

Prim & Tia's Adventures  
By: Wyland

## Author's Note

The following will be a version of what was once “Prim and Tia Island Antics”. The author has concluded the magnitude of the story was such the lazy author would never complete it in one go, or even in chapters of modest size designed to be collected into a single novel format.

Rather, the Adventures will be serialized, preferably in 2-4 page entries. This will involve trimming a bit of fat, so to say, and keeping a focus on the topic of the week.

That said, the Adventures will form a continuous timeline, one immediately following the next; and several adventures may together make up one scene. This format is most unlike the Tales, which are more or less chronologically scattershot and self-contained.

Another way to look at it would be the Tales are the fun antics our gnomish pair get into on the side, whereas the Adventures will form the main story line of their lives together, however long it should last.

Finally, Adventures 1 and 2 are comprised of the old Chapter One of Island Antics.

## Adventure 1

The gnome pair raced across the grasslands, and the angry and rather large bear pursued.

The gnome in the lead was red-haired and nimble, agilely avoiding obstacles. She wore loose leather pants with a vest of leather over a bustier which left her belly exposed. She carried a satchel, its strap running from shoulder to hip. Leather slippers and belt, from which hung a small stone knife, completed her outfit.

Her green-haired companion struggled to keep up while, apparently, making it her mission to stumble into every brush and rock in her path. Her outfit consisted of even less than her companion's, a leather skirt and smaller bustier without the vest. She wore sturdy boots with leather strips wound about them. On her back, a pack bounced as she ran, while a stone club and axe swung back and forth on her belt, matching her stride.

"You said you knew how to calm it down!" the second gnome, Tia, yelled, breathing hard as she ran all out.

"No, I said my ranger friend showed me how she calms animals," the other replied, her satchel trailing behind her. "I never claimed to have done it, myself!"

"You might have mentioned that before! We could have just strolled around it. But, no, not you. You're Prim! You always have to do things--"

A roar reminded the pair of the bear's ire.

"It is getting closer," Prim remarked, almost casually. She deftly leapt from stone to stone across a creek before their path.

Tia also jumped across, stumbling and cursing but managing to keep her balance and stay dry. "And whose fault is that?" she continued, the sound of splashing behind them letting the pair know their pursuer remained on the chase.

Prim frowned, brow furrowed. "Okay, okay, maybe an angry bear was not the best choice for my first attempt..." she conceded.

"Ya think?" Tia rubbed it in. "Why not try something less, I don't know, huge and furious for your first attempt?"

Prim rolled her eyes, running her hand through her hair's "flame" -- a section of her bangs she wore standing up as if burning -- to fluff it up even as she continued to run. "Right, right. But that observation does not exactly help our current outlook, Hot-Tits. What are you going to do?"

"ME?" Tia shouted, exasperation evident in her voice. "You got us into this!"

Another roar, closer this time. They could clearly hear the beast's heavy breathing and the crash of its paws on the ground with each bound it took.

"Well, my tribe had techniques to handle bears," Prim said as they dashed between a cluster of boulders.

"Then use one!" Tia shouted. Her shoulder grazed a jutting boulder, staggering her and eliciting another curse before she recovered her pace.

"The thing is, they all started with 'don't piss off any bears'," Prim explained.

"How can you be making jokes--" Tia began furiously, but was interrupted by another roar behind them.

"Right! That does it!" Tia skidded to a stop and turned, flinging off her pack. "I've had enough of you!" She drew her weapons.

"Hot-Tits, don't be foolish--" Prim began, horrified at Tia's actions. She also stopped and turned, but much too late. With an angry shout, Tia charged the bear, throwing the club at its face.

While the weapon did minimal damage to the bear, it had already slowed and now came to a confused stop. Its prey had been fleeing. It understood that. But now, one had turned against her, striking back. Worse, the

little creature had closed inside the bear's defenses, undaunted even as it raked its claws across her chest, leaving lines of blood behind.

And then pain, as its infernal axe struck again and again. The bear made another swipe at Tia, who rolled aside. Springing to her feet, she jumped upon first one and then a second boulder before leaping upon the confused bear's back. Holding on desperately with one hand, she swung her axe repeatedly with the other, striking her foe again and again.

Every creature has an instinctive desire to avoid pain. This gnome seemed to ignore it. The bear realized this creature was not normal. Would it ever stop attacking? How could the bear win against prey that did not stop when injured but, rather, went on hurting it?

And with that, the beast turned tail and fled in fear and confusion. Tia dropped off, landing on her side with a grunt. She swiftly stood, poised to give chase, but then felt a slap to her back.

"Well done, Hot-Tits!" Prim cried. The warrior, trembling at the touch, refrained from saying anything.

"I must say, you were quite the sight!" Prim said cheerfully. She offering Tia the warrior's club, which she had picked up as she had followed. As Tia took it back, Prim failed to notice her glaring at the bard's back, nor her clenched fists. "And that furry beast will think twice before bothering any sweet little gnomes in the future, I must say!" Prim continued, returning the stone knife Tia had made for her to her belt. "Well, what are you standing around for?" She dusted herself off. "You've cleared us a path -- let's get to it."

Muttering under her breath, Tia scowled as her companion casually strolled -- *literally* strolled Tia realized -- back along the path they had just fled along. After a moment, she looked down at her axe and saw the stone head had shattered sometime in the fight. "Crapsticks," she muttered, frowning at it.

"Come along, Hot-Tits!" Prim called back. "You won't get anywhere if you don't get a move on!"

"Right, right," Tia grumbled. "Don't mind I've another evening's work ahead of me, just go prance along without a clue. Do more cloud watching or butterfly catching or whatever idle foolishness you come up with this time." She winced as the cuts from the bear's claws decided it was time she understood how upset they were. Of course, Prim had not noticed her wounds, either. She sighed and slipped the remains of her weapon back into her belt and started to follow her oblivious friend.

Before she had taken two steps, a rock landed a few feet in front of her. She smiled in spite of herself as she picked it up. It was the correct size and shape she needed for a new axe head. It seemed Prim had noticed her busted weapon, after all. She stowed it in her pack and jogged to catch up with her friend, slinging the pack back on.

## Adventure 2

“We might as well stop here,” Prim said when they arrived at the creek they had crossed earlier. She started rummaging in the pack Tia had made for her, finally producing strips of cloth she had salvaged after the pair had a “disagreement” with a trio of goblins a week back. She held them up. “Here we are. Let's see to those wounds.”

“You can't be thinking to put that goblin filth on my cuts,” Tia growled as she gathered hooks and thread from her own pack.

“We could use the sod,” Prim replied. “I'm sure worms and grubs would love having a go at you. Besides, I scrubbed these out already. They should be clean. Enough.”

She pressed a cloth to Tia's wounds. The warrior grunted but decided it best not to argue. Besides, Prim really was concerned. Perhaps Tia had been too hasty in her judgment, earlier. She frowned as a surge of anger flashed within her, leaving before she could properly understand it.

“There!” Prim said, satisfied with her handiwork. “That will be doing for a start. Give me those lines. I'll fish us up something tasty--”

Tia laughed. “Tasty? Only if you don't try to cook it.”

Prim swatted the warrior's shoulder in mock irritation. “Oh, go fix your toys, O Finnick Warrior.”

“Yeah, I do prefer my meals edible,” Tia replied, gathering up her crafting materials. “I'm picky that way.” Prim sent her off by way of sticking her tongue out at her.

For the next few hours, Tia sat and chipped away at making a new axe head. Meanwhile, Prim set a few poles out for fish, using sticks for bobbers and some worms she rummaged from the aforementioned sod as bait.

Tia found herself distracted even as she worked. Almost despite herself, she kept looking over toward the camp Prim was setting up, though she had moved far enough to be out of sight for this very reason. Normally, she was able to put everything but her crafting out of mind as she worked.

She knew what was bothering her. She had already once before been unusually angry at Prim – furious, even – for reasons she did not understand. Rage had always been part of Tia's core being. She used her fury in her fighting as a shield against the fear and pain of combat. However, she could not recall losing control before Prim, to be on the verge of lashing out over trifles. Usually, the bard had a calming effect on Tia – even when she annoyed the warrior, Prim still managed to make her smile.

She knocked off a chunk of the stone, shaping the blade. As she brushed aside the removed material, a memory stirred within of the first time she had worked such a weapon out of a rock.

*“There you go,” Dhalkr said, reaching down and patting her shoulder. “Nicely done. Just work the axe out one piece at a time.”*

*She blushed at his praise – and touch. “Thank you, teacher.” Distracted, she struck at the stone again, hitting incorrectly and causing her tool to deflect off and scrape her finger.*

*With a cry, which she quickly stifled, the young gnome girl dropped everything and grabbed her hand. The wound was trifling. The humiliation was not.*

*The older gnome took her hand and examined it. “Nothing to worry about,” he said gently, letting her go. She nodded, sucking at the very small cut. “What happened?” he asked, a sternness to his query.*

*Tia blushed again and looked at her boots, the boots he had made for her.*

*“Little One,” he said, now quite stern and making it clear he would brook no more delays.*

*“I did not focus,” she mumbled. “Teacher,” she added.*

*“That's right.”*

*“Sorry, teacher.”*

*He smiled. “No apology needed. I think the pain was more teacher than I ever could be.”*

Tia chuckled, then looked at her hand. It had healed cleanly, of course, and left no scar. She gripped the stone tighter, seeing the axe head within it, waiting to get out. She struck it with the stone chisel she had created before, and another piece broke off.

*“Today, Little One, we decide what path your training will take,” Dhalkr announced.*

*Tia, now a few years older, beamed. “Really, teacher?” she asked, excited. “About time!” She winced. “Sorry, teacher...”*

*But he merely laughed. “I understand, Little One. But, as I have said before, you must first learn to survive nature before I can teach you to survive combat. You have learned and grown enough to now be ready for the next step – the first true step of being a warrior. Come with me.”*

*“Yes, teacher,” she answered.*

*He walked around his cabin. She followed, ready and eager. Several weapons and shields of various sizes were set out.*

*“Now, what path shall you follow, I wonder,” he idly mused, looking over the arsenal.*

A strange whooshing sound caught her attention. She looked up from her work, confused. Deciding it was just a trick of the wind combined with the surfacing of her memories, she turned her attention back to the axe.

