

Prim & Tia in "A Salty Tail"

By: Wyland

"Truly, you have been a remarkable group of scoundrels and drunkards!" Prim said to the crowd, bowing to all points. "Thank you! Thank you!"

The people in the bar laughed and cheered, with many raising mugs toward the gnome. Prim hopped off the table and, with a last wave, bounded over to a corner booth. She effortlessly slid all the way to the end, her back against the wall, her feet up on the cushions.

"Well, Hot-Tits, how did I do?" she asked.

Tia, seated across from her, pushed a mug over to her. "I'd say you did just fine," she said. "The place isn't burning down, and the crowd is not chasing us out."

The pair laughed, clinked mugs, and drank. "I must say, sitting here watching you earn us room and board is much easier than our usual wilderness wanderings," Tia said. "A gal could get used to it."

A man walked over to their booth. "Excuse me," he began, "but me and a friend was just wonderin' about yer face markings. Got a bet, ya see."

"They mean I'm fierce and tolerate no idiocy," Tia growled, glaring at him.

Flustered, he babbled out an apology and stepped away.

"Sociable as always," Prim observed, grinning. Tia did not respond.

"So," Prim said after a few seconds, "about those cute marks on your face "

"I'd advise you to find another subject," Tia said before raising her mug again.

Prim laughed lightly. "Very well, my Hot-Tits. You know, I heard rumor of ship going down recently with a special treasure. It was not far off land, they think."

"Oh? And what's that got to do with us?"

Prim smiled broadly, eyes excited. "The man talking spoke of a special pearl, what he called a Pearl of Wonder, being lost with the ship. That sounds astoundingly fascinating, Hot-Tits! Pearls are such lovely objects, anyway. What beauty could cause such an item to be labeled 'Wonder'? I must see!"

Tia frowned. "So, a treasure hunt, is it? Under the sea?" She scoffed. "How do you expect to search for it? Do you even know where the ship went down?"

"Vaguely," Prim said. "No one is certain, which is why no one has found it yet. But I know a way for us to be able to search the seafloor ourselves! We could swim over and take our time, looking under every nook and cranny!"

"And just how would we do this?" Tia asked, then brought a hand to her forehead, rubbing her temples. "Good gods, I actually asked..."

Prim giggled. "I know a the potion that would help us. Think of it, Hot-Tits," she implored. "There is doubtless a race on to find it, or soon will be. We could win it! We could be the first, and everyone will give us the greatest accolades!"

The warrior cocked an eyebrow. "You do realize I know you're playing me?" she asked.

"Naturally," Prim answered.

Tia rolled her eyes. "Fine. What's your plan to find it?"

"Yay!" Prim threw her arms around Tia happily. "Oh, it will be such fun! Wait right here! I can get my hands on it in no time at all! No, better, go to the pier – I shall meet you there!"

“Why do I feel this will not end well?” Tia asked as Prim excitedly pranced out of the bar.

An hour later, Tia walked along the pier and found Prim already sitting on a bollard, her feet swinging over the water. She was singing cheerfully, swaying along to the tune, as she looked up at the clouds, her hair blowing in the wind. A small bag which the warrior took to contain whatever concoctions Prim had planned for the pair of them rested on the pier below her.

Tia stopped and took a moment to watch and listen to her companion, a smile on her face. Whatever else could be said of Prim, she thought, her friend at least had the ability to spread cheer and simple joy.

She approached Prim, her boots stomping on the pier and her face back to her usual dour expression she tended to wear around Prim when the bard was clearly getting her into mischief.

“You know,” the bard said, interrupting her song, “gnomes really should be less noisy than that, what with us being so light.” She looked over, smiling still. “Or is that just your preferred method of announcing yourself?”

Tia grunted and stood beside her. Looking out at the water, she saw several ships and a number of boats out in the harbor. “Seems we are not the only ones on this mad venture,” she said.

“Yes, they do have a bit of a head start,” Prim said. “Though I do think we have the more effective methodology in mind.” She hopped down and lifted the small bag between them, and Tia heard a slight clink as the objects inside shifted about.

“You mean to go through with it, then,” Tia said.

“Is there any doubt?” Prim asked airily as she opened up the bag.

“No, not really,” Tia admitted, looking at the contents. She saw two ceramic vials large enough to more than fill her hand. “These seem human-sized,” she noted.

“That is nothing to worry about,” Prim said, taking one and handing the other to Tia.

“Which is my cue to do so,” Tia said, frowning and looking at the vial. She noted arcane runes painted onto its side. “You can read those, right?” she asked, one eyebrow raised skeptically.

“Pish-posh, Hot-Tits,” Prim said distractedly as she struggled to work the stopper off her vial. “You should know me well enough by now.”

“I’m afraid I do,” Tia said, opening her own. She sniffed the contents suspiciously. “So, you’re sure these will let us breathe underwater?”

“I am almost practically nearly certain,” Prim answered as her stopper finally popped off. “More or less.”

“Your confidence is comforting,” Tia said dryly.

“Is it not always? Now, onward to discovery and new beauty as yet never beheld by gnomish eyes!” she said, her eyes shining with an eager light. She held up the vial. “Bottoms up, Hot-Tits!”

“Hey, wait a moment!” Tia said. “I’m not entirely sold on this.”

“Are you backing out now?” Prim asked.

“Well, no ...” Tia trailed off. “It’s just, well, being underwater so long: Are you sure it’s safe?”

