

The Heroic(-ish) Adventures of Hummingbird and The Finisher

Part One

By: Wyland

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“Ha! Called it!” Prim declared excitedly, holding up her cue stick in triumph as two striped billiard balls plunked into corner pockets.

“So you did,” Tia lazily replied, not looking up from the newspaper she was reading. Two mugs of beer rested on the table beside her.

“You know what this means, Hot-Tits,” Prim said, walking around to take aim on the black sphere.

“Yes, it means you'll call side pocket and hit corner,” Tia said. The paper rustled as she changed pages.

Prim stuck her tongue out. “No way. You are going down this time! Just watch!”

“Watch you scratch, you mean?”

“Fine, if you are so smart, try this out – corner pocket, not side pocket.”

“You sure?”

“Am I not always?” Prim replied. She energetically struck the cue ball, sending it flying to the eight ball, which bounced off two rails on either side of the corner pocket, hit a side rail, and almost casually rolled into the side pocket in front of the redhead. Her head fell forward as she pouted.

“Bravo,” Tia said, finally looking up. “That makes, what, thirty-seven straight now?”

“I nearly had you this time!” Prim complained, arms crossed.

“And, as always, you failed to finish,” Tia said, taking a drink and returning to her newspaper. Prim sighed and racked the balls, set the cue, and broke.

“Ha! Got one!” she cried. “Ready to give up?”

“I am aquiver with fear,” Tia said, again flipping a page.

“Wait, is that OrcGirl?” Prim asked, dashing over and grabbing the paper. “What amazing thing has she done now?”

“OrcGirl?” Tia asked, a hint of scorn in her voice. “Don't you think she's a bit of a, I dunno, a goofball?” she asked, having another drink.

“No way!” Prim said, taken aback. “She is amazing! Why, just the other day, she rescued a hostage from the roof of a building!”

Tia raised a skeptical eyebrow. “The 'hostage' was another cape, some Dimwit Mistress or something, you know.”

Prim waved a hand dismissively. “Pish-posh with the details. The fact is, she fixed the situation, did she not?”

“If by 'fixed' you mean survived, sure, I can agree with that. Everyone got away clean. Nothing at all was affected.”

“Nuh-uh,” Prim said defiantly. “She saved the day!”

“Right. If she had not shown up, would it have changed the price of tea in Ienotochi?”

“Err, well, probably not...”

“Exactly,” Tia said, as if the matter was settled. “Now, if I'd-a been there, I'd-a just knocked every last one of them out, let the cops sort it out.” She punched the air a couple of times.

“You and your fighting,” Prim said, grinning. “Speaking of which, when is your next match?”

“Thursday. I was hoping it would be Wednesday--”

“But, then you would miss my ballet's premiere!” Prim said, shocked.

“Oh, really? That'd have been a shame...” She laughed at Prim's stunned expression. “I kid, I kid. You know I'm always there.”

“Yes, I know, I can always hear your snoring,” Prim said, laughing along and taking a drink of her own.

“It's not my fault,” Tia said defensively. “You need more action!” She punched the air again.

Smiling at her friend's antics, Prim looked at the crowd of the Devil's Due, a rather delightful bar in the singular sense it was of such questionable quality it could only dream to one day be a dive bar. While not particularly filthy, it was definitely neither clean nor well-maintained. The barkeep generally held a laissez faire attitude on what patrons were up to, and the patrons responded in kind. While the bar was not your typical type for two young ladies, Prim found the atmosphere refreshingly honest and unpretentious, a break from her ballet crowd.

She returned to the game. Ten minutes later, only the eight ball and three striped balls remained with the cue. "Ready to give up yet?" Prim asked as she stepped away for Tia's turn.

The green-haired gnome calmly pointed to two pockets, aimed, and fired. Two striped balls fell. "Luck," Prim said grumpily.

Tia shrugged, pointed to a pocket, and sent the last striped ball down. "Come on, guys, help me out here," Prim complained to the fallen spheres. A moment later, the black ball fell into a pocket.

"Thirty-eight," Tia said. Prim raised her arms in the air in mock cheering as Tia sat back down and resumed her puzzle.

"No way you are getting me this time," Prim said cheerfully as she picked up the triangle and tossed it onto the table.

As she reached into a pocket to fish out the balls, a man grabbed her forearm. "I think it's time you gals let someone else play," he said as two other men walked over beside him. The trio towered over the shorter gnome.

Prim pulled her arm away from him. "Nonsense. Hot-Tits and I are regulars here and paid our time. You can just wait until we are finished." She turned back to the table.

"Listen, lady. I don't wanna hurt ya. It's just time to let us play." He reached out to grab her shoulder. However, she deftly stepped aside, and his hand found only the air.

The second man stepped forward. "Cheeky little minx," he said as he also grabbed at the gnome. Once again, she almost lazily avoided the attempt.

"Now, really," she said as she slipped between the first man's legs after another effort to secure her. "Is there any need for this?"

The third man joined the fray, now, reaching down to pluck Prim up by her blouse only to meet with the same lack of success as his friends. She began laughing cheerfully. "You should join in, Hot-Tits!" she called out.

"Right, right," Tia said, scribbling an answer on the puzzle.

Now all three men were angrily grabbing for her, cussing at her and one another as they got in each other's way. The gnome pranced around, under, and even over them, planting her foot on the top of the second man's head as she leapt over him. A patron laughed, another raised his glass. Prim, standing on the billiard table, took a moment to curtsy before hopping off to avoid another lunge.

"Hey, Prim," Tia said, not looking up from the paper. "What's nine-letters and two words for what you should do?"

"Hrm," Prim said as she ducked and dodged again. "'L-O-O-K G-R-E-A-T'?" She leapt onto one attacker's back and then onto a second's shoulders before leaping back onto the table.

"Not quite. Try 'P-U-N-C-H T-H-E-M'."

Prim giggled. "Is that not more up your alley?"

Tia looked up at the scene. "Well, if you think it is time."

"Yes, I think it is time to finish it," Prim said, pointing a thumb over her shoulder. The three men were bent over, gasping for breath, their hands on their knees. "They are not much fun now, anyway."

Tia nodded and stood, cracking her knuckles. The third man held a hand out. "Now, wait a minute –"

"No," she said, and she laid into them.

The barkeep considered himself to have few duties. He flatly refused to mix any drink requiring stirring or shaking. Nor would he typically bring drinks to the patrons – they had to come over to the bar when they were thirsty. Complaints were generally met with a fist.

One duty he did consistently perform was clearing out the trash. Not the rubbish but, rather, those patrons rendered insensate for one reason or another. With a nod to Tia, he dragged the last of the now-unconscious trio to the back door to toss into the ally – and if the man's pockets were a little lighter, well, whose fault was that? It was a dangerous neighborhood, after all.

“Thirty-nine,” Tia announced fifteen minutes later. “Want to make it an even forty?”

Prim did not respond for a moment. She was sitting on her stool, looking thoughtfully into her glass. “You know, Hot-Tits,” she finally said, “that was pretty amazing of us.”

Tia laughed in derision and sat across from her. “What are you talking about? Those guys? Puh-leeze. Featherweights.”

Prim shook her head. “No, really. Between my moves and your fists, we put on quite the dance. We could do great things together.”

“If you're thinking of getting me on a stage, forget it,” Tia said.