*“The sword is the classic weapon,” Dhalkr said. He was showing her each weapon, lecturing her (again) on them. “Elegant, the wielder does not fight so much as dance with his foe.*

*“The club is simple. Brute strength overwhelms all.*

*“The axe is dangerous. One must be ready to commit everything to the attack, for one can holding nothing back when swinging such a weapon. It is painful, using the axe. For both the user and the other guy.” He laughed, and she giggled.*

*Tia picked up an axe and swung it. She found she enjoyed it much more than she had the sword. She chopped at the pile of firewood beside Dhalkr's house, finding the feel and sound as it struck home stirring something inside her.*

*Dhalkr smiled, shaking his head. “I should have known you'd choose the axe,” he said simply.*

*“Why, teacher?” she asked, confused.*

*“You never do anything halfway. You are the most determined student I have ever known.” He slapped her shoulder.*

*Once again, she blushed, finding herself unable to say anything.*

*“Now, let's see what style suits you best. I don't think a two-hander will work with your build,” he said simply, looking her up and down. “And, of course, those who wield two weapons risk even more, sacrificing defense for offense.” He was clearly back into lecturer mode. “Such warriors use their fury and their enemies' fear of pain to gain victory.”*

The odor of smoke caused Tia to look up from her nearly-finished weapon. Prim must have her campfire going. She sniffed again, her brows furrowed, as she caught the scent of burned meat in the air. Cursing, she gathered everything up. She turned to camp and saw, plain as can be, a line of smoke in the sky. She stood and ran toward it.

“For the love of – can you cook nothing, Prim?” she shouted when she saw the bard. “Why didn't you wait for me?”

Prim, who was examining the charred remains of a fish on a stick, an expression of disappointment and disgust on her face, looked up. “I just wanted it to be ready when you finished your axe!” she said defensively.

“Well, it got ready, all right,” Tia agreed, stomping over to the campfire -- now nearly a bonfire -- and lifting another stick with the smoking remains of a fish stuck to it. She examined the mess and sighed. “And then it went past ready and straight to rubbish. Well, berries for dinner, I suppose.”

Catching the warrior's glare, Prim pouted. “I was just trying to help...”

“Then stop helping,” Tia snapped. “You've been messing everything up all day.”

Prim folded her arms angrily and looked aside. “Fine! I won't use my healing paste on your cuts. You can just scar.”

Confused, Tia looked down at the pan again. “What are you--”

“My special healing paste.” She pointed to a small ceramic jar resting on the inside edge of the campfire's stone ring. “I learned it years ago. How do you think I maintain my amazing complexion with all this fighting?”

“Well, actually, I thought you avoided--” Tia started, beginning to feel the first pangs of shame for yelling at her friend, who apparently was trying to help and who promptly interrupted.

“Avoided fighting?” Prim asked, her voice rising angrily. “You think I am a coward, Tia?”

Realizing things were going downhill fast -- Prim calling her by name was a warning and a half -- Tia attempted to undo the damage. “No, just you always seem to talk--”

“Ever try talking a grimling out of attacking, Hot-Tits? It wouldn't be very useful.”

“Right, I'd imagine not. But come on,” Tia tried out a reasonable voice, “you made no move to attack the goblins or Grumpy Grump. Nor anything with the bandits.”

Prim let out a laugh filled with derision. “Your fighting was not much help there, was it, O Fierce Warrior Who Is Fleet of Foot?” she asked icily.

Now Tia leapt to her feet, angry in her turn. “If you recall, a certain annoying bard refused to be anything more than baggage.”

Prim put her arms on her hips and cocked an eyebrow. “Yes, but sexy baggage. With an exquisite ass.” She nodded sagely, thrusting a hip out.

The pair glared at each other again a moment, then together burst into giggles.

“Always bragging about your ass,” Tia said, sitting back down.

“Well, when you have one as exquisite as mine, you do have to bear the--”

“Bare! Ha!”

Prim giggled. “Is that a request?” she asked.

And before the warrior could react, Prim was on top of her again. “I still want my prize,” she whispered, face close.

And again, Tia found herself unable to think clearly. How did this keep happening? She should be repulsed. She should be shoving the redhead off her. Tia had never even thought of bedding another woman before meeting Prim, and now--

Prim reached over and gently rubbed around the cuts on Tia's chest where the bear had raked its claws on her. "How could I ever stay angry at you when ..." she mused, trailing off. She rolled to the side, letting a confused Tia sit back up. "That paste is ready. It just needed some extra heat. Get your shirt off."

"It's really no big deal," Tia said, embarrassed. She removed her shirt. "I'm perfectly fine."

"Pish-posh, Hot-Tits," Prim chided as she gently removed the bandages. The cuts were looking better, though clearly still fresh and angry. She picked up the jar and dipped two fingers into it. A green paste clung to her fingers as she withdrew them. She smeared the paste on Tia's wounds. The warrior, expecting a sting as these pastes always had, found herself surprised to find it did not sting. However, after a moment, it began to be rather warm – hot, even.

"Err, is it supposed to be--" she began, but Prim interrupted.

"Yes. What do you expect from that?" she asked, gesturing to the fire as she applied more paste.

"Fair point," Tia agreed. She resumed her silence as Prim ran her fingers along her wounds, the heat growing to be just slightly uncomfortable.

"How do you stand it?" she asked, finally.

"Stand what?" the bard asked in return.

"It's not just hot on my wounds, but everywhere," Tia said. "How do your fingers manage?"

Prim looked surprised, then eyed her paste-coated fingers. "Hrm. I never thought of that," she said in a low voice.

"Come again?"

Prim started. "Oh, this is nothing when it comes to my Hot-Tits's health," she said brightly. "Besides, I cannot let you scar your gorgeous chest..."

Tia rolled her eyes. "I'm not the one who pissed off the bear that put those cuts there," she reminded Prim.

"All the more reason for me to tend them," Prim continued smoothly, slathering more paste on the wounds.

Tia grunted, but gave no further indication of just how much the salve burned. The pain reminded her of more old memories. Her mind, already in a strange, nostalgic mood, took her back once again.

*"The shield is for those who wish to protect. Not just themselves, but those with them. Their comrades in arms, and those under their protection."*

*Tia walked over and hefted one of the larger shields. He laughed, taking it from her and giving her one more properly sized. "Try this, Little One."*

*She smiled and strapped it on, raising and swinging it. She turned to him – to find him swinging a club at her. Reflexively, she brought her shield up to deflect, rather than directly block, the attack. She saw him striking again, and again she sent it aside. A third blow fell, faster than the others, and she had only time enough to block it straight. The blow staggered her, and she found herself on her knees, struggling to get her breath back. She could do nothing but hold the shield between herself and her unexpected foe as a fourth blow jolted her arm.*

*He stopped his attack, stepping back. She warily lowered the shield to look at him. She realized her arm felt more sore than she ever thought possible, though the thought of complaining never crossed her mind.*

*"Very nicely done," he said. "You seem to have the instinct for it, Little One."*

*He continued lecturing, but the girl no longer heard anything, smiling vaguely after his compliment.*

“There we go!” Prim declared, bringing Tia back to the present again.

She looked down at her chest. Bandages covered her wounds again. The salve was definitely burning. She moved her arms.

“How are you feeling?” Prim asked, a little anxious.

“Good,” Tia said, moving her arms experimentally. “Really good, actually. Other than the heat, there is no pain.” She pulled out her club and lightly swung it around. “None at all.”

Prim smiled hugely. “Excellent! I knew it would fix you right up! By morning, there won't be a trace of your wounds.”

Tia looked at her in surprise. “Really? That soon? What is in this stuff?” she asked, picking up the jar and giving it a sniff. She blanched at the odor and turned away.

The bard laughed and took back the salve. “It is probably best you don't know.” She put the lid over it, and Tia decided to be content with that answer. She noticed Prim's fishing lines were still in the water, and one of them was bouncing. She smiled and jogged over. Apparently, regardless of her usual attitude, Prim knew her culinary limits well enough and left the lines out as a backup plan.

*Perhaps we will have better than berries tonight, after all, she thought as she took the pole and fought to bring in the catch. That is, if I can keep Prim from trying her hand at cooking again...*

### Adventure 3

That night, Tia found it impossible to sleep. She lay on her side, listening to the campfire smoldering behind her, memories still filling her thoughts.

Prim began softly singing in a language Tia did not know. She felt a power in the words, pulling her thoughts to ancient times beyond imagining, when the world was young and the mortal races had not yet awoken. There was a connection in the music to the land, to the sky – to the whole of nature itself. Every gnome had such a kinship to the natural world, of course, but the magic of the song went deeper than Tia had ever felt within herself.

The song ended. Tia lay quiet a moment, letting the power linger. Finally, she sat up and looked at her companion. Prim was looking at the stars.

“What was that?” she asked.

“A song I learned years ago,” Prim said. “When I was young and innocent.”

“You were innocent?” Tia grinned. “Why do I find that difficult to believe?”

The redhead met her eyes but did not return the smile. “Everyone was innocent, once,” she said. She looked back at the sky.

Tia followed her gaze. The two were silent for several minutes, each lost in her own thoughts.

“We aren't getting sleep anytime soon, it seems,” Tia said at last. “Tell me a tale. Surely you know several.” She grinned. “I'd wager there was some truth in there somewhere, even.”

That drew a smile from her companion. “Of course there is truth in every story I share,” she said. “Very well. I shall tell the tale of the Tappisier and the Dragon.”

“The what and the dragon?” Tia asked.

Prim frowned in confusion. “Tappisier.” Tia cocked an eyebrow. “One who makes tapestries.”

Tia let out a snort. “Oh. A weaver. Why didn't you just say so?”

“Weavers and tappisiers are not the same thing,” Prim said irritably.

“Maybe, but 'weaver' is easier to say. And hear. I'm just saying.”