“Magic is useful that way,” Prim said, grinning. “We shall be fine!”

“And what if the potion runs out while we’re at the bottom?”

Prim raised the vial up again. “These things always let you know. It is sort of feeling you get. We will know when it is time to surface.”

“And if we're out yonder?” Tia gestured toward the open sea.

“What has gotten into you?” Prim asked, curious. “You seem determined to worry yourself into a fit. I have always been under the impression my Hot-Tits was brave and bold.”

Tia glared at her. “Oh, going to play that game, are you?”

“It virtually always works.”

They locked eyes, the proud warrior's and the mirthful bard's. A brief yet playful battle of wills ensued. Tia felt she should simply refuse to play along with another one of Prim's silly games and insist they move on to the next town – or at the least, not go along without putting up at least the pretense of a fight.

For her part, Prim simply waited for Tia to sort everything out and agree with her. As usual.

Finally, Tia looked back out to sea with a chuckle. “I know I'm going to regret this.” She raised her vial to her lips and quickly drank it. Smiling with glee, Prim followed suit.

“Ugh, that flavor was somewhat less than what one would ordinarily consider pleasant,” she said after finishing.

Tia stoppered her bottle and set it in the bag. “Since you're the know-it-all, care to explain why potions always taste so terrible?”

“I think it is a trade secret. No one would want to mimic anything so foul.”

They giggled, then both froze. “I don't feel so good,” Tia said. “Is this supposed to make me queasy?”

“I have no idea,” Prim said, wincing.

“I thought you knew what this stuff did?”

“I did not say I ever – ahhhh – experienced it,” Prim said through gritted teeth.

“Are you about to hurl?” Tia asked.

“Are you?”

“Yes.”

“You shan't be alone, then.”

They quickly leaned over the side of the pier. However, the pain in their stomachs soon moved downward, their hips and legs and even their feet feeling as though they were being squeezed in a vice.

Finally, after a few seconds which felt quite longer, the pressure relaxed. They sighed, staring down at the water below and catching their breath.

“That ... was not fun,” Prim said.

“You can say that again,” Tia agreed.

They watched the waves below them in silence. Finally, Tia sighed.

“Come on,” she said. “We best get started.”

“Do you feel you can breathe underwater?” Prim asked.

“Haven't the foggiest.” She put her hands on the edge of the pier and moved to stand up, Prim following suit.

They both froze.

“Umm, Prim ...”

“Yes, Hot-Tits?”

“My legs feel ... weird.”

“Most unusual,” Prim said. “Do they feel rather as if they have ... umm ... been replaced?”

“Yes, that's about right.”

They nervously looked at each other.

“Side-effect?” Tia asked.

“It must be,” Prim agreed.

Still, they did not look back.

“This is stupid,” Tia said. “We have to look at ourselves sooner or later.”

“That we do.”

They continued looking at each other for several seconds. “Ruddy hell, we're being silly,” Tia said.

“For declaring our behavior foolish, I notice you are not exactly hurrying to change it,” Prim noted.

“Fine. Together, then?”

Prim nodded. “On my mark. Three. Two. One. Mark...”

They twisted around and looked back. Where their legs should be, they found each had a slender fish tail. The new, scaled appendages extended from their waists all the way to where their toes once were.

The pair stared for a moment, then looked at one another. “Explain,” Tia said simply.

Frowning, Prim picked up one of the vials. “I knew this one rune was strange,” Prim muttered, examining it.

Tia scoffed. “Strange?” she asked. “My ruddy legs are gone!” She tried to stand, then realized her error and merely flopped about pointlessly for a moment. “Dammit, *this* is going to get old fast” she muttered, finally using her arms to raise herself up enough to lean back against a bollard. She glared at Prim. “You mean to tell me you didn't know what a symbol even meant before letting me drink the stuff?”

“It was just one rune,” Prim said, leaning on an elbow and idly tossing the vial and catching it with her other hand.

“Which may very well have changed the entire meaning of – ”

“Pish-posh, Hot-tits. There are many words that mean the same if you add a syllable.”

“Oh? Name one!”

“Flammable' and 'inflammable',” Prim said.

Tia paused. “Name another,” she finally said.

“Regardless' and 'irregardless'.”

“Dammit, Prim, this isn't the time for a lesson in language!” She pointed to their tails. “What are we going to do about *these*?”

Prim's eyes finally lit up as she smiled a smile Tia knew meant more trouble for them both. “I should think it obvious, Hot-Tits: We swim!” She reached out and pulled herself to the edge of the pier.

“How are we supposed to do that? I can't even move with this thing,” Tia protested.

“I am certain we can figure it out. See you in the sea!” Prim said, laughing merrily as she slipped off the wooden platform and dove into the water below.

“Wait, you ninny!” Tia cried. She pulled herself to the edge and looked down in time to get splashed as Prim leapt out of the water, whooping with delight. The bard fell back into the water, then surfaced a moment later.

“Come on in, Hot-Tits!” she called, waving an arm. “The water is fine! More than fine, actually!”

Tia let out a laugh. “Of course,” she said. “Why did I even bother worrying?”

“Because you are a silly worry-wort,” Prim said, splashing water up at her with a giggle.

“Oh, is that so?” Tia grinned wickedly. She grabbed the edge of the pier with both hands. “It is *so* on!” she cried and dove off the side.

“Meep!” Prim shrieked playfully as the warrior splashed beside her. She leapt forward into the water, swimming around Tia as the warrior flailed about upside-down and struggled to understand how to move in her new form. “You can do it, Hot-Tits! It is easy!” Prim encouraged.

