

Prim & Tia's Adventures

By: Wyland

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.