“No, not that,” Prim said. “I just mean...” she trailed off, then shrugged and grabbed the triangle. “Ah, well. Let us play again. I am feeling it this time, Hot-Tits! Your winning streak shall come to an end!”

The next afternoon found Tia knocking on the door to Prim's apartment after having unlocked it with a key Prim had given her months before. “Rather casual outfit you have on,” she said as she walked in and saw the redhead wearing a loose sweatshirt and pants. “So, what's this big surprise you texted me about? Are we going to stay in and watch old musicals again? I could use the extra sleep.” She rummaged in Prim's refrigerator for a soda.

“Well, I have been thinking about the fight at the DD last night,” Prim said, leaning against a wall, arms crossed.

“That?” Tia scoffed. “Why is it different than all the others?”

Prim grinned. “That is my point, Hot-Tits. We have been in several such fights, and we always easily win.”

Tia nodded, taking a drink as she sat on a bean bag. “It's nothing to brag about, Prim. The typical DD patron isn't exactly used to fighting someone who knows what she's doing.”

“I think it is more than that, though,” Prim said. “You and I have something special going.”

“Uh-huh,” Tia said warily, eyebrow cocked. “And what do you mean by 'special'? This isn't another attempt to get me to grab your 'exquisite ass', is it?”

“No, no,” Prim said, airily waving away Tia's concerns. “I mean, you and I make a great team when it comes to fighting the, well, scum of the city.”

“Are you saying we should form a tag-team? Because there isn't a tag-team league in the circuit.”

Prim laughed. “No, I am saying we should fight for real, like OrcGirl does.”

Tia simply stared and blinked for a few moments. “Are you serious?” she finally asked.

“Quite! Take a look!” Smiling excitedly, Prim took off her sweats, revealing violet tights. “A superhero outfit! I figured it would go with my eyes. It took me a few hours to get it together. Making the mask was a bit difficult,” she added, picking up a matching mask from under a towel on a table. She held it up, examining it critically. “I think I finally got it straight. Of course, I could not wear a cape – it would cover up my exquisite ass!” She turned and patted her backside for emphasis before facing Tia again.

“Anyway, that was my idea for myself,” she continued. “Though, I have yet to settle on a name, unfortunately. I have several ideas and figured you could help me decide on one. Not that I am doing this for recognition! It just seems proper for a superhero to have a superhero name! As for you, well, your name was easy enough: The Finisher. As for a costume, I doubt I could ever get you into one of these,” she gestured at her tights. “I thought maybe we could go a more simple route for you.” She produced a pair of spectacles. “Ta-da! Since attempting to get you into any proper crime-fighting outfit is destined to be an exercise in futility, I figured we could keep it simple. They are non-prescription, of course. I got them from the prop department. Put these on, and nobody will know it is you. Watch!”

Prim put the glasses over Tia's eyes. “Wow! Who is this bespectacled gnome?” She giggled, then stepped back. “Well? What do you think?”

It took Tia a solid ten seconds to lift her jaw, it having fallen further and further down as Prim explained her plan. “What do I think?” she finally asked.

“Well, this may come as a bit of a surprise to you, but I *do* value your opinion, Hot-Tits,” Prim said with a grin.

Tia put a hand to her forehead as she tried to control herself. “What's with The Finisher?”

"Oh, I thought that would be rather obvious!"

Tia shook her head. "The only thing obvious, to my mind, is you're quite mad."

"Mad? Whatever do you mean?"

"Just forget it," Tia said, standing.

"Where are you going?"

"I said forget it!"

"Hot-Tits--"

Tia raised a finger, pointing it at Prim. "You're off on one of your crazy romantic ideas again without a care as to any risks, dragging me along to take care of you. And just how do you think you'll do anybody any good? You're just a tiny gnomish ballet dancer, for cryin' out loud! You think you can take down anyone over four and a half feet tall?"

Prim looked crestfallen. "But, Hot-Tits, that is why we would be a team..."

"No! No team!" Tia said hotly. "Get out of that ridiculous getup. You are a dancer, not a superhero. What were you thinking?"

Tears in her eyes, Prim angrily said, "I was thinking of helping people! Of protecting those who cannot protect themselves! And I think you and I have the ability to do it!"

Tia frowned. "Noble as your sentiment is," she said, walking toward the door, "it's also foolish and would only end up getting you hurt. How would that help anyone?" She shook her head as she opened the door. "I won't be a party to this. Good day." She left, the door closing behind her.

Prim stood still and silent, absorbing Tia's rejection, her body trembling from her emotions. "Fine!" she said after a few minutes. "Then I shall do it myself!"

"Come on, Sam, let's get this rolling, or we're gonna be late!" Bill said, irritably thrusting his arm out the window and gesturing for his coworker to hurry the heck up.

"Alright, alright already, hold your horses," Sam called back. He finished locking the back of the truck and walked to the passenger door, hopping in. "Happy?"

"My life is now complete."

Bill hit the gas, and the armored van lumbered along its normal route. As they drove down the empty streets, Sam started chatting.

"That broad!" he said. "You won't believe what she did this time."

"Oh, I'd believe it," Bill said grumpily. "As much as the other b.s. you've claimed she's done."

"You callin' me a liar?"

"Yup."

As the two bickered, a large moving truck pulled into the street behind them, the picture on its side showing a trio of overly-happy cartoon characters easily carrying far more furniture than was humanly possible. Some sarcastic fellow had spray-painted over the company slogan with graffiti rudely suggesting to where said characters were planning to move the couch.

As the truck approached, the top split, the sides folding down to reveal masts which extended upward, releasing sails and a skull and crossbones flag. The sides then became the deck of this makeshift galleon, as a prow extended in front. The back of the van folded to form the aft decks, a ship's wheel raising up and extending into place. Old cannons rose up, two on either side of the main deck.

A pair of license plates then flipped over on the aft side, revealing the ship's name: *Scurvy Plunder*.

A crew of unsavory-looking sailors manned the craft, several arming the cannons. At the front, a gnome in a tricorne hat and eye patch pointed a saber toward the armored van ahead of them, her wild blonde hair trailing behind her in the wind.

"Yar, speed up, ye sluggards! Thar be gold in sight!" the gnome cried. She held a strange pistol in her left hand, a multi-barreled affair as if someone had grafted a miniature grenade launcher onto an old flintlock that, itself, had somehow evolved into a revolver. She raised it and fired the revolver, shouting at the van. Her crew raised their weapons and cheered, some firing into the air, as well.

It was at roughly this point Bill and Sam realized their night was about to get rather odd.

A crewman spun the forward port-side cannon toward the van. A grappling hook launched out, embedding itself into the van's side armor. He pulled a lever, and a mechanism began reeling in the chain.

"Give it up, ye landlubbers!" the captain shouted. She pointed her gun at the van and fired the grenade attachment. A small spherical black bomb, replete with lit fuse and a white skull and crossbones painted on it, shot out and exploded outside the passenger window.

Bill, cursing up a storm, turned the van hard to the left. "Release! Hard to port!" the captain ordered, and the cannoneer yanked another lever, releasing the cable lest the strain cause the *Scurvy Plunder* to spin out while the helmsman spun the wheel. The ship leaned as it made the turn, following its prey.

"Give 'er a volley!" the captain barked. The forward two cannons launched bombs similar but larger to the one the captain had fired earlier. These caused quite the mess, one shattering the glass at Sam's side, the other wrecking the left-rear wheel well. Soon, the tire burst, the van losing speed and maneuverability.