“Wait, we can talk underwater, too?”

“Do you not understand the concept of magic?”

Tia managed to get herself right-side up. She gave Prim another wicked grin. “I understand I owe you for splashing me!” she said, darting at the redhead.

Prim let out a squeal of mock-fright and swam away, gracefully dashing around the piles as if she were skiing a slalom. Tia pursued with less technique, bouncing off the columns, but compensated with sheer determination.

Leaving the pier, Prim headed to deeper waters, giggling and waving at Tia, who laughed and redoubled her pursuit. Just as she was about to catch the redhead, Prim changed direction and merrily swam circles around her.

“Is this not amazing?” Prim asked.

“How can we even speak down here?” Tia asked, spinning and trying catch her agile friend.

“The same way we can see!” Prim said. “We are mermaids, Hot-Tits! ... Or would that be mergnomes? Hrm, I wonder,” she paused, fingers on chin in thought.

Tia quickly wrapped both arms around her from behind. “Gotcha!” she said.

“Hey, no fair nabbing me when I am in serious thought!” Prim laughed.

“And here I thought someone once told me 'all is fair'.”

“That is only for when *I* win, silly!” She twisted around to face Tia and put her arms around the warrior's neck. “Though I must say finding myself in your arms is always a win, so I suppose it still counts.”

Tia blushed. “Whatever happened to our treasure hunt?” she asked, seeking to change the subject.

Prim put her head against Tia's shoulder. “I would say I found mine,” she said.

The warrior rolled her eyes. “There's the legendary Prim focus, already forgetting why we drank those ruddy potions. The potions which, if you recall, gave us tails.”

“A most exquisite tail for me!” Prim said, drawing away from Tia to spin and dance, showing off her new curves.

“Hrm, I wonder,” Tia muttered. She reached down and grabbed Prim's tail at the narrow section with one hand, and the other she reached toward Prim's fins.

“Hey!” Prim protested. “What are you doirrrgle mrrgle ...” she trailed off into incoherence, eyes unfocused, as Tia gently stroked and squeezed her fins.

“So, it would seem your sensitive feet are still around, more or less,” Tia said, grinning wickedly.

“Rrrgle,” Prim moaned.

“Ya know, it almost seems your exquisite tail is even more sensitive than your cute little feet ever were.”

“Sooo unfarrrrgle,” Prim complained, hugging herself now.

“Very true, but beside the point,” Tia said.

“Rrrgle mrrrrgle ... ”

“This is all well and fun, and you are ridiculously cute with your hair floating around as aimlessly as your focus,” Tia taunted, stroking Prim's fins and eliciting another incomprehensible moan from Prim. “But perhaps we should resume our treasure hunt.”

She let the redhead go. For a moment, Prim could do little more than struggle for breath. Finally recovering, she gathered up her hair behind her. Tia noticed her hair flame appeared even more as a flame, flowing and billowing in the water.

“Most unlike you, Hot-Tits, to be so distracted when we have such an important activity as we have!” Prim said.

“Hey, I wasn't the one speaking in – ”

“Over there, Hot-Tits!” Prim said as she suddenly swam away. “I can see some debris! Let us check it out!”

Tia chuckled. “Right, let's do that,” she said, following. She caught up to Prim as the redhead rummaged through a few broken planks on the sea floor. “I can't believe I let you talk me into this,” Tia grumbled, joining the search.

“Pish-posh, Hot-Tits. I never have to talk you into anything.”

“Really? Are you saying I jumped at the chance to be turned into a fish – ”

“Mermaid.”

“ – So we could scrounge a vast seabed in the dim hopes of locating this Pearl of Blunder – ”

“Wonder.”

“ – That you doubtless overheard some drunkard rambling on about?”

“Of course you did,” Prim said. They swam away from the mess, scanning the bottom. “You are always eager for adventure, after all.”

“Adventure?” Tia scoffed. “Is that what we're calling all the trouble you cause now?”

“You wound me, Hot-Tits,” Prim said, putting her hands over her heart. “I am just an innocent soul, never causing anything.” (“Ha!”) “Events just sort of happen when I am in the area, due to no fault of my own. I would have you know I am the perfect picture of passivity.”

Tia laughed. “Are you trying to claim the whirlwind – or, rather, *whirlpool*, I suppose – of chaos that constantly spins around you has nothing to do with your behavior?”

“Clearly.”

“Oh, I think I'd love to hear your explanations for our various 'adventures,’” Tia said, grinning. “So, when the goblins caged us?”

“The situation was created by the goblins' behavior, not my own.” She shrugged. “Anyone could be forgiven for having fallen into their devious designs.”

“It was an obvious trap! We had even spotted it was baited with a comic book, in case you forgot, you ninny.”

“As I said: Devious.” Prim noticed a few fish watching them and swam over. “Hello, little ones,” she said. The fish fluttered their fins happily and swarmed around the redhead.

“Making new friends?” Tia asked as she came near.

“It would seem so,” Prim said, reaching out to tickle one of the fish with a smile.

With a chuckle, Tia swam over to what appeared to be an overturned, broken rowboat which had seen better days, and examined it. Prim moved beside her, a few of the fish still around the redhead.

“And when the crowd mistook you for a witch?” Tia resumed their earlier conversation.

“They started it,” Prim answered, running a hand through the silt around the boat. “I was just enjoying the fine fair with my Hot-Tits. The next thing I know, they are confusing me with someone else.”

