he had several masterpieces all piled in a corner, as if to merely catalogue them by value? As though such wonders, pale though they would be in your magnificent presence, could ever have a price placed upon them.”

She shook her arms loose from her guards. “Besides, I wear them better.” She gestured to the her armor, turning around to show off.

The dragon laughed. “Doubtless, you speak true, little one.”

Dafty coughed nervously and stepped forward. “My lord dragon, please accept these token –”

“Right, right,” the dragon said, almost bored. “Anything else to say, little gnome, before we finish?”

“Yes,” Prim said. “Oh great and wondrous dragon, I beg your forgiveness that I used these unworthy fools to meet you.”

“WHAT?” Dafty said, the other cultists shifting and muttering comfortably.

“Had I known where you lived, I would have humbly sought you out. Instead, I was reduced to using this sorry lot to signal your most mighty and powerful.”

The dragon roared with laughter. “I like you, little one.”

“My lord –” Dafty began.

“You honor me greatly,” Prim said, “O Mighty One. Please, accept your humble servant's gift: These fools and their feeble treasures.”

“Now see here –” Dafty tried again.

“I accept, little one,” the dragon said. He began inhaling.

The cultists screamed. Prim covered her face, prepared for the end.

The dragon's breath burned the entire half-circle of cultists. Dafty bore the brunt of the blast. The flames seemed to curl around Prim, as though playfully tickling her. She felt heat, but nothing worse than an opening the door to a baker's oven.

When it was over, she looked around. The men were ash. The ground was blackened and crackling, except for a small circle around her.

“Surprised, little one?” the dragon asked. “Surely you knew the power of those scales.”

“O Astounding One, I was told, indeed. But as they say: 'Seeing is believing',” Prim replied. “You have honored me above my station, O He of the Hottest Flame.” She curtsied grandly.

And then she gasped as the dragon grabbed her in his claws, then set her on his back. “O Wonder of Wonders, why –”

“You said you offered their treasures. You were their most valuable treasure. Now, you are mine.”

Prim gulped. “Thank you, O Glorious One,” she managed to get out.

The dragon laughed and grabbed the plates before taking flight....

The tavernkeep of the Happy Harpy was wiping his bar top when the door opened. “Greetings, guest –” he began, but stopped at the sight before him. His patrons all stopped talking and stared.

A beautiful gnome in amazing dancer's silks of a quality he had never imagined could exist entered. She wore golden bracelets, anklets, arm bands, and a necklace. On her brow, a circlet of silver and gold with diamonds inset shone brightly. From her belt hung a rapier with a jeweled hilt. On her back she carried a fancy fiddle case, a masterwork piece of artistry on its own which only hinted at the instrument inside.

And yet, the gnome herself exceeded the beauty of any person in the room's experience, or even imagination. Her hair was full and lush, her skin unmarked and flawless. She carried herself high, with a vibrancy and energy that radiated from her as light from a fire.

She walked toward the fireplace. “Mind if I have a drink?” Prim asked on the way, taking a patron's mug with a dazzling smile. He merely nodded, his mouth hanging open. She took a long drink, the crowd mesmerized and silent.

“I've had the craziest year ever,” she declared as she turned toward the crowd. “I must say, it makes for a fine song.”