The *Scurvy Plunder* pulled up alongside. The side cannons launched grappling hooks, which secured themselves into the armor and pulled it alongside the ship.

"Blast it, Sam, use the gun for cryin' out loud!" Bill shouted.

Sam leaned out and fired a shotgun, his aim poor in all the confusion. The gnome laughed gleefully and ran over to the side of the ship, swinging her sword, striking the firearm. Sam took a moment to look at his shattered weapon before dropping it and leaning back inside the cabin.

"Get us out--" he began, but was interrupted by the gnome leaping through the open window and landing in his lap. She slammed the hilt of her saber into his head. His eyes rolled up, and Sam was out like a light.

The gnome pointed her gun at Bill. "I do be thinkin' ye it be in yer best interest to be stoppin' the vehicle, if ye ken," she told him.

Bill hit the brakes.

As the vehicles came to a screeching halt, the gnome leaned out the window. "Yar, time to be plunderin', boys!" she cried.

The pirates cheered and ran toward the van, a few pulling Bill and Sam out of the cabin. The captain laughed heartily as she jumped out of the window and landed onto the street.

"Open the doors! Hurry ye up, sluggards! Get a move on!"

One of the pirates opened the back of the van with Sam's keys. Several climbed inside and returned, bringing bags toward the ship. After ten feet, they stopped, confused.

"What be ye doin'?" the captain shouted. "Get ye movin'!"

One of the pirates pointed. The gnome turned to look.

Over at the ship's wheel, Prim was in her costume and merrily giving the device a spin back and forth. "Tell me, does this thing actually steer the vehicle?" she asked. "Only it seems rather, I do not know, inefficient? Kind of mad, really, to steer a truck that way."

The captain leapt onto the truck and ran over. "What be ye doin' on my ship?" she demanded, raising her sword to Prim's neck.

Only, somehow, Prim was on the other side of the helm. The captain looked from Prim to where she had been and then back. "Well, I was out and about and saw your brouhaha earlier," Prim casually continued. "I figured I would come over and visit."

"Ye be here for a polite chat, be ye?" the captain asked. Quick as a snake striking, she spun around the ship's wheel to put her blade to Prim's throat ... to again find Prim had moved, now leaning against a mast.

"Well, I thought it rude to just wreck your little robbery without a bit of friendly greetings," she said.

"Rather elusive, ye be," the captain said. "But I be the Captain, missy, and the Captain do not be playin' fair. Boys! Get her!"

The pirates dropped their loot and boarded their own ship with a yell. Prim laughed as she ducked and weaved and dodged. "You have a merry crew, Captain," she called out as she danced around a pirate, who spun around so much he fell over, dizzy. "They prance about rather well. I should speak with my friend about getting them parts in the next ballet!"

The pirates roared angrily, crying out "get her" and "grab her" and other commands not so pleasant. A pair tried to wrap a rope around Prim, who laughed as she leapt over a third pirate, with the result the pair wrapped around him, swung around, and crashed into each other.

"Ye do be dancin' well," the Captain called. "What be yer name?"

“Ah, well, to be honest, I have not yet decided,” Prim said as she ducked a belaying pin flying at her. The thrower had used an underhand toss to account for Prim's gnomish size. The unfortunate result was the pin flew straight into another pirate's jewels, and not the sparkling kind.

“I had thought of the Midnight Rescuer,” Prim continued, sliding between a pirate's legs while another swung a club at her, with yet another painful result.

“That do be rather limited,” the Captain noted.

“Agreed,” Prim said. “It would sort of imply I never come out during the day.”

“Aye.”

“So, I considered the Crimson Avenger to go with my hair.”

“Ye be wearin' purple, though.”

Prim jumped over a pirate charging at her, giving him a kick to send him on his way overboard.

“Exactly! I thought of--”

A pack of cars with garish colors and very large speakers blaring out music that was mostly percussion cruised by. In addition to their sound systems, the cars' exhausts blared out powerfully. The music and exhausts loudly drowned out whatever names Prim had thought of next.

The Captain looked at the cruisers with mild irritation, then returned to observing Prim. The redhead dashed about from one group of pirate attackers to another with no hesitation between. She smiled and laughed as if she had not a care in the world, still apparently rattling off the list of names she had considered despite all the noise.

The vision of the redhead's movements brought a tickle of something the Captain had seen before long ago to mind. Frowning, she tried to think of it, but it eluded her. Meanwhile, the musical cars passed far enough she could hear Prim again.

“-- would be just plain silly, do you not think?” she said.

“Aye,” the Captain said, though she had no idea what she was agreeing to. “And ye would no be silly, would ye?”

“Precisely!” Prim said as she ducked a punch from the last standing crewman. He struck the mast and cried out in agony, falling to his knees and cradling his hand.

Prim turned toward the Captain, grinning. “And now it is just you and me, it would seem. Shall we finish this?”

The Captain was already aiming her gun. She pulled the trigger. Prim just barely dodged the bomb, which exploded behind her.

“Really, now, how rude!” she said. “Taking a shot without a fair warning the fight between us was engaged.”

“I be a pirate, ye flighty --” the Captain, who had been drawing a bead on Prim with her gun again, pulled it up as she realized just what Prim reminded her of. She grinned, then laughed heartily again.

Prim put her hands on her hips, bemused. “What is so funny, Captain?”

“I finally be kennin' what ye be,” the Captain answered.

“Gorgeous?”

The Captain laughed again. “Ye do be a funny one, do ye not?” she asked. “And the way ye be movin' about: Ye know what ye be?”

“Graceful? Lovely? Beautiful?” Prim suggested, grinning.

The Captain walked toward her, stopping two feet away. “Ye be a flighty one. I do be seein' it once, long ago. Ye be a hummingbird.”

Prim's jaw dropped open. “What? A silly little harmless bird?” she said, annoyance in her voice.

“Aye. Ye do be needin' a name, ye say? I do be a Captain, and I do hereby dub ye Hummingbird.” She laughed again.

Prim raised a hand, finger pointing at the Captain. “Now wait just a min--” she got out, when the Captain quickly stepped forward and slammed the pommel of her saber into Prim's stomach. She crumpled, unable to speak or even cry out.

“Quite ... unfair...” Prim gasped.

“Indeed.” The Captain turned to a couple of pirates. “On yer feet, ye miserable currs, and tie her up!”

The pair jogged over as quick as they could, considering their wounds. They grabbed her arms and secured them behind her back with ropes. They wrapped more ropes around her chest, tying another to it for a leash. One of them handed it to the Captain.

“Get ye back to work!” she shouted to the crew. “Hurry! We be runnin' out of time, and I no be leavin' the loot behind!”

The crew groaned and got back to work hauling sacks from the van to the ship. Meanwhile, the Captain led Prim back to the ship's wheel.

“Ye be cute, Hummingbird, but ye clearly no be experienced,” she said.

Prim had finally gotten her wind back. “Do not think me defeated, Captain,” she said defiantly.

“So proud. I do be thinkin' I already be gettin' the most valuable treasure tonight,” the Captain said, tugging the leash gently and smiling pleasantly.

“Well, I am rather amazing, after all,” Prim agreed.

The Captain let out another of her laughs. “That ye do be. Tell me, Hummingbird, why do ye be wantin' to be fightin' villains such as meself?”