“Who just happened to be you from a previous visit,” Tia laughed.

“I told you, that was a simple misunderstanding.”

“Sure, sure. And what about the time with orks and the vibrating – ”

“Oh, look at that clam! Is it not unusually large?”

“Changing the subject? Yeah, it is. Thinking our Pearl of Blunder is in it?”

“*Wonder*, Hot-Tits, and yes.”

“To which question?”

“I think you know. And what do we have here?” She pointed down, where Tia saw a large shadow. Looking up, they spotted a shark swimming above them. The fish following Prim darted under her, out of sight of the shark.

“Oh, dear,” Tia said. “I don't know how well I could fight down here.” She put a fist in her other hand. “Maybe it's time to find out.”

“Why fight at all?” Prim asked. “Think about it: We are mermaids!”

“And what has that to do with anything?”

Prim rolled her eyes. “The fish seem to like and respond to us. Why not the shark?”

“Are you nuts?” Tia demanded, pointing toward the shark. “Have you seen those teeth? You think they're for show? If we go talk to it, that thing would doubtless eat us both and brag about how two stupid mermaids came over to chat about the currents.”

“Think of it as an exciting challenge!” Prim suggested with a smile.

Tia crossed her arms, shaking her head. “Oh, no, you're not getting me up there that easily,” she said.

“Why not? Are you a wee bit frightened? Is my Hot-Tits turning into the Chicken of the Sea?”

The warrior scowled at her. “As if. And you think I don't know what you're doing? I grew up with crazy dares, you know.”

“Actually, I do not know,” Prim said. “A certain inquisitive gnome always becomes oddly reticent when it comes to her childhood. But, do go on; show me how you responded to dares. Or is that why you have those cute tattoos on your cheeks?”

“They aren't 'cute,'” Tia said hotly. “They're fierce!”

“Neither description is inaccurate: They are fiercely cute!” Prim said with her classic grin, eyes shining. “Just like you when you are annoyed, like now.”

“And who got me all irritated?” Tia loudly roared.

“Well, Hot-Tits, I suppose yelling out is one way to introduce yourself to our toothy new friend.”

Prim pointed behind Tia, while the fish around her took off as fast as their little tails would propel them. The warrior discovered the shark had apparently heard her outburst and was now swimming directly toward the gnomes.

“Oh, don't you start with it,” she shouted at the approaching predator, holding a hand up, palm out toward it. Her other hand she held in a fist at her side. “I am *not* in the mood!”

The shark slowed, clearly surprised by Tia's aggressive response. “That's right,” she said. “Anyone looking for trouble will get more than they bargain for here. For I am Tia Wildleaf, a champion warrior of my tribe – come at me if you dare, or else begone! Choose swiftly!”

So stern and proud did Tia hover before the shark, her predator froze in place, overwhelmed by the power of her will. After a moment, it slowly circled in place, meek as a lamb.

This behavior caught Tia off-guard. "Wait, what are you – ?" she began, when suddenly Prim wrapped her arms around the warrior's chest from behind.

"You are the most amazing person I have ever met," Prim whispered into her ear. Tia could feel the currents of her voice, her mouth was so near the warrior's ear. Tia felt a heat rising, more than just blushing.

"Prim – "

"If we were on the surface, I would have you right now and pleasure you such as to make you squeal in registers which would make the most talented opera singers weep with jealousy," Prim finished.

"I – uh – you ..." Tia stammered.

In an instant, the shark lunged at Prim. "Woa," the bard said as she dropped her hold on Tia and quickly slipped aside, avoiding the creature's bite. It wedged between the gnomes, snapping at Prim, who deftly dodged to and fro as she backed away.

The shark bit straight at her ... and came up short as it pulled to a halt, which it had been. "Enough of that!" Tia said from behind it as she held onto its tail with both arms.

"I do think he is jealous!" Prim said, grinning.

Tia blinked, confused, and the shark took the opportunity to twist out of her grasp and turn to nuzzle her face. "Wait ... what?" she once again stammered.

"He likes you!" the bard said, laughing and swimming around them both. "Hot-Tits has a boyfriend! Hot-Tits has a boyfriend!" she merrily chanted in a singsong voice.

"You've got to be kidding me!" Tia cried as she struggled to push the shark away. It merely swam up and back down behind her, nuzzling again. "Get offa me," Tia told it, eliciting more nuzzling and Prim's laughter.

"That's it, we're done here," the warrior said. She furiously swam away.

"He is coming to get you!" Prim called after her. "I think he likes when you play hard to get!"

"Do something, why don't you?" Tia yelled back.

"I am watching and laughing. What more do you want?"

"You useless little ..." the warrior's voice faded as she swam out of range.

Prim giggled. "Ah, Hot-Tits, if you only realized how amazing you are," she softly said to herself. She felt an appendage amiably drape itself over her shoulder from behind. She gently put her hand on it. "Would you not agree?" she asked her new companion.

She paused, frowning. She looked at the appendage. It looked like a length of purple rope. She felt odd circles against her skin where it contacted her.

She froze half in terror and half in revulsion as she realized what it was that touched her. She felt another tentacle – for that was clearly what they were – draping itself across her other shoulder and shuddered.

As a third worked around her waist, she let out a "meep!" of shock and revulsion and twisted out of the grasp of the first two tentacles to face behind her. She found herself in the grasp of a squid, the rest of its tentacles now reaching for her.