The bard rolled her eyes. She tossed a log onto the coals, then picked up a stick and poked the fire back to life. She watched the flames pick up and dance for several seconds, then began the story.

“Once there was a young maiden who was an exceptional ... weaver,” Prim said with an annoyed look at Tia, who gave an insufferable grin in return. “Nobles, even royalty, commissioned her work. However, she was not satisfied with her skills, always aspiring to improve. Therefore, she traveled the lands and the seas, to the south where it is warm all year round and to the north where the ice lingers well into the summer. She sought out techniques from every people she encountered, sharing her own knowledge. For she loved the lore of her craft, desiring nothing more than advancing it further than it had ever been, to leave behind a legacy of knowledge and skill for others to follow.

“One day, she heard of a dragon which would demand maidens from a village every decade or so. 'A dragon would surely know much knowledge, even of weaving!' she thought to herself. 'And there must be amazing works in his horde, the product of ancient craftsmen whose techniques have long been lost.' So she went to the village and offered herself (as well as a few trinkets she had conveniently come across in her travels) to the dragon. To show her worth, she presented him a tapestry of her own making, her finest masterpiece. And, oh! the glory of it! The subject – a dragon, of course – appeared to move as the viewer moved, giving it a life of its own.

“The dragon was impressed at her work, even though she was a mere mortal. He agreed to her request and took her to his den. He showed her marvels and treasures. He revealed techniques she had never imagined. She showed him methods she had learned from her travels.

“The days passed, filled with wonder. The nights were filled with a wonder of an altogether different sort. After all, dragons can take on a mortal, glorious form.” She stopped speaking, smiling softly, lost in thought as she gazed at the flames again.

Tia contemplated the idea of making a deal with a dragon. It did not seem like a particularly wise notion to her. All the stories she had heard of dragons tended to end up with folks being eaten. She decided not to mention this just now.

“To her surprise, she fell in love,” Prim suddenly continued, interrupting Tia's thoughts. “But the dragon did not understand love, not in the sense of love between two people. He loved her, his greatest treasure – but that was all she was, treasure. He loved his gems and precious metals and magical swords and armors and his works of art and fancy clothes unique in the world. He loved his pretty weaver making exceptional tapestries recording stories he told her of his life as well as their time together.

“This hollow love was not enough for her. She felt trapped, like a caged bird. She told him she could not survive without the love of another, that she would surely die. But the dragon's heart would not change.

“She considered escape, but the dragon had magical snares placed in his home to keep mortals from trying to steal his treasures. What could she do, stuck at the center of all his traps? She attempted to escape, anyway. Perhaps she could show him how desperate she was for love. Maybe her attempts would convince him to try, just a little, to learn to truly love her. Or possibly she was simply beyond reason, desperate for change, any change – for something other than endless days of a facade of love.

“Unfortunately, all her trouble earned her from the dragon was a mixture of amusement at the futility of her efforts and ire she could possibly even consider the notion of leaving his magnificence.”

Prim spoke this last in a tone of disgust, brow furrowed in anger. Tia cocked an eyebrow at her, wanting her to elaborate. But the bard was too focused on the fire and her story to notice, and Tia decided to not interrupt the story.

“She hatched a plan,” Prim went on. “In her travels, she had picked up the odd magical trick here and there. She decided to use one. When she shared his bed, when he was most distracted, she stole a little of his power. Bit by bit, as the months and years passed, she gathered his magic for her own, without him noticing.”

“Handy trick,” Tia commented.

Prim nodded and continued. “One day, the dragon noticed something was wrong. He could feel his power was less than it once was, a weakness within himself. However, he did not suspect the weaver. She was a mere mortal, after all. What could she do?

“Rather, he decided to seek the answer from his kin. He flew away to meet with the elders of his kind.

“The weaver knew it was now or never. After he was gone half a day, she released the dragon's power within her. He sensed the power, as it was his own, a part of him gone missing. And he realized she had taken it. He returned in a rage.

“But she had already escaped, having slipped the magical bonds which were designed for mortals, not for dragons. She used the power she had taken to confuse their senses. And, having gotten away, she kept the power within her hidden, not daring to use it, for to do so would reveal her location to him.

“And, oh, he was seeking her, ever seeking her. He flew across the lands and across the seas. In his rage, he flew up into the heavens, among the stars themselves, where every night he crosses the world, looking down upon us all, searching for his lost treasure.”

Prim fell silent at last. Tia was not certain what to think of that story. She looked up at the stars and considered it would feel to know somewhere up there, an old foe was watching for her and waiting to find her and snatch her away forever. She shuddered at the thought.

“And on that cheery note,” she said, standing and stretching with a bit of a groan, “I think I shall give sleep another go.”

“I am sorry, Hot-Tits,” Prim said. “Perhaps that was not the best story at a time such as this.”

“Nah, I liked it,” Tia said, waving her friend off as she lay down. “But if a dragon ever came for me, I’d give him solid reasons to move along.” She pointed to her ax and club beside her blankets.

The redhead grinned. “I am certain you would make quite the convincing argument, indeed. Good night, Hot-Tits.”

She began singing softly, and Tia soon found sleep at last.

The bard finished her song and watched her friend resting. It was clear the salve still bothered her, for she shifted frequently, occasionally rubbing at the bandages.

Prim sighed, thinking back to earlier when the bear had chased them. She remembered the terror she had felt when Tia had turned to face it. And her horror at the thought Tia could be killed because Prim had messed up and angered the beast in the first place.

She looked at the campfire, recalling the flames that had erupted around Tia. She had seen Tia call on them before, when Prim had been in danger. As before, the warrior had not even known she was summoning the flames, the Gift of the Rage.

As she had done many nights before, she tried to recall all she had heard about the Gift. It amounted to very little. One thing she was certain of, however – they were a part of the warrior, whether she accepted them or not.

Her eyes found her companion again. “What happened to you, Tia, to cause you to avoid that part of yourself?” she softly asked. “What hurts have you suffered so you cannot even tell your Prim?”

She looked up at the heavens again. The constellation of the dragon, ever in the night sky, looked down on her.

## Adventure 4

“And here we are, at yet another unknown, bustling town,” Tia declared as they passed a sign welcoming them to Tropstad.

“I wonder what beauty and adventure we shall find!” Prim said cheerfully, looking excitedly at the passers-by. “And what interesting fashions!” she cried, seeing a lady wearing a large hat with what could politely be described as an abundance of feathers walking by.

It was the fourth afternoon since Prim's nighttime story. The pair had traveled in their typical aimless manner, stumbled across a road, and followed it to the town.

“Let's find some food,” Tia said.

“Baths first!” Prim demanded.

Tia rolled her eyes. “What is it with you and bathing?”

“You prefer the sour scent of sweat and grime?” Prim asked, crossing her arms and turning her head away. “I can smell you from five yards away!”

“I thought you liked my musk,” Tia said, grinning. “It's a thing of beauty, after all.” Prim merely gave an unimpressed glare. Tia let out a laugh. “Come on, then. The bathing hall it is.”

“Yay!” Prim cried, throwing her arms into the air. They set out to find a bath, Prim prancing around like an overactive child, looking at every sign, decoration, or colorful outfit they came across. Passersby soon made sure to give the pair a wide berth.

“See, everyone can smell the travel on us!” Prim said after watching a mother hustle her children away from them.

“Riiiiight. And it has nothing to do with you behaving like a loon,” Tia retorted.

“I cannot help myself!” Prim said, putting her hands on her hips and sticking her tongue out at Tia. “It is just so exciting to experience a new town for the first time!”

They soon found a bathing hall and paid their way in out of the rather limited funds they had managed to save in their travels. Tia frowned at her very-light coin purse as Prim dragged her by the arm to the changing room.

“We really need to watch our spending,” Tia said as they stripped. “Money bonanzas don't exactly happen when you spend half your time wandering aimlessly, the other half getting out of someone's dungeon.”

“We can be bunny girls again!” Prim said brightly. “Things always get much more interesting when we put on the ears and tail!”

“No!” Tia flatly replied. “I am sick of fishnets,” she added with a grumble.

“Always so negative,” Prim said cheerfully, grabbing buckets and supplies for both of them.

They entered the washing room. Prim opened her mouth, but Tia thrust out a hand to forestall her. “I can scrub my own back, thank you very much,” she said.

Prim pouted. “Awww... Where is the fun in that?”

“Who is talking about fun?” Tia asked as she sat on a stool and rummaged for her soap. “You wanted to go the bath, and now here we are. Let's just do what people do here, okay?”

“What is with the determined attitude at a place in which to relax?” Prim asked, filling her bucket at the fountain in the center of the room. “People also have fun at bath houses, you know. Oh!” she said brightly, bringing her fist to her palm. “But of course! That is what you meant!” And with that, she flung the water onto Tia.

The warrior sputtered. “What was that for?” she demanded. Wiping the water from her eyes, she did not see or hear Prim slip behind her. “Have you gone ma – ah – ahhhh ...”

Her anger drained away into a sigh as Prim massaged her back with soapy hands. “Still want to scrub your own back?” she asked in a low voice.

“Nrrgle,” Tia said, her head lolling and eyes unfocused. Prim giggled.

“I do seem to have that way with people,” she said. “Did I ever tell you about the time I distracted an entire Ork raiding party until the caravan I was with could get to safety? They still tell tales of my deeds that day...”

“Do they?” Tia asked, her wits returning.

“The Orks do, yes.”

Tia laughed. “I probably shouldn't ask just how you keep up with their talk – ahhh.”

“Goodness, Hot-Tits, you are so tense,” Prim said, kneading Tia's back. “I may have to use extreme measures to get you to relax properly.”

“Extreme measures? Why do I not like the sound – hey!”

For Prim had slipped her hands around and cupped Tia's breasts from behind. “I am just helping your body relax,” she said.

“I think they are relaxed enough, thank you!”

“True, no knots here,” Prim said, squeezing playfully. “Nice and soft.”

“Dammit, Prim!” Tia said. “I thought you were supposed to be washing my back, not feeling me up!”

“You mean I should work lower?” Prim asked, sliding her hands back and down toward Tia's backside.