“I should think that obvious,” Prim said, frowning.

“Then do be tellin' me.”

Prim opened her mouth, then stopped. She started to speak again, then stopped, confused.

“Ye not be knowin'?” the Captain asked.

Prim elected to remain silent.

The Captain smiled. “If ye be wantin' the adventure, the excitement, why not be joinin' me crew?”

“As if,” Prim said simply.

The Captain laughed again. “Ye do be interestin' me, Hummingbird.” She pulled Prim's leash, bringing the redhead right up to her. “I do be keepin' what I find interestin'.”

“I am told I am quite entertaining,” Prim said.

“Do no be short-changin' yerself. So capable, so determined – so confused. Why be fightin' fer so-called 'justice' and 'nobility' or whatever nonsense it be?”

“If the other option is petty thievery, I shall pass,” Prim answered.

The Captain looked offended. “There be nothin' petty here. We be eekin' out the best lives we can be in a society that do be pushing us down. What do we be owin' anyone?” She waved her arms at the ship. “Here, we be free. Can you say so where you be from?” She moved in close to Prim. “Here, ye can be dancin' yer own dance, not that of others. Ye can be shinin' as the treasure you do be, not buried and crushed by those who be claimin' to be our *elites* and livin' off the sweat of those they be deemin' beneath 'em.”

“I am flattered, Captain, truly,” Prim said, smiling. “And I imagine your life to be quite exciting.”

The Captain smiled. “Yet ye must refuse me offer.” Prim remained silent. “Perhaps ye be changin' yer mind in time, after seein' me life up close. Ye might be findin' it appeal– ”

A giant red ballpoint pen landed like a spear beside them, its point burying itself in the deck. They turned to where it had flown from.

“What be this nonsense?” the Captain asked.

They spotted a trim man on the roof of a two-story building looking down at them. He wore a suit and mask colored blue. All along his outfit, various words, phrases, and geometric patterns were drawn in black at random orientations. However, every item had some red correction. The red ink corrected misspellings, added missing words to the phrases, closed lazily-drawn triangles, and so on.

“Do be gettin' ye gone, whoever ye be!” the Captain shouted. The pirates, who had just finished piling the loot into the ship, raised their weapons and yelled.

“I do not think so,” the man called down. “For that money belongs to the Nitpicker!”

The Captain snorted. “Whatever foolishness ye be callin' yerself,” she called back, “we do be here first! The loot do be ours! Be on yer way!”

“I think not!” he retorted. “I have plans for that money that simply cannot be delayed; therefore...” He leapt down, rolling to his feet to absorb the energy of his fall. He idly dusted off a shoulder. “Therefore, I shall be taking it,” he finished.

The Captain drew her sword. “So ye be plannin' to die? I can be arrangin' that!” The pirates cheered.

“Do not be so simple as to think I am alone, fools,” the Nitpicker said. He snapped his fingers.

All around, men stepped out of shadows. They numbered at least as many as the pirates. All wore the same outfit: a black shirt and pants, gloves, belts, and mask. Headbands with the corrected triangle the Nitpicker wore on front indicated their allegiance. They wielded the large red pens as staves or spears.

“The Nitpicker, eh?” Prim said from where she was sitting on the railing, legs swinging. The Captain turned to her, then at the ropes on the deck where Prim had been standing. She shook her head with a grin as Prim continued. “With a getup like that, I would have thought the Editor or the Proofreader more appropriate.”

The Nitpicker stopped, rather taken aback. “You just totally went off-topic and ruined my grand entrance!” he shouted, stomping his foot angrily. “Return to the matter at hand at once!”

Prim giggled, hands on her stomach. “Okay, I understand your name now, after all, Pickernits,” she said, wiping away a tear.

“That is NITPICKER, scamp!”

“Right, right,” Prim lazily waved a dismissive hand and stood. “So, spill it already: What grand plan do you have for this money?”

“Ha! You philistine! That is not to be revealed until a later act!” he said. “This is merely the first act, wherein I introduce my villainy. You have no sense of dramatic tension, do you, little one?”

“And you lack comedic timing,” Prim said, sticking her tongue out and doing a cartwheel along the railing.

“This is no comedy, you foolish child,” the Nitpicker said. “And your mask is not straight! Penalty!” He flicked his wrist, and a red pen fell from his sleeve into his hand. He flung it at Prim, who stepped aside to avoid it.

The Captain had contented herself to watch Prim, smiling at the redhead's antics. Finally, she decided it was time to get to business. “Yer little byplay do be entertainin’,” the Captain said. “But it be pointless – this money be ours!” The pirates roared, waving their weapons.

“Yes, you are quite correct,” the Nitpicker said. “It is time we return to the matter at hand. Nitjas, attack!”

Battle commenced. The pirates threw bombs and clubs at their foes as the nitjas closed on them, tossing pocket dictionaries and ordinary-sized red pens that were also sharpened to quite the point. The lines collided, the nitjas climbing or leaping over the deck. The pirates were more than ready to protect their precious booty. Swords and clubs and pens swung and stabbed. Fists flew, curses were shouted from each side.

The Captain now jumped into the fray, barking orders and laughing as she sent nitjas flying overboard with her bomb gun or knocked them about with her sword. The Nitpicker, meanwhile, satisfied himself to slowly walk toward the action – doubtless for dramatic effect.

Prim, meanwhile, found herself in the midst of a battle with no allies on either side. Pirates and nitjas both took swings at her or grabbed at her. It was taking all her abilities to keep from being overpowered through sheer numbers. The notion of taking any of the fight to her foes was laughable. A lasso fell over her and tightened around her chest, pinning her arms. She dashed at the pirate holding the rope and slid between his legs, then quickly ran around him. The rope trailing behind her did the trick, tripping him. As he toppled over, she slipped out of the loop.

No sooner had she made this escape than a pair of nitjas were swinging pens at her. She danced between them, and grinned as they managed to knock each other out. And then a pirate grabbed her from behind.

A smoke bomb exploded beside her. The pirate coughed, and Prim slipped out of his grip. She rolled away from the smoke, finally able to breathe, gasping for air.

She saw the Nitpicker's pen swinging at her too late to do more than lean back. The weapon struck her head, and she fell, dazed. He raised his weapon to finish her off.

Prim rolled, avoiding the point of the weapon, and managed to get to her feet. And then a nitja kicked her in the back, and she flew into side of the deck.

“Whoever you are, pest, you will not be ruining my greatest plan with your feeble antics,” the Nitpicker said as he approached, two nitjas flanking him, pens pointed at her. The trio thrust their weapons at her.

Prim rolled toward the Nitpicker, under two of the weapons. The third grazed her back. Ignoring the pain, she kicked up at the Nitpicker's shin. He cried out in pain as his leg buckled. Prim leapt onto a nitja and kicked off his chest, trying to get off the ship: Escape was her only option.

“I do not think so!” Nitpicker cried, flicking his wrist. A yellow pen dropped into his hand. He flung it as Prim flew over the rail. It struck the back of her shoulder. She cried out. Her balance thrown off, she landed hard

on the street. Her vision blurred, the sounds of the battle became muted. She struggled to stand, her body slow to respond, sluggish. She heard the two nitjas land beside her.

Another smoke bomb exploded around her. The approaching nitjas shouted in confusion, then coughed as the gas filled their lungs. They then grunted in pain as someone struck them repeatedly.