"No!" she cried. "Not tentacles!"

The squid pulled her close and ... nuzzled.

Prim let out an unintelligible squeal. "No no no no no ..." she repeated. Above her, she saw Tia swimming desperately, the shark in hot pursuit.

“Hot-Tits!” Prim cried. “I would appreciate your help right now with an overly-amorous cephalopod!”

“You've got some nerve, ya know!” Tia called down. “You're as shameless as ever, expecting me to help you out now!”

“Of course I do – you are Hot-Tits! You always help me!”

“Well, I'm a bit busy right now,” Tia said, quickly changing direction as the shark swam past her. “Perhaps you can laugh it away? And 'sephalopolid'? What the heck is that? Try using terms others can understand!”

“Cephalopod: A squid, silly!” Prim said. Turning back to the squid, she decided to reason with it. “Listen, there seems to be a misunderstanding here,” she told it. She gently prised a tentacle off her arm and patted it sympathetically. “I am sure you are delightful fellow, but I simply am not available. You understand, of course.”

The squid wrapped more tentacles around her. It brought its eyes up to hers.

“Right,” she said. “Of course you understand about as well as any unfortunate fellow smitten by my exquisite tail could ever be expected to be. Well, no hard feelings.” She sighed and took a deep breath. “HOT-TITS!!!” she screamed.

Tia swam over and grabbed Prim. The squid, shocked, loosened its grip enough for the warrior to swim down. The shark, still pursuing the warrior, collided with the squid. The two sea creatures were soon arguing, the squid waving its tentacles angrily while the shark snapped at it.

The gnomes swiftly fled. “Excellent timing, Hot-Tits,” Prim said.

“Lucky you, I was in the area,” Tia replied.

They looked at one another and giggled.

“Come on, let's get back to hunting for your Pearl of Blunder,” Tia said.

“Wonder, Hot-Tits,” Prim automatically corrected as she turned toward a coral formation on the sea floor.

The pair explored for several minutes. “This is pointless,” Tia finally said, gesturing around. “There's simply too much to dig through for just the two of us.”

“Fair,” Prim agreed, putting a finger to her chin in thought. “We need to at least find a wreck or something. I am certain there are some nearby. Let us see!”

They swam still further from the shore, finally locating a few ruined ships resting at the bottom of the ocean. Swimming through the first one produced no useful results, though Prim had found a flashy pink hat she tried, unsuccessfully, to get Tia to wear. The second wreck turned out no better.

“These are too old,” Prim said. “The Pearl was lost only recently.”

Tia nodded. They passed by another broken ship, clearly ancient by all the growth on it. Finally, they spotted what appeared to be a recent disaster.

“There we go,” Tia said. “That looks promising.”

They swam to the captain's quarters, where they found among the debris an old locked chest. It took Prim a few seconds to find a pick in her hair (“most of my picks seem to have morphed into my exquisite tail,” she explained), and a few more seconds to defeat the lock.

They lifted the lid and looked inside. They found maps and logs, a necklace with a broken locket, and a small mahogany box. Tia lifted it out and flipped up the latch. She looked at Prim, who nodded. The warrior raised the lid.

An incandescent light of many colors shone from the box. Drawn toward it as if against their wills, they leaned forward to see a pearl sitting in the center of cushions. The light radiated from it, the colors shifting so fast they dazzled the eyes.

Into their minds came visions, unique to each, yet similar in design. There was indeed a power in the Pearl, and it promised them mighty things.

Tia reached for the Pearl. Prim quickly grabbed her wrist. The warrior glared at her, and Prim quickly snatched the box and shut the lid before she could react.

They glared at one another for a moment longer, then let out breaths they had not realized they had been holding.

“It was a mistake for us to seek this out,” Prim said, shuddering. “My curious nature seems to have gotten the better of me.”

It was a mark of how affected she was that Tia felt no desire to needle Prim for her admission. “This thing promised me things,” she said. “Powerful, wonderful things. Did it promise you anything?”

Prim nodded. “It did.”

“All I'd have to do,” Tia said, her voice taking on a dreamy tone, “was take it for myself.” She reached for the box.

The bard hid it behind her back. “I think maybe we should find a trench to toss this in,” she said.

“What?” Tia asked, confused.

“Magic items like this: I can feel its nature. They should not be trusted. Nothing good ever comes from anything that claims to be able to give you such power, Hot-Tits.”

Tia put a hand to her forehead. “Why should we trust it, you mean,” she said.

“More or less,” Prim agreed.

“I can't think down here,” Tia stated. “It's too cramped. Let's go up for some air. Or, whatever. You know what I mean.” They turned to the door.

The shark floated outside of it. Seeing them turn, it tried to enter, getting stuck in the door and gnashing its teeth in frustration.

“Criminy!” Tia shouted. “Don't you know when to quit?” she asked it.

They turned to swim out a window, when it was suddenly blocked by the squid, its tentacles splayed over it.

Prim shrieked and dropped the box, which floated down and opened, for she had not secured the latch. The multicolored light flashed out once again. She quickly reached down and gathered up the Pearl before turning to the other windows and swimming madly out. Tia followed as best she could.

After a few seconds, they looked back to see their pursuers not far behind them.

“What do we do?” Prim asked. “I am out of ideas!”

She heard no response. Looking over in concern, she saw Tia staring at Prim's hands. The bard looked at the Pearl clutched in both her hands, discovering some light seeping through. Adjusting her grasp, she blocked the last of it.