“Right!” Tia said, standing up. “I think that did the trick. I feel better already!”

“Excellent!” Prim said, spinning around. “Now it is your turn!” she added, pointing to her back. “And feel free to be rough, if that is your thing,” she added, twisting around and winking.

Tia sighed. “You never stop, do you...”

Several minutes later, now washed up, they entered the bathing area. It was not particularly busy, with just a few other towel-clad women gathered in groups. They gave irritated looks as Prim removed her towel and settled into the water naked, sighing.

“There are few pleasures in life greater than relaxing in a nice, warm bath,” she said, leaning back.

Tia chuckled. “You somehow always find these pleasures wherever you go,” she said. “And it seems your list of 'few' is rather long.” She disrobed and joined Prim in the pool. Noticing the other patrons' disapproving looks, she waved brightly with an exaggerated smile.

Prim giggled as they blushed furiously and turned away. “Now, this I did not expect: My Hot-Tits did not bring her towel into the pool!”

“What's the point? You'd find a way to get it off me, anyway.”

“True, I would,” Prim said, completely unabashed. “But I must say I do so feel a tinge of regret. The hunt would have been most fun!”

“You're hopeless,” Tia said with a grin.

“What can I say, Hot-Tits?” Prim smiled at her. “I know what I love.”

The pair settled into a comfortable silence. Tia soon closed her eyes, feeling the stress of the road fading away. She had to admit Prim's near-obsession with comfort had its advantages.

As she relaxed, her mind drifted toward her memories, the ones that kept resurfacing of late. She had tried to figure out why she kept returning to them but could come up with no answer. She had even considered opening up to Prim about them, but something always held her back. She shook her head to clear it, sighed, and leaned back against the rocks of the pool wall.

The spirit dream suddenly came to her again, and she found herself in the desert once more. She could feel the heat of the sun.

The hummingbird flitted about, not in any particular pattern, going from rock to dried bush to rock to Tia and then to a cactus. The wolf sat, watching the bird.

“You know, I was rather enjoying a pleasant bath,” Tia said to the wolf. It looked at her, huffed, and resumed watching the hummingbird.

She scanned the horizon. She spotted the dark, whirling section of memories from before. It was far away, and she felt no threat it would bother her this visit.

“Why am I back here?” she asked the wolf after a few minutes, or hours. Once again, time seemed to make little sense.

The wolf ignored her. The hummingbird landed on its snout, eliciting a snort. The wolf stood and shook. The bird flew off cheerfully, as if it had not just annoyed the wolf. The beast settled back down and resumed watching the bird.

“You're no help,” Tia told it. Several minutes passed. Or seconds.

She heard voices, as if from a distance. She looked around for the source, but she was alone. With a shrug, she decided to listen in.

“He's such a bore, though,” one voice said.

“And he's always acting as if he's all that,” another said.

Tia's mouth twisted as if she had just sucked on a lemon. “Gossip? Seriously?” she demanded of the wolf. “You brought me here for this?” The canine ignored her.

“And nobody asked him to get involved,” a third voice said.

“He should just get the hint and go away,” the first voice said.

“Matters of the heart are never so simple as that,” a new, familiar voice said. “You cannot blame a person for falling in love, no matter how inconvenient it may be to you.”

“Oh? And what do you know?” the third voice demanded.

“I know a man's heart rarely listens to his head. Though other parts of his anatomy often try and do the thinking for him.”

The voices giggled. Tia rolled her eyes, then kicked a stone just to distract herself from the voices.

“What business does he have trying to court me, anyway?” the first voice asked. “He should know I'm way out of his league.”

Suddenly, Tia turned to the wolf. “You didn't bring me here,” she said. “I came here on my own. That's why you're ignoring me.”

The wolf glanced at her a moment, huffed, then returned to the bird.

“Why did I come here?” she asked. “What happened to bring me to this dream?”

The bird circled her head, squeaking merrily.

“Pish-posh. Everyone has a right to love, even if it is not returned as his happens to be,” the familiar voice said. “Unrequited love can be beautiful as any. Sad, annoying even, but beautiful, nonetheless.”

“Prim,” Tia said. “Only she can prattle on like that about beauty and other foolishness.”

To Tia's surprise, it began to rain in her dream state. A desert rain that wastes no time with pleasantries and simply drops everything at once poured over her.

“Yes, this is much better than relaxing in a hot bath,” she said to no one as she was promptly soaked.

The hummingbird landed on her shoulder and began squeaking a tune. Tia stood in the downpour for several minutes or hours before suddenly realizing the bird was unaffected by the rain, its feathers dry. She looked to the wolf, which was as soaked as she herself was.

And then her eyes were drawn back to the maelstrom of her negative memories. It made no move, though she felt a power in it, subdued, biding its time. She shuddered, closing her eyes.

When she opened them, she realized she was back in the hot bath. She tried to stand, but her body insisted on stretching the moment she stirred.

“Oh, but that does feel good,” she said. Looking around for Prim, she could not at first find her. Then, to her horror, she saw the redhead climbing the fence between the women's and men's baths.

Her shock at Prim's audaciousness left her momentarily mute. Meanwhile, Prim reached the top and leaned over.

“Hey, you!” she shouted. “Yeah, you! I see you peeping at those other women!” She flung her sandal, and a man's cry of pain sounded from the other side of the fence. “Ha! Serves you right for not staring at my exquisite ass, you unrefined oaf!”

Tia put her face into her palm.

“I do not understand,” Prim complained a few minutes later. Behind them, the door to the bath house slammed.

“What, exactly, has you flummoxed?” Tia asked.

They were standing in front of the bathing hall, wearing nothing but towels and holding their clothes.

“I do not understand why *we* get thrown out when we were the victims of the peeper!” Prim said, throwing her sandals to the ground in irritation. “Also, since when do you say 'flummoxed', Hot-Tits?” she asked brightly, her smile returning.

“Dunno,” Tia said, turning away to hide her grin. Prim was so predictable: She always cheered up when Tia used big words she had learned from her. “Bad influence, I guess.”

“Like what you see?” Prim asked a man walking by. He grinned, nodded, and tipped his hat.

“Move along,” Tia growled.

“Well, that bath was less relaxing that I had hoped,” Prim said as she walked toward an alley in which to dress.

“We should have gone to the pub,” Tia needled. “At least we'd be wearing our clothes now and not half-naked in public.”

“You say that like it would be more appealing,” Prim said. “Besides, I have seen you naked plenty of times at the DD, so do not pretend such a state of undress would be unheard-of had we gone to the pub first.”

“True, but at least then we would have drinks,” Tia pointed out. “And a crowd more appreciative of your exquisite ass,” she added with a chuckle as a trio of women walked by, gasping in shock as they saw the pair in their state of undress.

“An excellent point!” Prim said merrily. “The pub it is, then!”

## Adventure 5

“Why is it,” Tia asked as the pair ran along the edge of a cliff twelve days after their bathhouse misadventure, “I often find myself in these situations with you?”

“Whatever do you mean, Hot-Tits,” Prim asked, ducking a goblin's arrow almost casually. Cries and grunts arose from their pursuers.

Tia glared at her friend. “You know full well. Always running for our lives from something.”

“In my defense, this one is your fault.”

“My fault?” Tia roared. Another arrow harmlessly landed nearby.

“You and your stubbornness with goblins,” Prim said. “One would think you would learn to live and let live.”

“Oh, so we should just go around filthy, thieving goblins because – ”

“ – Because there were forty of them and two of us?”

Tia frowned. “Well, how was I supposed to know there were so many? We only saw five!”

“How can you be so amazing at tracking and whatnot, but you never check how many foes you might be facing before rushing in?” Prim asked. “It truly astounds me.”

“Oh, so now it's lecture time, is it?”

“No,” Prim said, “that should probably wait until later. We have more pressing matters right now.” She gestured ahead.

Tia looked. “Oh, you cannot be serious...”

Ahead of them, the path led to a primitive rope bridge crossing the gorge beside them. Even from a distance, the lack of craftsmanship was evident.

“There's no way we can cross that!” Tia said. “It's barely able to stay up as it is!”

“Nevertheless, we must, Hot-Tits. Unless you think our friends are in a forgiving mood?”

“Right. You first, then.”

They arrived at the bridge, which consisted of one thick rope with two thinner ropes running above to hold on to. Smaller ropes every few feet connected the upper ropes to the main one.

Prim lightly stepped out onto it, hardly even touching the upper ropes. “Come along, Hot-Tits! It is more secure than it appears.”

“That's not sayin' much,” Tia muttered as she followed more slowly. Whereas the sure-footed Prim dashed along, the warrior slowly trudged forward. As soon as she set foot on the main rope, she realized it was swaying back and forth. She gripped the side ropes as though her life depended on it and shuffled on.

After a few steps, a horn sounded from behind them. “That can't be good,” Tia said.

“There is nothing to be done,” Prim said as the goblin mob neared the bridge. “Press forward!”

“I'm going, I'm going!” Tia said. She heard the goblins jeering behind her. Looking back, she saw them scuffling and fighting over who would go on the bridge first – and, therefore, face the warrior who had pummeled several earlier.

Prim was two-thirds across when she heard more goblin jeering – only now, it came from ahead of them. “Well, this would seem to pose a problem,” she called back to Tia fifteen feet behind her.

The warrior looked up and saw a second mob of goblins come into view in front of them. She looked back at their pursuers – just in time, to duck an arrow fired from the edge of the cliff. Other goblins had managed to sort out who would go first and were on the bridge, closing in.

“Any crazy ideas?” she asked.

“My ideas are never crazy, Hot-Tits,” Prim said, turning back to Tia. The warrior suddenly realized Prim was not even using the support ropes.

“Would you hold on, at least?” she asked. “You're making me dizzy just looking at you.”

Prim grinned. “Relax, Hot-Tits. You are doing fine!”

“I'd be doing better if you'd hold on!” Tia snarled.

“Such a worrier,” Prim said with a laugh as she casually leaned aside to avoid another arrow.