Prim fared little better, coughing from the smoke. She fell back on the pavement, exhausted. And then she felt hands lift her, and she was slung over a shoulder. She looked up as she and her rescuer escaped the cloud, to see several nitjas throwing the sacks of loot into a truck that had driven up in the chaos. She thought she heard the Nitpicker shouting.

And her world went dark.

She opened her eyes, finding it a surprisingly difficult task. Her vision was clear, at least, though she was not quite certain her head was. She raised a hand to her forehead, trying to recall the events of the battle.

“Welcome back.”

She looked over. Tia watched her from a chair beside the bed Prim found herself in. She realized it was her own bed, and the chair was hers. They were in Prim's apartment. Glancing at the window, she found it was nearly sunset. She noticed her costume folded on the dresser and realized she was in her pajamas. She reached under her shirt and found gauze wrapped over her wounds.

“How long?” Prim asked.

“About sixteen hours.”

Prim nodded, regretting the motion immediately as the room swam. She put one hand back on her forehead, the other waving to indicate the room. “How--”

“I carried you.”

They were silent a few moments as Prim's vision settled down. Finally, she pushed herself up on her pillows.

“And how did you happen to find me?” she asked.

“I followed you, of course.”

“And tended me?”

“Naturally. Stitches, too.”

“Was I poisoned?” Prim frowned as she tried to recall how she had felt. “It seemed ... odd ... there at the end, after the Nitpicker hit me with that dart-pen thing.”

“Sedative. I knew you were fine – You kept babbling.”

Prim took a closer look at her friend. As she expected, based on the curt answers, Tia was glaring at her, body tense.

“I should thank you, then,” Prim said. Tia did not respond. “Thank you, Hot-Tits,” Prim said formally. Tia nodded, then reached over and tossed a paper into Prim's lap. The redhead looked at it. It was opened to an article (way back on page B16) which described the robbery of an armored vehicle by a couple of villains.

“Are you happy?” Tia asked.

Prim blew at her hair in exasperation. “If you are wanting to yell at me, Tia, do so and be done with it,” she said.

“You got to have your fun. You pranced about in your silly costume, you fought the bad guys in the name of justice or whatever.” Tia gripped the chair tightly, as if holding herself back. “And you accomplished nothing!” She pointed to the paper. “Nothing, except making those around you worry and nearly getting yourself killed in the process. As I told you would happen. But would you listen to me? Of course not! Not Prim! When she gets a lunatic idea, the rest of us can only follow along, consequences be damned!” She slapped the chair's hand rest. “So tell me, Prim: Are you happy? Did you get what you set out for?”

Several silent seconds passed. Tia let out a huff and shook her head. “You're always so talkative, and you always have answers. Just not for me, it seems.” She stood, hands clenched. “I made dinner. I'll go reheat some for you.” She walked out of the room.

Prim sighed, took the paper, and pushed the blankets off her. She stood, the effects of the sedative making her only slightly wobbly.

She walked to the dresser, set the paper on it, and lifted her costume up to examine it. It was clean, and the cut on the back had been sewn. She checked the shoulder, finding the hole from the pen-dart had also been mended.

Setting the outfit down, she examined the mask. Someone – Tia, clearly – had made adjustments to it, stitching it better than Prim's limited skill could accomplish. She put it on, looking in the mirror to find it was perfectly straight.

A minute later, Tia walked into the room with a tray laden with a plate and glass. She stopped when she saw Prim wearing her costume, gloves in her hand, mask pushed up over her hair.

“What do you think you're doing?” Tia demanded.

“Dressing,” Prim said. She worked her fingers into a glove.

“Like heck you are,” Tia said, setting the tray on the bed while Prim pulled the glove on. “I didn't risk my neck for you to go risk yours again.”

Prim worked the other glove on, then turned to her friend. “Do you intend to stop me, Hot-Tits?”

Frowning, Tia crossed her arms. “I could, you know.”

Prim pulled the mask over her eyes. “Then do what you must,” she said, walking toward the door.

“Is that all you are going to say?”

Prim angrily turned toward Tia. “What does it matter what I say, Hot-Tits? I am just a mad gnome in a ridiculous getup, right? A dancer, not a superhero.”

Tia had the good grace to look slightly guilty. “Prim...” she began, trailing off. She gave an exasperated sigh.

Prim looked at the ceiling, trying to put her thoughts together. “I am sorry, Hot-Tits,” she said. “You deserve an explanation. I just wish I could give one that would make sense to you. It is just something that feels ... right. As if a part of me demands I do this. That I was not meant only to enjoy the fruits of others' heroics, big and small.”

“So you need to be the hero, too,” Tia said, a tinge of disgust in her voice.

“It is more than that,” Prim said, shaking her head. “It is ... Well ...” Tia raised an eyebrow to see the normally verbose redhead struggling to find words.

“Prim, if this is about ego--” she began, but Prim cut her off.

“No! It is not about me gaining anything! It is about me giving back!” She turned away, a hand idly working on her hair flame. “I am called, Hot-Tits,” she began again, “to share what I can only describe as the light.”

Tia snorted. “The light? What are you--”

“The light of joy and cheer and happiness and beauty and love! It is in me, yearning to get out. It is why I became a dancer, so that I might spread beauty in a world all too eager to focus on the ugly – to wear it as a badge of honor, even.

“People notice the negatives, the losses, more than anything else. The joy of a raise could be ruined by a stained blouse. A glorious triumph in sports could be wrecked by a simple rude gesture in traffic.

“But when people smile, Hot-Tits –” Prim smiled slightly at the thought “– and others see it, they, too get a little lift. And when I dance and sing for kids, their eyes shine. And maybe, just maybe, they pass it along, a little bit of the light. And yet, I wonder: 'Am I doing all I can? Am I not obligated to do utmost of my ability and talent? Can I do more?’

“There are those who seek the destruction of all that is good in this world. Perhaps they are too much, too powerful, for a gnomish dancer and her martial arts friend with the gorgeous knockers.” Tia rolled her eyes at this, unable to stop the corner of her mouth twitching upward. Prim continued, “but there are lesser ones who see the light and turn away, distracted by baubles, by lust, by selfish greed. Everyday, ordinary villains who slowly chip away at others' joy, at the foundations of civilization itself, even. If no one engages them, if no one offers an alternative, if no one shares and protects the light – why should anyone care anymore, Hot-Tits? Why should anyone not just be in this life for their own selves?”

Prim looked at Tia, eyes blazing. “I would not long survive in such a world, Hot-Tits. And when I realized you and I had something more than just the ordinary, I realized I had to go out there and battle for the light. Alone, if that must be so.”

She turned away. “I have started something. I do not know where it leads. I only know I must do my part, and I cannot turn back.”

There was an awkward silence, and then Prim continued in a soft voice. “Sorry to preach. Thank you, Hot-Tits. For saving me. And for stitching me and my costume up. I shall be going, now. Feel free to sleep here tonight, if you wish.”

She walked out of the bedroom, ignoring the pain in her back, and headed to the front door.

“You really are hopeless, you know,” Tia called out.

Prim turned back. Tia stepped out of the bedroom carrying the tray with dinner on it in one hand – and wearing the spectacles Prim had given her earlier.

“You can't even finish your dinner,” she said, putting a hand on her hip and shaking her head with a grin. “How do you expect to do any better out there without me?”