Tia shook her head as if waking up. “Ugh, I'm not a fan of that,” she said.

“Me, either,” Prim agreed.

Suddenly, the pair collided with an unexpected obstruction. After a moment's panicked struggling, they realized they were caught in a fishing net.

“Well, of all the lousy luck ...” Tia snarled, trying to disentangle herself.

Prim found it impossible (even for her) to get herself loose while also holding onto the Pearl with both hands. “Hot-Tits, you need to relax and go slow,” she said.

“Oh, sure, great time for another infamous Prim Lecture,” Tia replied.

“I am simply trying –” Prim began when the net rose up, dragging them toward the surface. “Well, this cannot be good,” she said.

“That’s one way to put it,” Tia said. She tugged on the netting wrapped around her tail, achieving little progress, while the light from the Pearl shone out as Prim also struggled. After a moment, the warrior stopped. “Oh, look, our friends are back,” she observed.

Indeed, the shark and squid had followed them and now caught up to them. The shark tried biting at the net, while the squid tugged and pulled at it. The pair were clearly trying to help the gnomes escape the net.

As they worked, Prim looked up. “We are very nearly to the surface,” she observed.

“They aren’t making any progress,” Tia said, watching the surface approach. “Best they give up. Go on, now!” she said, making a shooing motion at the shark.

They broke the surface. She looked at Prim to find the bard holding her hands over her mouth, eyes closed with concentration. Tia caught no sight of the Pearl or its entrancing light.

They heard men’s voices as the fishermen hauled the net up. Then shouts of surprise and excitement as they realized what they had caught.

“Well, hello, boys,” Prim said, flashing a winning smile. “Are you lot not just the luckiest folks ever, catching just the hottest and the most exquisite prizes of all?”

Prim let out a loud yawn. “This is rather dull,” she complained.

The pair were hanging upside-down from a line stretched, ropes wrapped around their tails. Their hands were bound behind their backs. Additional coils of ropes were wrapped around their arms and chests both above and below their breasts just for good measure.

“I doubt they have us up here for our entertainment,” Tia said. “More for their own, really.”

Sailors on other ships had laughed and waved at their comrades’ catch. Many called out various ideas of what to do with the cute “mergnomes”.

“I normally approve of a sexy display, but I would rather like to at least be right-side up once in a while,” Prim said.

“I wonder what they’ll think of their precious display once the potions wear off?”

“Since they clearly have no appreciation for the exquisite, I doubt it will matter at all,” Prim said, quite offended.

Tia laughed. “You still fussed not a one responded to your introduction?”

“They agreed you are hot,” Prim pouted. “The least they could do is recognize the exquisite!”

The warrior rolled her eyes. “I wonder how exquisite they’ll find things once that Pearl works its way through.”

“I have no idea what you are talking about, Hot-Tits. Is the sun getting to you?”

“Fine. Be coy about it.”

The pair settled into another silence for several minutes before Prim broke it.

“So ... ” she began.

“Why don’t I like the sound of that?”

“About those cute marks on your face ... ”

“Is now really the time?” Tia asked.

“Is it ever the time? No. And yes.”

“What in the name of Rith are you talking about?”

Prim grinned. “Since you never seem to want to talk about them – at least, not without getting all fussy – then there is never a time for it, which means any time is as good as the other times.”

Tia stared at her blankly, trying to sort out what she had just heard.

“Are they tribal markings?” Prim pressed.

“I don't want to talk about them.”

“Naturally. Did a handsome young gnome let slip he thinks such markings are sexy?”

“Goodness, no.”

“Pity. He would have been absolutely correct.”

Tia rolled her eyes. “Why don't you channel your insane energies into getting us loose?”

“I would but – alas! – there is an unfortunate issue preventing me from reaching my full escapologist potential and, thus, is keeping us hanging here helplessly.” She shook her head sadly. “A pity.”

“What would the 'unfortunate issue' be?” Tia asked skeptically.

“I am entirely too distracted by the origins of your markings – ”

Tia huffed. “And there it is.”

“It is not my fault, Hot-Tits. The mystery is such anyone would be driven to distraction.”

“We've known each other how long? And you've gotten us out of how many scrapes? Though most of them were of your own devising, now I think on it”

“But the mystery has taken more and more of my attention! It has truly become more than I can handle! I no longer even care about getting free for want of the knowledge!”

“You never care to get free, anyway,” Tia pointed out.

“Not true!” Prim pouted. “I do get us free when it gets boring.”

The warrior grinned. “Well, isn't it boring yet? You were whining about it earlier.”

“But not with the mystery – ”

“Oh, for crying out loud, drop it, already!”

Prim laughed. “You really want to mention 'dropping' right now?”

“Fair point,” Tia grumbled.

The two hung in silence for several seconds. Finally, Prim spoke again.

“So, about those cute – ”

Tia let out a cry of mingled anger and frustration.

“I take it you would rather not discuss them,” Prim said.

“I would rather you get us down from here!” Tia shot back.

Prim tilted her head in thought. “I seem to have a vague idea ... the trouble is, I cannot think clearly ...”

“Bull!” Tia snarled. “You just don't want to.”

“What I *want*, Hot-Tits, is to know how you got those markings and what they represent.”

Looking away again, Tia grumbled nothing in particular for several seconds. Prim waited, not having a lot to do at the moment, anyway. She began to idly whistle while Tia stewed.

“They are not cute,” Tia finally said through gritted teeth.