Suddenly, the bridge gave a lurch in the wind. Tia grabbed hold of the support ropes for dear life. Meanwhile, Prim lost her balance, her foot slipping off the main rope. She grabbed a support rope as she fell, hanging precariously.

“I am fine,” she called up to Tia. “And not a word about this.”

The warrior sighed in relief. “Yes, the lecture should probably wait until later, right?” Prim stuck out her tongue and blew raspberries at her, as she climbed back up.

“We'll never survive out here,” Tia said.

“Are you suggesting we jump?” Prim asked.

“No. But you should push on,” the warrior said, forcing herself to move faster. “At least there are fewer goblins on that side.”

“That we can see, at least,” Prim added with a smile. She moved along the bridge, now holding the upper ropes. The goblins roared with delight seeing her approach, brandishing clubs and spears.

When she got six feet away, Prim crouched and sprung forward. The goblins, taken by surprise at her unexpected charge, instinctively stepped back. Reaching solid ground, she leapt onto one goblin's shoulders and over, landing on second goblin's head and hopping onto the rocks.

“You are a slower than usual lot, are you not?” she asked as the goblins looked around, puzzled.

They finally decided to try and grab her. The bard laughed and danced about as the goblins lunged at where she had been standing only to collide into one another. She ducked another pair grabbing at her, with similar results for the goblins.

While Prim kept their foes distracted, Tia finally scooted off the bridge. Without a moment's hesitation, she drew her axe, and with a dull thud, she chopped one upper rope off at the wooden post it had been tied to.

She looked back to see the goblins scrambling to stay on the bridge. She raised the axe over the other support rope. The goblins on the bridge shrieked. The ones closest to the cliff scrambled to try and make it back. The others dropped down to hang onto the main rope.

Tia gave them two seconds to get themselves sorted, then swung the axe again. The second upper rope fluttered down, cut.

She drew her club and turned to the mob. They had managed to trip Prim, who tried to roll away. Before she could get up, a goblin lunged at her, falling over her and pinning her.

Tia shouted and sprang at him. Seeing her coming at him in a fury, he let out a cry and scrambled off Prim. Tia then pivoted and engaged the pack. A furious melee ensued, the warrior striking several foes, knocking a few. The goblins panicked at her sudden assault and those that still could hurriedly moved back several feet to regroup.

There were at least twenty of them, however. The gnomes found themselves with a mob before them and their backs to a cliff with a single rope which led to another forty goblins. A wall of rock rose sheer on their right at least twenty feet.

“Any ideas?” Tia asked.

“None that are pleasant,” Prim said, panting from her exertions.

“It seems they are reluctant to attack,” Tia said. “I think they just sent one of ‘em I hit ahead, or back, or whichever. Probably to get reinforcements.”

“Well, that does not seem promising for us.”

“What do you think of our options?”

Prim grinned. “We stand here until we get overwhelmed, or we charge in and hope they are simply a kinky lot and not a hungry one.”

Tia laughed grimly. “Bout what I reckoned.” She raised her weapons.

Prim put a hand on her shoulder. “Wait. They seem to be chanting something.”

The goblins in front of them had turned and were indeed chanting. *Gluhden*, they cried together. *Gluhden, Gluhden*, they repeated.

“What is Gluhden?” Tia asked.

“Haven't the foggiest,” Prim answered. “I would wager we shall find out in a few moments.”

“Good,” the warrior said, spinning her weapons in anticipation. “I hate waiting.”

Several of the chanting goblins pulled out ropes and held them ready, taunting the gnomes. Prim laughed derisively, causing a few of them to meekly lower their ropes in confusion and humiliation.

“It would seem we have the answer to kinky or hungry,” she said.

The goblins, still chanting, parted. The path sloped downward behind them, and the gnomes saw a giant lizard, much larger than the bear Tia had fought before, approaching on all fours. It wore a metal collar with several ropes connected to it. A few goblins held the other ends of the ropes, guiding the creature along.

“Well ... this is different,” Prim said, tilting her head.

The goblins with ropes began approaching the gnomes. Tia raised her weapons to them. They stopped, then laughed and pointed at the lizard.

“I think they expect us to surrender rather than battle their friend,” Prim said.

Tia let out a derisive snort. “If they wanted lizard meat for dinner, they should have just said so.”

Putting both weapons in her left hand, she leaned down and gathered up a stone. She flung it at Gluhden.

It struck the creature between its eyes. The goblins all quieted down, looking at one another in bewilderment, unsure of what was to come after this unexpected display of defiance.

The giant lizard blinked, then let out a roar toward the sky. Flames erupted from its mouth in a fiery geyser.

“Oh, come on!” Tia shouted. “Goblins have a fire-breathing lizard pet? That's ridiculous!”

Gluhden turned toward her and charged. Refusing to back down, the warrior leapt at it. With a swipe of a paw, it sent her flying against the rock face.

Prim let out a loud whistle, catching the lizard's attention. It thrust forward, snapping at her. She dodged aside, then jumped over the beast's swipe attack. It let out a frustrated roar, when Tia, having recovered, slammed both weapons into its flank, the axe's head sinking deep. Gluhden roared now in pain and spun, swinging its tail against Tia. She flew several feet before landing and tumbling up against the edge of the cliff, stopping just before going over. She looked down a moment in relief, then turned toward her foe.

Gluhden was facing her, taking a deep breath. Tia gritted her teeth as she realized she had no time to move out of the way.

The giant lizard exhaled. The flames shot toward her.

Suddenly, Prim stood above Tia, her back to the warrior. She held her hands out toward the lizard. The flames slammed into them and parted around both gnomes, Prim grunting from the effort.

The fires stopped. Prim dropped to a knee, panting.

“Prim?” Tia asked, stunned.

“A trick ... I learned,” Prim said, turning and smiling weakly. “Perhaps we should move – ”

As she spoke, Gluhden drew another, deeper breath. Tia tried to stand and shove Prim aside, but her boot slipped on the loose rocks at the cliff's edge. She fell onto her hands and knees. She looked up to see the lizard let loose its flames again.

Tia could do no more than watch as Prim raised her hands to try to again deflect the blast. The flames struck her and parted for a moment; however, they soon began closing in on the gnomes. Tia felt the heat engulf her as the walls of fire on either side of her moved in.

And then Prim let out a cry, and to Tia's astonishment, wings burst from her friend's back. A pair of reptilian wings grew and spread apart. And as if she gained strength from their presence, Prim stood and pushed the stream of flame back, away from the gnomes, and into the face of Gluhden itself.

The lizard roared in pain, clearly not immune to its own flames. The goblins began running around in a panic as Gluhden stomped about in a rage.

Prim looked at her wings. “Well, these are new,” she said, her tone unusually flat. She turned toward Tia, an expression of deep sadness and guilt on her features.

“What – what – ” Tia stammered. The strange anger toward Prim that had been barely under control now surged throughout Tia. “Prim ... what are you?” she finally managed to ask.

“A gnome,” Prim said, reaching out to help the warrior to her feet. Tia slapped her hand away. Prim started, then looked down. “I should have told you...” she said, her voice trailing away. “I tried to tell you so many times.”

Tia felt as if the world had turned upside-down. “Tell me what?” Tia she demanded as she stood. “That you're half-demon?”

“Dragon.”

“Whatever. You mean to tell me all this time, you had this power in you? To control fire?” Tia let out a humorless laugh. “That would have been handy to have in that burning mansion. Or were you more interested in grabbing my ass than getting us out?”

Prim silently opened and closed her mouth a few times. Tia found her anger growing as her normally-vocal companion now struggled to talk to her.

“It is ... complicated, Tia,” Prim said at last.

“Oh, it's 'Tia' now, is it?” Tia snarled, ignoring the irony of her being upset at *not* being called by Prim's nickname for her.

The sound of trampling feet caught their attention. Tia looked past Prim to discover Gluhden had apparently decided randomly stomping around was not solving anything and was now charging right at the gnomes, who had ill-advisedly not moved themselves away from the cliff.

Prim half-turned, saw the danger, then ran straight at Tia. “Hold on!” she shouted.

“Wait, weren't you just saying your wings were new?” Tia asked as Prim slammed into her and they wrapped their arms around each other. They tumbled over the side. “Do you even have any idea what you are doing?”

“Vaguely,” Prim replied as she spread her wings and more or less straightened their fall. She then flapped her wings desperately, pulling them up from the a straight dive just enough but not enough to gain any altitude.

“This is madness!” Tia cried as the ground raced toward them.

She lost her hold on Prim as they struck the earth. She bounced and skidded and finally slammed into a boulder. Pain shot through her, and finally darkness took her.

## Adventure 6

Tia regained consciousness within a few moments. She immediately regretted it. Her body was a case study in pain. She had no doubt multiple ribs had broken, not to mention she was battered and bruised all over. Moving anything sent agony through her.

*Except my toe, she thought, wiggling it. Goodness, I must be dying, making a joke like that. Prim has gotten to me after all this time. That's what it is. And, I'm dying now. Prim's a demon or dragon or something, and I'm dying. What a horrible day this turned out to be. Chased by goblins – again. Attacked by the stupidest fire-breathing lizard ever. Well, at least I'll be with the spirits before the goblins come down and decide to stew me after all. I'll be sure to thump that hummingbird a good one.*

“Hang on, Hot-Tits!” Prim said as if from far away. “I’ve got you!”

*Right. You had me real good as you knocked me off a cliff and got me killed.*

Prim spoke words Tia did not understand. She heard a *whoosh* sound, and a light shone through her eyelids. She opened her eyes to find herself engulfed in blue flame. Rather than burn her, though, the fire soothed her pain. Her breathing eased as she felt ribs move back into position and knit together. Her limbs strengthened and healed, the cuts closing and the bruises fading.

The flames died down. Tia looked at Prim.

“Thank goodness,” the latter said, tears in her eyes. “I thought I – ” she stopped, unable to finish.

Tia looked around. She was in a circle of black, the fires Prim had used to heal Tia having burned the ground around her. Prim was on her knees, her hands pressed into the ground. A line of scorch marks from the circle ended at where Prim's hands met the ground.