Prim's lip trembled. She momentarily could not say anything as tears welled in her eyes. Finally, she wailed, “Hot-Tits!”

“Yes, yes,” Tia said nervously, stepping back a pace. “There's no need – oomph! Watch out, Prim, don't make me drop – get your face offa – ack, too tight, can't breathe ...”

Part Two

“This is where the Nitpicker went off to?” Prim asked, looking down at the factory from the roof of the building across the street.

Standing beside her, Tia was also examining the factory. “That’s what the goon ... the *nitja* –” her distaste of the term was evident in her voice – “the idiot I beat up and got that smoke bomb from was saying to the other idiot I beat up.”

“Did you get this information before or after you knocked them senseless?” Prim grinned.

Tia shrugged. “Could have been either way. I was a bit preoccupied with saving your backside and not worrying much about the details.”

“How dare you, Hot-Tits!” Prim said in a tone of offense, a hand going to her chest. Tia cocked an eyebrow at her. “– not pay attention to the details of my exquisite ass,” the redhead finished with a sly look.

Rolling her eyes once again, Tia turned back to the factory. “I wonder why they chose a taffy factory. Does anyone even eat that stuff anymore?”

“I used to as a kid. Then, this one time, it pulled a tooth right out. I rather lost the taste for it after that.”

“I can imagine.” Tia pointed. “Over there – looks like a garage door opened up. See all the light? I’ll bet that’s where our ... *nitja*,” her mouth turned at the word, “friends are. Back to business?”

“That depends – Are you sure you want to be seen with all that on?”

Tia glared at her. “And what is wrong with my outfit?”

Prim gestured at the flat-cap and trench coat Tia had added to her spectacles. “Well, you look like a confused university professor whose tenure was just rejected, is all. Not to mention the mask *and* specs? A bit of an overkill, no?”

Tia snorted and adjusted the glasses. “Well, at least I’m not called Butterfly.”

“Hey! It is Hummingbird, actually.”

“Right, right, because that is so much more dramatic a name. I honestly can’t believe you’re going with it. Didn’t you say that pirate loon called you that?”

“She did, but she had a good point,” Prim said. She pranced about. “I am both agile and distractingly lovely like a hummingbird. Besides, it beats –” a car backfired on the street below them, drowning her words out “– which is just a silly name.”

“Absolutely,” Tia absentmindedly agreed, looking back at the factory. “No sense being silly, Hummingbird.”

“Precisely!” Prim agreed. Then she paused. “Wait a minute, are you mocking me –”

“Right! Onward and forward, and all that jazz!” Tia cried, dashing toward the fire escape.

Prim frowned a moment, then giggled and followed.

On the factory’s roof, Prim picked the lock on a window. Opening it up, the pair slipped down onto a metal catwalk high above the ground. They then carefully walked toward the lights they had spotted from across the street.

The scene before them was bizarre. In a large open area, the Nitpicker and a hooded figure were having a discussion while nitjas were busy transferring several boxes from a trio of limos into a nondescript black van. Several large men, clearly the hooded man’s goons, stood guard by the limos.

A giant vat of taffy stood to one side of the area. A few nitjas stood by the controls of the hoist which held a chain over the vat. From the chain, her arms tied behind her, dangled the Captain, held aloft by a metal hook attached to ropes around her chest.

“Just be finishin’ me and be done, ye raft-ridin’ sail stainer!” the Captain called down.

The Nitpicker idly waved a hand up at her. “Your demise will come in due time, my uncouth pirate friend. These tasks must be performed in the proper order.” He returned his attention to the hooded man.

Tia touched Prim’s shoulder and pointed to an access ladder. Prim nodded, and the pair crept to it and worked their way down to a lower catwalk. After few yards along this path, they hopped onto a stack of crates. Dropping onto their stomachs, they looked over the edge of the crates.

They noticed the Captain’s weapons lying beside the vat. Meanwhile, the nitjas who were loading boxes finished their work, slamming the van doors closed. Several goons loaded into two of the limos as the hooded

figure and the Nitpicker shook hands. The former moved to the remaining limo and entered, a couple of goons joining him.

“Should we try and stop them?” Tia asked as the limos' engines started up.

“I do not think so,” Prim said. “We should probably focus on the Nitpicker and the Captain.”

“You don't mean to rescue her, do you?” Tia asked. “After all the trouble she gave you earlier?”

“She does not deserve such a sticky fate, Finisher. But, that was not what I meant.”

“And just what do you --” Tia began, then stopped as she felt something sharp pressing against her back. A second joined it, and the tip of a nitja pen-spear appeared beside her face.

She slowly turned her head to look at Prim, to find her companion also held at pen-point. The redhead shrugged and grinned wryly. “It just seemed the more pressing matter,” she said.

The nitjas forced the gnomes to stand and patted them down. “Hey, careful where you put your hands!” Prim said. “My exquisite ass is higher, you know!” She shook it for emphasis. The rather confused nitja patted it. “Much better!” she said with a grin.

Meanwhile, another nitja removed Tia's coat to discover she wore a bandoleer with knives and collapsible batons and various other assorted weaponry, all of which they promptly took, as well. They pulled the gnomes' hands behind their backs and tied them together. Below, doors raised up, and the limos drove outside. The doors lowered as the gnomes were shoved forward and forced to hop down the crates to the floor, where one walked over to add Tia's gear to the Captain's.

The Nitpicker turned at the sound of the approaching group and clapped his hands together. “Oh-ho, but we have guests!” he said. “Why, I do believe we have met before, my colorful little scamp,” he said to Prim, smiling.

“I recall you making quite the spectacle of yourself, so I must admit, the pleasure was mine, Pickernits,” Prim said with a grin.

He frowned. “Still precocious, little one. And quite rude. You know my name, but I do not know yours.”

“Hummingbird,” Prim said cheerily.

“A most appropriate name,” he complimented. “And I see you have straightened your mask. Excellent.”

“Is it not, though? My friend the Finisher here took care of it for me.”

He turned to Tia. “The Finisher, is it? An odd and rather ambitious name, no?” He cocked an eyebrow skeptically. “Regardless, most excellent craftsmanship. I take it you were the one who carried our mutual friend away from my nitjas?”

“Yes, I pummeled some of your idiot minions,” Tia growled.

He reached out and plucked her glasses, looking through the lenses. “Tsk, tsk. No prescription. Both spectacles and a mask disguise?” he asked in a disapproving tone. “Is that not – ”

Tia swiftly kicked out, catching the side of the Nitpicker's knee. It buckled, and he cried out as he fell onto it. “I'll be having my specs back, thank you,” Tia growled.

The nitjas dashed over and grabbed her, pulling her back. “No!” the Nitpicker said, holding a hand out, palm up. The nitjas ready to pummel Tia held back.

“Oh, I suppose I should have warned you she has a bit of a temper,” Prim said with another grin.

The Nitpicker grunted, annoyed. He stepped to Tia and set the lenses back on her face. “You are as uncouth as that pilfering pirate,” he said to her. “I think you two should join her, then.”

“Nice of ye to be visitin' me, Hummingbird,” the Captain said. The heroines were now hanging on either side of her, similarly bound.

“It is truly a pleasure,” Prim said. “Though I do regret it is under such uncomfortable circumstances,” she added.

“It do be a pleasant day fer a dip, tho', do it not?” She gestured to the taffy below.

“Indeed.”

“I do be wonderin', while I be hangin' up here all this time, what flavor I be endin' up.”