“Mmm-hmm,” Prim responded, deciding to try a tactful approach.

“They are fierce markings of my tribe. They mean I am strong.” She paused.

Prim intently and silently watched her friend's struggle, so close was she to answers – and learning more about her Hot-Tits.

“Fine,” Tia said. “You'll never stop pestering me if I don't tell. But this stops with you, understand?” She looked at the bard, who nodded.

“Not one word,” Prim promised.

“Or twenty, knowing you,” Tia said. She grinned, and Prim guiltily grinned back.

“A fair point. Not one word or twenty or any other number known to gnome or dog,” she amended.

Tia blinked. “Or dog?” she asked, then let out a light laugh as Prim playfully stuck her tongue out at her. “Eh, whatever.

“In my first fight – my first *real* fight, mind, not practice – I did not exactly overperform. I know now, of course, the first one is always the toughest. You never know how you'll react. But I recovered myself soon enough and, by all accounts, impressed the others.

“Anyway, that night during the celebrations, one of my tribesmen spoke out about it.”

Prim frowned. “That seems dangerous,” she said.

Tia nodded. “Very. I got my dander up.” She looked away again. “I was a bit of a hothead back then,” she admitted.

“I would never have imagined such a thing,” Prim said.

Their eyes met, their lips curled up. The pair giggled together.

“Ah, well, we all had growing up to do,” Tia said wistfully after a moment. “Anyway, the short of it is I was determined to show how tough I could be. Dares were thrown about rather willy-nilly for a bit. The usual stuff – drink this, smash that on your head, that sort of thing. Rather childish, really.

“Eventually, caught up in the competitive spirit of it all and wanting to prove myself once and for all, I told them I would get tattooed – and not utter one sound of complaint or pain.”

“Wow,” Prim said. “That is ... a silly reason for your markings.”

Tia let out a bark of a laugh. “That's one way to put it.”

“And it is rather disappointing.”

Tia grinned. “Ah, but here's the rub: It was supposed to go on my back.”

“Wait, what?”

Tia rolled her eyes. “I wanted a big tattoo of a wolf all on my back,” she said.

“A wolf. On your back,” Prim said. She looked pointedly at Tia's cheeks.

“A bit off, aren't they?” Tia asked, grinning.

“Just a little,” Prim agreed.

“Would it help if I mentioned we were all celebrating our victory at the time?”

“Somewhat, but I still have difficulty thinking a little alcohol – ”

“A lot of alcohol. And a little of some other stuff. Maybe a lot.” She grinned. “My memory's *hazy*, you see.”

“Ahhh, yes, I do see,” the bard said.

“Well, anyway, at some point we all forgot what we were planning, and random suggestions for the tattos were thrown out. I think. Again, my memory of the evening is a bit fuzzy.”

“Understandable,” Prim said delicately.

“Meanwhile, someone had mentioned whiskers”

“Which would have been adorable!” Prim brightly said, unable to control herself. “And just image how TiaKitty would look with real whiskers on her face!”

Tia guffawed. “I’m trying not to. Fortunately, once the needle started to hurt my face, my brain kicked in and noticed the pain was supposed to be on my back. With marks already inked in, we had a, ah, 'debate' about what next to do.”

Prim grinned. “How many black eyes did you hand out?”

The warrior smiled. “Quite a few. I was rather upset, mind. Fortunately, after separating us and calming me down, my Teacher came up with the suggestion to turn them into what you see now.”

“So, my Hot-Tits's wonderful markings are the result of mixing up her face for her back and whiskers for a wolf,” Prim mused.

“Sums it up. Mind, it's quite common to paint our faces before a battle in patterns much like these. So, as Teacher pointed out, this saves me a lot of trouble.” She grinned. “You cannot believe the money I've saved on mud!”

“Very thrifty,” Prim said, laughing.

“It does have certain advantages, I do admit,” Tia said.

“Well, I must say, I am quite pleased your tribe was engaging in various chemical substances at the time.”

“Oh?”

Prim smiled broadly. “After all, I do adore my Hot-Tits just how she is.”

“I’m touched,” Tia said. “And now that you have the full story, are you going to get us loose – and of course,” she added as Prim brought her now-untied hands around front to untie Tia's ropes. “And just how long have you had your wrists untied?”

“I did not time it,” Prim said as she worked. “How long have we been hanging here?”

“You kept up the pretense just to get me to tell you all that?”

“Hrm, for once I might actually be guilty of something as charged,” Prim said as she finished freeing Tia's wrists.

“An admission,” Tia said. “Will wonders never cease. And what are we going to do after getting down from here?” she asked as they worked to untie their torso bondage.

“You know me, Hot-Tits,” Prim said.

“Right. No plan whatsoever.”

“Precisely.”

They reached up to free their tails, falling to the deck in moments. Unfortunately, a cry rose up – they had been spotted.

“Nothing to do for it but crawl,” Tia said.

The pair pulled themselves toward the edge, but men were upon them much too fast. They quickly found themselves lifted into the air by the men.

“Perhaps we could make some sort of deal,” Prim said, flashing another smile.

“Or just pummel you,” Tia growled.

The men laughed at her spunk.

The ship shook with a loud crash.

Everyone looked at one another in surprise. “I did not do it,” Prim reflexively said. Tia brought a hand to her forehead.

Another crash rattled the ship. Then, with a large splash, a giant shark's head rose out of the water on the starboard side, huge teeth gnashing before it sank back below the water.