The warrior examined Prim. Her wings were still out, though they seemed a bit battered from whatever tumble Prim had taken on landing. And yet, her hair was full and perfect. And it was not just her hair – her skin even seemed flawless. There was dirt on her, certainly, and her clothes were a mess. But she seemed healthier, more vibrant, than ordinary. Even her eyes appeared brighter and more aware.

Tia shook her head. “You thought you had killed me?” she continued Prim's statement. She stood, surprised to find the action felt as normal as ever. “Yeah, I thought so, too. Throwing us off the cliff like that...” She glared at Prim. “You mind telling me about those?” She pointed at Prim's wings.

The redhead looked at one wing, then the other. “Honestly, I had never seen them before,” she said. Tia scoffed.

“Honestly'. Interesting word choice. This a first for you?”

Prim recoiled as if physically struck. “Hot-Tits – ” she began.

“Oh, we're back to 'Hot-Tits' now, are we?”

With a sigh, Prim looked up at the sky and brought a hand to her face. “We need to move,” she said after a moment.

“We do? To where?” Tia asked.

“It does not matter. But first...” She closed her eyes in concentration. Her wings folded and shrank into her back, vanishing. Her hair dulled slightly and became frazzled. In moments, she was her old self again.

She brushed her arms. “There. I must say, that took more effort than I remember.”

“Deigning to mingle with us mere mortals again?” Tia asked.

“Oh, pish-posh already,” Prim said irritably. “I am a gnome, Hot-Tits. I am still Primiphi Piltrum Stannumshard. I am a pewterer, a bard, and the exceptionally humble owner of the world's most exquisite ass.” She tried a smile at that.

“And a dragon,” Tia said flatly, crossing her arms.

Prim bit her tongue, taking a moment to catch herself. “Come on, then,” she finally said, turning and walking away from the bridge where, many feet above, the goblins on one side were still trying to figure out exactly what had happened to their kinky fun gnome-involved plans for the evening while the goblins on the other fled for their lives from an angry giant fiery lizard.

In the ashes where Prim had healed Tia, new flowers stuck their stems out of the soil.

The pair traveled for an hour before they said another word – or even looked at one another – again.

“When I was poisoned in that basement,” Tia finally began, “in what’s-his-name’s place.”

“I remember,” Prim said simply.

“Why didn’t you heal me then?”

“You were poisoned. I have not the power to cure poisons.”

“Oh,” Tia said, lamely. “Well, why didn’t you spread your wings and fly us out instead of making me stagger out, with you half-dragging me?”

“I told you before. The wings are new to me.”

“What do you mean, ‘new’?”

Prim regarded Tia with an annoyed expression. “‘New’ as in I had never sprouted them before.”

“How can that be, if you’re a dragon?”

“Are you intentionally being obtuse?” Prim demanded. “I told you, I am a gnome! Have you noticed my beautiful skin, Hot-Tits?” She pinched an arm to demonstrate.

Tia scowled. “And how can I believe you don’t have scales when you can clearly hide your wings? I’m surprised you didn’t pop out horns and a tail.”

“Do you really think so little of me after all this time?” Prim asked.

“I don’t know you,” Tia said. “I thought I had an idea. And I know you always tweak your stories. But, like an idiot, I believed there was truth in there.”

Prim’s eyes narrowed. She spoke in a cold tone. “You are one to talk. You think you have no idea about me? What about you?”

“What do you mean?” Tia asked defensively.

“You never speak of yourself. I open myself up and share my life, but I get nothing in return. I know nothing about your past. Absolutely nothing! Not a thing about your family. Nothing about who taught you, or how you learned, or why you left your home. Nothing about what you did between setting out on your own and meeting me. Not even what tribe you are from. Nothing.

“And you give me not one word about what it is that hurt you so much you will not even let me in. Yes, Tia,” she said as the other flinched. “I know you are hurt. I let you get away with your silence because I can see you so plainly carry a great pain. I have given you time and respected your space, because I want you to heal. I want that more than anything.”

Tia, who looked away while fighting a growing feeling of shame at Prim’s accusations, suddenly rounded on her angrily. “Oh, you worried about my pain, did you?” she snarled. “You were so concerned for me you kept your dragon nature hidden away! Can’t let your Hot-Tits know your ace in the hole. Tell me: How many times could you have kept us from getting stripped and tied up and all the rest? All these games you play, getting me into trouble. I stupidly thought you were in trouble right alongside me, but all this time, you’re laughing inside at the hapless mortal!”

Prim balled her hands into fists as Tia spoke, her arms straight down, her anger threatening to overwhelm her. “You are ... so ... *dense!*” she sputtered, stamping her foot angrily and nearly shouting the last word. Suddenly, she staggered back as if in shock. “Oh. I see, now.”

“See what, dare I ask?” Tia asked.

“Someone betrayed your trust,” Prim said without thinking. She immediately put a hand to her mouth as if she could put the words back in.

Tia stepped forward to stand right in front of her, her face inches from Prim's. “You don't know anything!” she snarled. “That much you were right about! For all your fancy speechifying and stories and songs, at the end of the day you know nothing!” She turned and stomped away.

“Hot-Tits,” Prim said gently. “I am sor – ”

“You said it didn't matter where we went,” Tia said.

“Yes, but – ”

“Fine. You go that way.” Tia pointed to the left. “I'll go this way.” She continued toward the right.

“Hot-Tits?” Prim asked, stunned.

Tia stopped and turned. “If it doesn't matter, then who cares which of us goes where? You go your way, I'll go mine.”

“But – ”

“I'm sure your demon or dragon or whatever nature will let you survive until you get you to wherever it is you're going. It's not as if you ever have anywhere in mind, anyway. You can then find some new patsy to drag into your particular kind of trouble and listen to your constant nattering.” She resumed walking away.

Prim stood frozen for a moment, unable to do anything more than watch. Finally, she stirred. “Please, wait!” she cried, stepping after Tia.

But Tia merely pointed again, not looking back. “Go!” she called out.

Prim stopped in her tracks. “Do not leave me,” she called out. When Tia did not respond but trudged on, she added softly, “I don't want to be alone. Not again.” Tears streamed down her face.

Tia kept walking. Prim watched, hoping against hope.

Soon, however, she passed out of Prim's sight.

With a sob, she turned and stumbled, blinded by tears, away from her Hot-Tits.

## Adventure 7

Prim put one foot in front of the other.

That was all her mind could process. One foot forward. Other foot forward. Left foot. Right foot.

Where she was going, she could not have told anyone. She did not know, herself. She knew, on an instinctive level, that she had veered from her initial path to move directly away from where she had revealed her hidden power to Tia.

After all, the further away from Him, the better. The quicker, the better.

But, was it really better? she wondered. At the end of it all, without Hot-Tits, does it matter anymore?

At some point, the tears had stopped. Not that she had felt like doing anything more productive than curling up and crying until the end of time. No, they had stopped because she simply had run out.

It was only the single idea of getting away that kept her moving.

“I don't want to be alone. Not again,” she had said as Tia walked away. And now, here she was, alone.

And she knew of one being who was still eager for her company. She shuddered at the thought. No, she was not ready to see Him again.

“After all, being with Him is really being alone, after all,” she reasoned aloud.

She continued onward, her mind numb. Every now and again, images of Tia would flash in her mind. Prim would reel as if struck when this happened. Then, her arms clutching one another tight as if to literally hold herself together, she would straighten and resume her journey.

Left foot. Right foot.

Dance steps came to mind, and she mentally clutched at them with the eagerness of a starving man for a morsel of food. She determined to go through every dance she knew. Anything to keep her mind away from what had just happened.

But then the memory of dancing for Tia before the campfire came to mind, and she crumpled again.

*I know where you are, Little Thief.*

She nearly shrieked at His voice in her mind.

Wiping sweat off her brow, she stood and broke into a jog. Yes, the further away, the better.

*You always were so unpredictable. From the moment we first met, you managed to surprise me. That is why you are my greatest treasure. But you are still a mortal.*

Her emotional state had left her mind open to Him, she realized. Could He feel her presence even now? Or was He lying, trying to trick her into giving herself up?

*And mortals cannot resist using power, any power, for long. Even you, Little Thief. Sooner or later, I knew you would have to show yourself. It was inevitable.*

She broke into a run.

*Why do you keep going?*

“You know why,” she answered aloud. She heard His laughter.

*Is here where you foolish notion of “love” comes in?*

“True love is not foolish, even if the lovers themselves are,” Prim said, laughing. “You always underestimated love. But my love of life is what gave me the power to leave you, was it not?”

She heard his roar of rage in her mind at the reminder. *You always did have such a strange fascination with love and beauty. More than any mortal I've known. "Life always finds a way," you told me. "That is why it is the greatest beauty of all." Well, are you feeling beautiful now, Little Thief?*

"Go away."

*Was it for love you revealed yourself to me?*

Prim did not answer. He laughed again.

*So, it was. Whom do you love? Was it worth it, knowing I am coming to collect you, Little Thief?*

She felt tears flowing down her cheeks again but did not answer.

*Once again, you prove me right. Your "love" will lead you right back to me.*

A surge of defiance arose within her. "You are wrong," she said. "As you always have been."

*Perhaps. Perhaps not. You still have a choice, Little Thief. Will you hold to your precious belief and let me catch you at last? Or will you finally admit I am right, and your mortal "love" is nothing more than a delusion and a weight pulling you down? Which path will you choose?*

"You know my answer. I will not kill myself." She stopped running and gave a wry smile, knowing he would feel it. "I made a bargain, after all."

He laughed. *So you did, Little Thief.*

She closed her eyes. With a deep breath, she focused and shut her mind to him again.

And then she ran.

Night fell, and she slowed down to a jog. Her body was telling her she was hungry and thirsty and just plain exhausted, but she did not dare stop. Every mile, every foot even, was precious now.

The moon, only at the quarter, set. She continued jogging under the stars. She had wandered for so long, often at night, she could see quite well on such a clear night even with the moon no longer shining down.

She looked back from where she had come, and her heart froze. A blue light flashed out in the distance.