“Piña colada, of course, my pirate friend.”

The Captain laughed loudly. “Yarr, I can be livin' with that. How about you?”

“I am quite clearly passion fruit,” Prim said, causing the Captain to laugh even harder.

“You seem to know all the flavors, Hummingbird,” Tia said as a few nitjas looked up, annoyed, before returning to their work. “Did you eat the stuff constantly as a kid? Is it any wonder you lost a tooth?”

Prim grinned. “I may have been a little on the greedy side in my youth when it came to sweets.”

Tia snorted. “Your youth? I’ve seen you polish off triple sundaes all on your own...”

“My dear ladies!” the Nitpicker called up from below, interrupting the argument. “My men have finished loading up the goods. It is now time to say our farewells.”

“But first, you have to tell us your genius plan,” Prim said.

He smiled. “You are quite correct.”

“Yarr, do just be killin’ me already,” the Captain moaned.

“My genius plan naturally involves various esoteric sciences which are doubtless beyond your hopelessly limited knowledge. However, to keep it simple for you, I needed chemicals which would produce an exothermic reaction orders of magnitude greater than the typical – ”

“You mean bombs,” Prim said simply.

He let out an annoyed cough into his hand. “Right. Bombs. And since the procurement of such things – ”

“Would be illegal, you had to use the black market and, thus, rob the armored van to pay off the fellow in the hoodie from earlier,” Prim continued.

“This no be difficult so far,” the Captain said.

“Yes, rather simple, really,” Tia agreed.

“There is nothing simple about the Nitpicker’s plans!” he shouted. Collecting himself, he continued. “I need the bombs to knock the water tower over into the warehouse and destroy all the tea stored there!”

The gnomes looked at each other a moment. Finally, Prim said, “and you have a large quantity of tea already on its way to the markets, I take it?”

“Correct!”

“And when word gets out the local shipment of tea has been ruined...” she trailed off.

“Then there will be a run on any available tea, of course.”

“And where would this tea be headed?”

“Ienotochi, of course.”

Prim gasped. “You fiend! You actually mean to change the price of tea in Ienotochi!”

The Nitpicker let out a maniacal laugh. “Yes, I always detested that ridiculous saying! When did the price of tea in a far-off land ever become the standard unit of measure for the value of one’s actions?”

Tia tilted her head back and let out a thoroughly annoyed cry. “I’m with the Captain!” she said. “Just finish us, already!”

“Yes, that does seem to be a good idea,” the Nitpicker said. “I hope you have said your final prayers.”

A nitja ran over and spoke to him quietly, so the gnomes could not hear. He responded, then the nitja ran off. “Forgive me, but I fear I need a moment. Do feel free to hang around.” He walked to the van, where other nitjas were gesticulating.

“Before we go down,” the Captain said to Prim, “would ye mind answerin’ one thing, Hummingbird?”

“What is it, Captain?”

The Captain smiled mischievously. “What flavor be yer friend?”

“Peaches and cream,” Prim answered without hesitation. The Captain roared with laughter.

“Oh, very funny,” Tia said angrily.

“Aye, it do be indeed, landlubber!” The pirate continued laughing.

“Landlubber? You do realize your ‘ship’ never leaves the street, right?”

“Yar, what be ye a-sayin’?”

“I’m saying you’re a pirate who has never so much as gotten her toes wet! You’re as much a landlubber as I am!”

“Watch yerself, lubber! Those be fightin’ words!” the Captain said.

“Yes, they are,” Tia snapped back. “Tell me – can you even swim, oh mighty pirate?”

“Yar, that be doin’ it! I be challengin’ ye to a duel, I do!”

“With pleasure. After we get mixed into candies, I’ll be ready to give you a solid beat-down.”

They glared at each other for several seconds, then sighed almost as one. “Yarr, thar not be much point to arguin’ right now,” the Captain said.

"I dunno," Tia mused. "It was rather distracting me from our sugary outlook." They grinned at one another, then fell into thoughtful silence.

Moments later, the Nitpicker spoke again, calling up to them. "I do apologize, ladies." They looked down at him as he walked back from the van. "That minor matter will no longer interrupt our discussion. As brave heroines doomed to –"

"I no be a heroine, ye rotten-timbered son of a sea cook!"

The Nitpicker idly waved a dismissive hand at the Captain. "No matter. Good manners demand I give you an uninterrupted monologue before sending you to your demise. As such, we shall begin anew!"

"Oh, for the love of ..." Tia groaned.

He coughed into his hand, then put both behind his back, as if ready to give a lecture. He opened his mouth; however, a high-pitched voice interrupted, singing joyfully.

I'm a deepwater sailor come from Ienotochi.
Give me way, hey, blow the man down.
If ye give me some whiskey, I won't up and punch ye.
Give me some time to blow the man down.

All eyes turned toward the voice to find Prim, who was on the railing beside the control panel, singing and dancing merrily. Tia and the Captain looked over to where she had been hanging beside them, then at each other. They grinned.

There was a bad guy who was quite persnickety.
Give me way, hey, blow the man down.
There was no one more picky, but plenty more tricky!
Give me some time to blow the man down.

When she got to *tricky*, Prim looked right at the Nitpicker.

"Your meter is all off!" the Nitpicker cried after she finished.

"And your buckle line is all off," Prim retorted, still dancing merrily.

He looked down at his belt, then back at Prim. "That makes no sense! My shirt does not button in the center!" he shouted. "How could I even have such a line, you dunce? And stop that!"

"Whatever is upsetting you, Pickernits?"

"Your time signature! You keep switching between 3/4 and 4/4 time!"

"Quite so," Prim cheerfully answered. "Is it not simply complex?"

"Those words are antonyms, you blithering buffoon! I demand you choose a signature and stick to it!"

"Oh, very well," Prim said, shifting her dance accordingly – but now on her hands.

"That is just pointlessly silly!" he told her.

"Irregardless, is it not a delight to watch?" she asked.

"That word is stupid!" he said. "Adding 'ir-' to 'regardless' should change the meaning, not mean the same thing!"

"Yes, there do tend to be *alot* of such silly words in our language. I read about them in a *lieberry* once."

"It is *'library'*, you simpleton!" he shouted. He began shaking his fists like a child having a fit. "And I just *know* you said 'a lot' as one word, did you not?"

"Oh, did I?" she asked in a would-be-innocent voice. "That must ... be ... the ... moooooost ..." she spoke slowly, then suddenly ended in a rush, "infuriatingthingyoueverencountered." She paused. "Ever," she finished.

"ARRRGH!" he cried, covering his hands with his ears.

"Umm, boss," a nitja said. "You okay?"

"No, I most definitely am not okay, you dimwitted oaf!" he shouted, grabbing his minion by the front of his shirt. "Seize that little rule-breaking gnome and shut her up already!" He shoved him toward Prim.

The nitjas drew their pens and approached Prim. "Oh, dear me," she said, laying along the rail and putting a fist under her chin as if in deep thought. "I do seem to have started something, have I not?"

"That you have," Tia said.

The Nitpicker and his men looked over. Where the gnomes' weapons were, Tia and the Captain were standing. The pirate was checking her gun was loaded, while Tia was shrugging into her trench coat.

"How did you--?" the Nitpicker began, then looked over at Prim. The redhead was now swinging her legs off the railing as though she had not a care in the world. Beside her, two ropes were hanging over the railing. He saw they were connected to levers of the winch controls.