Needless to say, the men promptly scrambled to get the ship moving, their captors dropping the gnomes onto the wooden deck.

“Ow! My exquisite tail!” Prim complained.

“They definitely need a good pummeling,” Tia said, rubbing the back of her head as the ship shook from another blow.

And then a large, purple tentacle rose from the water and wrapped over the deck. Two more followed, and a giant squid surfaced. It let out a loud, angry cry.

“Prim!” Tia said, staring at the beast. “What's going on?”

Prim frowned in thought. “It seems our amorous new friends' inner-guardian desires have been fulfilled in a surprisingly substantial manner.”

“Meaning?”

“The Pearl I slipped to the cephalopod – ”

“Squid, dammit! Just say squid!” Tia shouted. The ship shook as the shark banged against it again. She began crawling to the edge again. “And I thought you swallowed the Pearl!”

“Oh, no, that was just a show for the fishermen,” Prim said, now crawling behind her. “I thought they might have seen the Pearl's light.”

“So, they would have thought it was in your belly,” Tia said, climbing onto the gunwale and turning to give Prim a hand. “What if they had decided to try and get it out?” she asked, grinning.

Prim laughed. “Honestly, I had not thought about that. Fortunately, there was no need to find out, was there? Off we go!” she cried, diving into the water. Tia followed moments after.

Settled into the water, they quickly swam down and away from the disaster unfolding behind them.

“So, that Pearl actually had power,” Tia said. “It was not just making empty promises.”

“It would seem so,” Prim agreed.

“You gave it to the squid, you said? Then how did the shark also grow?”

“I expect the squid decided to share it. After all, they were both worried about us. They likely imagined themselves gallantly coming to our rescue.”

“Meaning, they both still have their hearts set on us?” Tia asked.

Prim frowned. “I should think so. How could anyone not be?”

“You're shameless, you know.”

“So I have been told. Repeatedly.”

After several minutes, they looked back to find the giant beasts pursuing them again. The gnomes waited, seeing as it would be futile to attempt to outswim the much larger creatures.

“Hello, my friends,” Prim greeting them as they neared. The squid gently wrapped a tentacle around her and pulled her against its body, the bard struggling not to scream.

“Careful, buddy,” Tia said as the shark nuzzled her. “You’re a bit bigger than before. Lucky thing for us,” she added, patting him. The shark gleefully swam around her in a circle.

“Maybe they can take us home?” Prim asked through gritted teeth. The squid seemed to deflate somewhat.

“Come on,” Tia said. “They saved us. The least you could do is relax.”

“I suppose you are correct,” Prim said. Taking a deep breath and letting it out, she slowly put a hand on the squid. “Thank you, my friend,” she told it. “You really saved us.”

It cried out for joy and also swam in a circle. “Woa!” Prim said. “At least let me off first!” The squid froze as if embarrassed. After a moment, Prim laughed. “My mistake. That was quite fun, actually!”

And off the squid went again, Prim now squealing with excitement at the ride.

Suddenly, her squeals stopped, and after a moment Tia understood. For the warrior could no longer breathe, and she realized the potion was wearing off. She could feel her tail painfully turning back into legs, which were soon kicking uselessly in the water.

The shark sensed her distress and swam over. She grabbed his dorsal fin, and the shark rose up, breaching the surface with a large splash.

Tia sputtered and coughed on the creature’s back. She looked over to find the squid had surfaced, as well, and was holding a coughing Prim on one tentacle held outstretched.

“Th-thank you,” Prim said.

“Yeah, thanks,” Tia added. She glared at Prim. “So much for these things warning us they were expiring!”

“Well, we did take an unusual dosage,” Prim said.

“And whose fault was that?”

Prim did not answer. Instead, she stood, and Tia followed suit. “We are sorry we are not truly aquatic,” Prim told the squid. She raised a leg to demonstrate. “We were simply exploring your delightful realm, but we must now return to land.”

The creatures looked at one another, then began swimming. “Do they understand us anymore?” Tia asked. “Are they taking us home?”

Prim shrugged. “I think they get the general idea and are taking us to land, at least.”

Soon, the port came back into view. Their giant friends headed a few miles down the coast. They then stopped short of a beach, unable to get closer.

“Thank you,” Prim said. She held her arms wide, and the squid brought her over for a hug. “You really are an amazing creature,” she told it. “I am sorry I reacted so poorly when we first met.”

“I’m gonna miss ya, big guy,” Tia told the shark. She gave his fin a hug and patted it.

The gnomes leapt into the water and swam toward shore. Reaching it, they turned back and waved. The squid waved a tentacle; the shark raised its head up. Then they turned and headed to the deeper waters.

“I wonder what happened to the Pearl,” Tia said.

“It is likely lost deep at sea,” Prim answered. “And I am content with that.”

“All’s well that ends well, eh?”

“Yes, I would say everything ended well, indeed. For everyone.”

“And the fishermen?”

“Okay, most everyone,” Prim amended.

She turned to the woods not far from the shore. “And besides, I learned something delightful about my Hot-Tits! Oh, I should turn it into a song!”

“Oh, no you don't!” Tia said as they disappeared among the trees. “You promised!”

“Only to not tell it to any gnomes or dogs. And we mentioned nothing about singing!”

“That's not what we agreed to, dammit!”

As their voices faded, out in the distance a ship sailed along ... and suddenly stopped as giant tentacles wrapped around it, a large dorsal fin appearing on the ocean surface nearby.