Looking around wildly, she found a patch of bushes and dove in. Trembling, hardly able to move from either exhaustion or terror or both, she slowly peered out.

She had run far from the hills where the goblins were and into an open stretch of grassland. And back at the hills, lines of blue flames shot from the sky, as He flew back and forth, breathing fire in His rage.

Prim watched as the flames stopped, then, an unknown amount of time later, flames shot up from the ground. Though she could not see the hill for another ridge in between, she knew he had landed at the goblins and was demanding they point him to her.

She had no delusions the goblins would protect her. However, in the chaos and madness, perhaps they had lost track of her and Tia.

She blanched. Tia! What if the goblins pointed Him to her?

*The bargain would hold, she thought. Surely it would.*

He would figure out Tia was the reason Prim had revealed herself. How could He not? Could she risk Tia's life?

And she found herself running back. What she hoped to do, she could not have said. Her only thought was getting back to see – to know – that her Hot-Tits was safe.

As she ran, she kept watching the ridge, hoping to see His fire indicating He was still busy intimidating goblins. She focused on it so intently, she paid little attention to her path.

"He seems angry," a would-be casual voice behind her said.

Prim stumbled to a halt, shock running through her. She turned.

Tia was standing, leaning against a tree, arms lazily crossed. She had obviously seen Prim running up and had waited for her.

“H-Hot-Tits?” Prim asked weakly.

“Can you believe it? I finally get away from you, and then I immediately missed your constant nattering,” Tia said. She shrugged. “Who could have expected *that*?”

As Prim struggled to recover her breath, Tia stepped away from the tree to stand a few feet in front her. They looked one another over, both feeling awkward at this sudden meeting.

Finally, Tia gave a sheepish grin.

“You're the weaver, of course.”

“Tappisier,” Prim said automatically. Tia let out a short laugh.

“Tappisier, weaver. Whatever.” She hesitated. “I should have figured it out sooner,” she finally admitted. “And using your powers – your *stolen* powers – lit a signal beacon for our irate friend with the over-dramatic entrance, didn't it?”

Prim found herself unable to speak, swallowed anxiously, and nodded.

“So typical of you,” Tia said. “Act first, worry about consequences later. It'll all work out, right? Though I suppose I should not complain, seeing as you saved my life.” She gave a nervous grin, then rolled her eyes to the sky and sighed, hands on her hips.

“Tekuvode,” she said, still looking up.

“Come again?” Prim asked, confused.

“That is my tribe. Tekuvode: The People of the Rushing Waters.” She met Prim's gaze. “Now you know something about me.”

Prim stared a moment, open-mouthed. And then she laughed and rushed into Tia's arms, bursting into tears. They stood there, hugging each other, for several moments.

“Why didn't you tell me?” Tia asked.

“I was afraid you would get all hot-headed and leave me,” Prim said.

“Now, why would you think a silly thing that?” Tia asked with a laugh. She paused, then continued in a lower voice. “I'm so sorry. You were right about me. Not just about my past, but how I would react. I knew you were thinking I would stomp away, and I was furious *because* you were right. I – I – ” she faltered.

Prim gently put her hand on Tia's cheek. “And then you turned right around and came after me,” she said. “I should have known you would – you always have. I am sorry I forgot that.”

Tia took Prim's hand in her own. “Great. We're a sorry pair of idiots,” she said with a grin. “Meanwhile, your ex-boyfriend over there – ” she jerked a thumb toward the hill in question – “seems to be throwing quite the tantrum. A rather possessive fellow, is he?”

“Yes, he is,” Prim said, her terror returning after having been pushed aside by the reunion. She started trembling again. “I thought He would go after you.”

Tia hesitated a moment, contemplative. “That explains why you were running back to me, then,” she finally said.

“And you to me,” Prim said. Her brows furrowed in confusion. “It has been nighttime for quite a while. How is it you were able to track me so well?”

Tia shrugged. “It wasn't hard at all. Simplest thing ever, in fact. You clearly immediately veered to run directly away from the ...” she nearly said *dragon* and swiftly changed tack “... goblins' home. I know you hate hills, because you every time you complain about them loudly and constantly. So all I had to do was find the easiest, laziest path and – ow!” She rubbed her arm where Prim had punched it, grinning. “No need to get fussy,” she playfully said.

But Prim did not seem inclined to play. “It is your own fault. You went and ruined a perfectly good re–” she began, but she stopped when Tia put a hand on her shoulder and squeezed affectionately. Their eyes locked, and Prim saw an intensity she had never before seen in Tia's. The bard felt her fears slip away as she looked into them.

“Thank you, Prim,” Tia said. “For understanding me. For forgiving me. And now, we're in this together. Though,” her eyes twinkled with mirth as the corner of her mouth twitched, “I must say, this batch of your particular kind of trouble is quite impressive, even for you.”

For one of the few times in her life, Prim found herself unable to speak. Tia found she did not need Prim to say anything and simply nodded in understanding.

A light flashed off to the side. They turned to face the goblin hill. Standing together, each with an arm around the other, they watched the blue light of the dragon's rage burn over the ridge.

## Adventure 8

The ridge glowed once more from the dragon's flames. Prim squeezed Tia again. The barbarian suddenly felt the strange anger from before rise up inside.

*Stop it, she thought. I don't know what the problem is, but right now is not the time.*  
And then, unbidden, more visions of her past came to her.

\*\*\*\*\*

*The young she-gnome stood on the small log, swinging a sword. The log shifted in the rut it was in. She waved an arm like a windmill, then recovered. With a sigh, she resumed her practice.*

*"Relax, Little One," her Teacher said. "Quit thinking so much. You know the forms. Just go through them."*

*"Yes, I know them," the young Tia said, grunting as the sword arced through the air. "But it is not the forms I am worried about, Teacher."*

*"Warriors need balance. Like any other skill, if you want to get better, you practice."*

*Tia swung the sword fiercely. The log shifted again. "Woa!" she said, dropping the sword and tumbling off. "Oof," she grunted as she hit the turf.*

*"Yes. Practice." He sighed, scratching the back of his head. "Lots of practice."*

*Blushing, Tia dusted herself off, picked up her sword, and jumped back on the log. It once again shifted, her boot slipped, and she fell back off. "Ow!" she cried as she landed on her rump.*

*"Lots and lots of practice."*

*Grumbling under her breath, Tia carefully climbed back onto the log and began her form. "This is just so silly," she complained.*

*"Not everything you are bad at is silly, Little One," he said.*

*"Right, like dancing?"*

*He chuckled. "The way you did it, yes, that was silly." Seeing her expression darken, he added, "but that is simply because you do not practice. I know you want to do so much, Little One, and it speaks well of you. But when you focus on some skills, others will lag behind."*

*"So, I need to balance," Tia said, frowning.*

*"Exactly. Balance on the log, balance what you learn, balance in life." He kicked the log.*

*She staggered and stumbled, tumbling off once again. He sighed. "This clearly will take a while. Perhaps we can work on a different form of balance, then," he said, offering her a hand up. Blushing again, she took it. "What is your knack?" he asked.*

*She looked away and sheathed her sword. "My knack? Well, it's nothing."*

*"Come now," he said sternly. "Every gnome has a knack, and no gnome's knack is nothing!"*

*Tia rolled her eyes. "Great, here comes another lecture."*

*He dropped down and swept her legs, sending her onto her back. He put his foot on her chest. "I agreed to teach you, Little One," he said, eyes blazing down at her. "That means I teach; you listen. I ask; you answer. If I am to make a warrior of you, I need to know everything you bring with you. That means if your knack is to produce sparks from your ears or to summon a leaf to wipe yourself after going behind a tree, you tell me. You hide no skill or ability from me, understand?"*

*She nodded. "Yes, Teacher."*

*"Good." He stepped off her and helped her back to her feet again. "Let's try that again. What is your knack?"*

*"It's just so ... shameful," she said, shaking her head.*

\*\*\*\*\*

Back with Prim, Tia saw another flame light the sky.

"How are we doing this?" she asked aloud. "What is he bringing to the fight? Fire, obviously. Wings and a tail are always fun to work with. Doubtless more fangs than I would care to count. Probably able to see like a hawk, smell like a hound. Every physical advantage out there, in other words, is his." She grinned in a grim sort of way, the anger abating as her attention moved to the upcoming battle.

Prim shook her head. "We cannot beat Him," she said sadly.

"Hey, that's no way to talk before a fight!" Tia chided lightheartedly. "Where's the crazy Prim who goes into any situation with reckless cheer?"

"You are not strong enough yet," Prim said morosely. "I did not come back to you so we may fight Him."

"Then why did you?"

"To ensure you would be safe. I could not stand the thought of losing ..." she trailed off. "Well, it does not matter. You will be fine on your own. I have never met anyone more capable –"

"Oh, pull yourself together!" Tia said, taking a step back and putting her hands on Prim's shoulders. "We're not finished yet!"

"But we cannot win –"

"To think, the ever-scheming Prim is at a loss!" Tia laughed. "I never imagined I would see the day you would be ready to give up so easily!"

"What can we do, though? You have no idea of His power!" Prim shuddered. "I was His pet for years, Hot-Tits. I know of His power all too well."

Tia cupped Prim's cheek in her hand. "And yet, you managed to defeat him. You got away."

"I was lucky –"

"Nonsense. Think about what you did. Come on, ya ninny, it's right there." She sniffed the air. "Yes, not far at all."

"What are you going on about, Hot-Tits?"

\*\*\*\*\*

*"Good, Little One. You almost make me think you will eventually come close to falling off only ninety-eight times out of a hundred instead of ninety-nine."*

*Back on the log, the young Tia shook her head. "Your compliments always inspire, Teacher."*

*He laughed. "Your balance is improving. Is that enough of a compliment for you?"*

*She grinned. "Thank you, Teacher." She resumed her sword practice.*

*After a few minutes, he nodded. "Yes, you're definitely improving. I doubt balance will ever be your strong suite, but at least we can keep you on your feet most of the time. Maybe even long enough to keep you alive. Maybe not."*

*"Such cheer, Teacher."*

*He laughed again. "Now, how about your knack? We've not discussed it for a month. Have you been practicing as I told you?"*

*"Yes, yes," she said, swinging her sword angrily. It slipped out of her grip, flying away. Instinctively, she turned to try and grab at it. Her foot slipped, and she fell off the log again.*

*"That one looked like it hurt," he said simply, walking to retrieve her sword.*

*"More than looked it," she said, rubbing her head.*

*"It seems you still don't like your knack," he said,*

*"It's so ... cowardly!" She slammed her fists on the ground.*

*He walked to her and helped her up. "Little One, why are you training?" She looked away. "We both know you want to help and protect others. You want to be strong for everyone else. It's a noble desire. But strength is not the only way to defend what you love. Birds fly in flocks, their colors distracting predators from their friends. Their power is not in strength, but in deception." He held out the sword. "Understand?"*

*She took the sword distractedly, brows furrowed in thought. "Maybe," she said, shaking her head. With a determined look on her face, she hopped back on the log, stumbling only slightly. She began the form again.*

\*\*\*\*\*

“This way!” Tia cried, dashing off. Prim quickly caught up to her. “I smelt it as I returned to you,” the warrior explained.

“Smelt what?” Prim asked.

Tia sniffed the air again. “A bog, of course.”

“Eww!” Prim shuddered and stopped. “And why would we run *toward* one of those foul, nasty, disgusting, putrid –”

Tia grabbed her arm and yanked her along. “Don't stop, ninny! We've barely got time as it is!”

“Time for what?”

“An alternative to fighting.”

“Since when does my Hot-Tits avoid fights?” Prim asked. “This is highly irregular!”

They ran for several minutes. Prim could finally smell the bog. She frowned. “I must give you the edge in olfactory modality, Hot-Tits,” she said. “I only just detected the nauseating, revolting, sickening bog.” She pondered as they ran. “It just occurred to me 'bog' is a fitting term. The fewer letters used – the less said of it – the better.”

Tia laughed. “I can see the water,” she said. “It's not far now.”

“So, you brought us to this thing because ...?” Prim prompted.

“You said we can't win by fighting,” Tia said. “And you had this foolish notion of letting your winged lover boy take you away, leaving me behind.” She turned to glare at Prim as they ran. “I told you we're in this together,” she said. “That means I'm not letting him take you away from me.”

Before Prim could reply, the warrior stopped. Prim skidded to a halt beside her. “No matter the smell,” Tia added.

“Ugh, why did you bring us here?” Prim asked, putting her hands over her nose.

“Quit fussing and jump in,” Tia said.

“Are you insane?” Prim cried.

“Probably should shout louder,” Tia said. “He might not have heard that.”

“There is no way I am getting into that filth,” Prim said in a low hiss.

“Fine. Go back to lover boy. Fly away to his bed. I hear he likes it warmed by vain gnomes.”

“Not funny.”

“Wasn't meant to be.” Tia hitched a thumb toward the mire. “Get in.”

Prim sighed and turned to the muddy water. She slowly dipped a toe in, then drew it back.

“No. No, I cannot do this,” she said, shuddering again.

“And here I thought you wanted to know more about me,” Tia said, grinning.

Prim spun around at that. “Wait, what has this foul mud to do with you?” she demanded.

“Get in, and you'll see.”

“See what?”

“My knack,” Tia said simply. And she shoved Prim backwards into the muck.

\*\*\*\*\*

*A she-gnome wearing an apron and wielding a rolling pin ran out of the house. “Dagnabbit, bring back my cobbler!” she yelled as she stopped beside a blackberry bush. “You young rascals! I'll find you and give your backsides a good beating!” She looked around angrily, then turned and walked into the house, slamming the door behind her.*

*After a few minutes, a section of the bush rustled and moved. The brambles withdrew into the main part of the bush, revealing a young Tia and her teacher crouching. They were both wearing various sticks and grasses stuck into their clothes to help camouflage them.*

*“Looks like the coast is clear,” Tia said.*

*“You have been practicing, Little One,” he said, grabbing a handful of cobbler from the pan in his hand and taking a bite.*

*“Yes, Teacher,” she replied, smiling and helping herself to the dessert.*

*“I'd say you passed this test quite well.”*

*"Thank you, Teacher," she said. "And you were right."  
"I am right about lots of things," he said, grinning as they started walking away. "Which was it this time?"  
"Just about my knack and protecting others."  
He smiled and patted her shoulder.  
"Glad you figured it out," he said. "We'll change your focus when it comes to your knack. From now on, practice it a quarter of an hour a day. The rest of the hour, work on hiding without your knack."  
"Without it?"  
"Yes. I won't have you relying solely on your knack. You've the ability to be far more resourceful than that."  
The two continued walking, enjoying their treasure.  
"What's next, Teacher?" Tia finally asked.  
"Next, we polish off this tasty treat, of course. And then you pick enough blackberries to fill the pan back up."  
Tia looked at him in surprise. "What? Why?"  
"Well, you stole her cobbler. It only makes sense you gather more blackberries for her in recompense."  
"Wait, you did the stealing!" she said.  
He waved her off. "Ah, but you did the hiding. And it was all part of your training."  
"Training you came up with!"  
"Yes. And your next lesson involves picking berries."  
She frowned at him. "I have a feeling my lesson today is never to trust your smile again."  
He flashed her the aforementioned smile. "Passing two tests in one day? Well done, Little One."*

\*\*\*\*\*

Prim went under with a splash. She surfaced, coughing and retching. "Hot-Tits!" she cried, slapping the water angrily. This proved unfortunate, as she managed to splash water back into her own face.

And then another splash washed over her as Tia, laughing, jumped in beside her. The warrior stood, spitting out some of the water.

"Yes, it tastes as bad as it smells," she said, grinning.

"I have already got mud in places I would rather not," Prim said grumpily. "I should have gone back to Him when I had the chance." Tia laughed again and pulled her to her feet.

"Come on, ninny," she said, wading into the mire.

"What has this to do with your knack?" Prim asked, reluctantly following and trying vainly to get her soaked hair to behave.

"You'll see." Tia looked back at her, grinning. "Let's just hope lover boy doesn't." She stepped further into the muck, using all her skill to find them something of a solid path. As she walked, she plucked various stalks of grass or twigs floating in the water.

"You are being as clear as this filth you dumped me into," Prim said as she followed. "At least it is night," she muttered. "There is less light to show how horrible I must look."

As they struggled through the rough terrain, Tia looked about, searching anxiously. Prim noticed.

"Please tell me your knack is not getting us stuck pointlessly in the mud," she said, eyebrow raised.

"We need a place to escape through," Tia said.

“Oh, we should escape? Then let us slowly trudge through a stinky, disgusting – ”

“There we go!” Tia said, changing her course.

“And just what are you... oh.” She had spotted a rotted log half in the water which Tia was making for. “Well, I think I see where you are going with this.” She shook her head. “He will spot that in an instant, Hot-Tits.”

“I know,” the warrior said. She got to the log and crawled partway into one end, then back crawled out. “That is why we are going over there.” She pointed to a tiny patch of feeble brown grass which clearly was losing the fight for survival.

“That's twenty feet across the water,” Prim said.

“Better get swimming!” Tia pushed off the edge of the log. “And try not to leave any prints!”

“You speak as if I have never hidden in my life,” Prim said.

“Wait, are you saying you're a sneaky one? I wouldn't have ever imagined it!”

Prim stuck her tongue out, instantly regretting it as she tasted the muck on her lips. “Ugh,” she complained again. She imitated Tia, climbing into the log before kicking out into the water.

They quickly swam to the grass. Tia began shoving the bits of grass and sticks she had gathered into her hair and top the moment she reached it.

“Ack! You are *not* putting that in my gorgeous hair!” Prim complained as Tia began doing just that.

“Lucky us, your gorgeous hair isn't here,” Tia said, threading a twig into the muddy locks.

“Fine, fine. It will be worth it to see my Hot-Tits's knack.” She raised her eyebrow again. “Though I am beginning to guess what it is.”

“Good,” Tia said, adding the final leaf to Prim's top. “Because we have no time to spare.” She pointed toward the ridge. “The light show has stopped. Our friend will be on his way soon.”

She pulled Prim down into the water beside the clump of grass. “Stay close,” she told the bard. “And stay still.”

She turned to the grass. Holding her hand out, she snapped her fingers. She reached over and grasped the grass, then pulled.

Prim watched as the grass blurred, seeming to double and triple, as Tia pulled it over them. Even the ground seemed to follow, extending out past them. It appeared to Prim they were now kneeling buried up to their shoulders in the ground, even as she could feel the water around her. The grasses spread over and about them, concealing the pair better than Prim could have envisioned.

“Impressive,” she whispered.

Tia grinned. “I used to think it cowardly to hide,” she whispered back.

“And now?”

“Now, I'm glad my Teacher had the foresight to knock some sense into me.”

They fell silent, looking back where the dragon would approach when He arrived.

The seconds slipped by. The pair continued their silent vigil. Tia's mind was focused on the threat. Prim, however, found her own thoughts scattered.

*I should be frantic, with Him so near, she thought. He has always had that effect on me since my escape. So why am I so calm now?*

She looked at Tia. The warrior continued to gaze toward where they had been, her eyes blazing. Though she was the prey, she was still in her element. Hiding, yet ready to strike. She held herself absolutely still; nonetheless, Prim felt the tension in her, ready to be released the moment need arose.

*My need*, she realized. Tia was ready to throw everything into protecting her. “We’re in this together,” the warrior had said earlier, during their reunion. And she had repeated it as they ran to the bog.

Prim slipped her hand into Tia’s. The warrior glanced down at them, then over to her. Their eyes met.

“Together,” Prim whispered, smiling her first genuine smile since she had revealed her hidden power.

Tia’s face lit up in a smile of her own. “Glad to have you back,” she whispered, squeezing Prim’s hand.

“I have been such a fool, letting Him get into my head,” Prim said. “But no more.”

“Good. Because I rather like your silly head the way it is.”

As they smiled at each other, a shadow across the stars caught their attention. They looked back and saw the dragon landing where they had first entered the mire.