He slapped a hand to his forehead. "Your infuriating display was to distract everyone from those two, then you could pull the ropes while dancing on your hands. We were so focused on you..."

"Well, I must admit, there were moments everyone was looking your way," Prim said with a wink. "It was quite embarrassing to watch, to be honest."

He clenched his fists at his side. "You ... you ... infuriating little *trickster* ..." he trailed off, comprehension dawning. "You even told me it was a trick," he said softly. "Well played."

Prim laughed, standing and bowing. "You quite clearly listened to my song, Pickernits. I thank you for the honor." She straightened up. "But you did not pay enough attention, it would seem – to your cost."

"What cost?" He asked, then he brought a fist down into his palm. "Oh, right. Your friends are loose."

"And armed," Tia reminded him.

"And we be ready to be gettin' this fight started, we be!" the Captain said, taking aim at a nitja behind Prim and letting fly a bomb.

Prim leapt off the rail as the black sphere flew past. The explosion knocked a few nitjas down, where they lay senseless.

Tia charged a group of nitjas, a baton in either hand. "Come on over, it's time to play!" she shouted, grinning, as she began raining blows on her foes. Nitjas were sent flying about by the batons or her kicks. Neither shin nor skull was safe from her attack.

The Captain had plenty of enemies to keep herself contented. Laughing her maniacal laugh, she swatted them with her saber or pistol-whipped their heads when she was not sending the odd bomb at other nitjas in the factory. Two bombs flew over a quartet of nitjas, who watched, confused by the miss – until the bombs exploded against crates, which promptly dumped their load of candies on the hapless minions' heads, burying them under a mountain of sweets.

Meanwhile, Hummingbird and the Nitpicker stood facing each other, mere feet apart. The nitjas intuitively understood this fight was not for them and let them be.

"I give you credit," he told her, brandishing his pen-spear. "I never imagined you could give me such trouble."

She grinned. "I have been told I have a knack for causing it."

He laughed. "Yes, I believe you. Are you not armed?"

"I carry no weapon."

"Is this some kind of code of honor?" he asked.

She shrugged. "I would not know what to do with one if I had it."

"And yet, as you said, you have started a brawl. How do you expect to survive it?"

She merely smiled.

"Very well! Have at you!" he cried, swinging his pen at her.

She deftly stepped aside from it, then ducked as he brought it around. "Mighty slow, Pickernits," she admonished.

"Then I shall increase speed!" he cried, engaging in a series of rapid thrusts. Prim evaded them, then rolled under him as he ended his sequence with a kick.

She simply slapped him on the rear.

"Why you!" he cried, spinning and bringing his pen around. It whistled as it sliced through the air where she had been standing, but she was nowhere to be seen. He looked around a moment, confused, then closed his eyes in anger.

"Would you kindly get off my shoulders and take this fight seriously?" he growled.

Giggling, she performed a back flip off him. "How about we compromise," she suggested, winking and dancing about, carefree, once again. "One of two."

With a strangled cry of fury, he swung at her again and again. Each time, she deftly avoided his strike. He flung small pens from his sleeves at her, maneuvering her toward the pile of crates, meaning to trap her with nowhere to move as she dodged his pre-planned assault. With a triumphant grin, he brought the pen down at her.

Quick as can be, she leapt onto the side of the crate and off, the pen striking the crate and smashing through. As candies poured out, she deftly landed on the weapon he still held.

“Close, Pickernits,” she said. Before he knew what was happening, she gave his cheek a peck. “But still too slow.”

Laughing gaily, she leapt off as he roared with rage. Strategy no longer a thought, he simply swung at her wildly. She easily avoided his blows, ducking and dodging and cartwheeling about.

And then he saw his chance. As she once again leapt aside, he kicked a wrapped candy that had landed nearby. It slid to where her foot came down. For just a moment, she struggled to recover her balance. In that moment, he shoved her down and knelt over her, his pen-spear across her chest, pinning her to the floor.

“Good show,” he said. “But, I think it is time our game was finished.”

She smiled.

“How?” he cried. “How can you *still* be smiling after all this?”

“Because she knows my cue,” Tia said, stepping beside them and cracking her knuckles. He turned to look at her in surprise.

“Yarr, so *that* be why ye be callin' yerself that,” the Captain called out. The Nitpicker looked over to see her sitting on a pile of unconscious nitjas, calmly reloading her gun.

“Don't credit me. Hummingbird's the one who came up with it,” Tia said.

“And an accurate name it is, is it not, Finisher?” Prim asked.

The Nitpicker sighed, all the fight draining from him. He looked at Prim. “How many steps ahead of me were you?” he asked. “Did you actually plan on getting captured, I wonder.”

She shrugged again. “It was a possibility, of course. Though I did not really have a plan so much as a set of tasks and a vague notion of how to go about getting them done.”

He let out a rueful laugh. “All my elaborate scheming, and you beat me with improvisation. Well played, dear Hummingbird. Well played, indeed.”

“Right,” Tia said. “Enough talk.” And with a kick to the gut to start, she set about pummeling the hapless Nitpicker.

While the beating was going on, Prim stood and dusted herself off. The Captain walked over to her.

“Ye know me offer still be standin’,” she said. “Ye can be joinin' me crew any time.”

“Thank you, Captain,” Prim said. “And if you ever get tired of villainy – ”

The pirate let out a loud bark of a laugh. “Ye be a funny one, ye be, Hummingbird.” Prim shook her head, laughing lightly.

They watched Tia at her work for a few moments. The Captain took her hat off and began brushing it with her hand.

“I suppose I should try and keep you for the police,” Prim said.

“And yet the thought no be serious, do it?”

“No, I do not suppose it is. I wonder why.”

“Well, if'n ye be turnin' the Captain in, who'd be left to be keepin' the pirate scum of the city in line?” She bowed.

Prim laughed. “Very true. Meanwhile, do not go after the truck's money. I do not want to have to fight you again so soon.”

The Captain put her hat back on. “Yarr, well, since ye be savin' me, I be givin' ye this one.”

“Thank you,” Prim said. “Take care of yourself, my friend.”

The pirate gave her a serious look. “Never be trustin' a pirate for a friend,” she warned with a twisted grin. “Ye never know when our fancy will be changin'.” She raised her eyepatch, revealing a healthy eye underneath. She intently studied Prim with both eyes. “Though I think I be fancyin' ye for quite a while. Good day, my flighty friend. Tell that lubber she no be bad in a fight. And our duel do be put off fer now.” She turned and strode to an exit, replacing her eye patch and softly singing “I'm a deepwater sailor come from Ienotochi....” The door banged shut behind her.

“Come on, Finisher,” Hummingbird wearily called out. “Let us go home.”

Back at her apartment, Prim sat in a chair in front of the television and idly adjusted her hair flame. The news was on, though she was not paying it any mind.

A cold can of beer landing in her lap snapped her out of her reverie. "I would say these are well-earned," Tia said, flopping onto the bean bag and cracking open her drink.

Prim smiled softly, looking at the can in her hand. "Yes. We did something, did we not?"

Tia looked at her, eyebrow cocked. "Something?" she asked. "We kicked some serious butt!" She punched the air with her free hand.

"Yes," Prim agreed.

"And stopped the Nitpicker's plan."

"Uh-huh."

"The price of tea in Ienotochi is safe, thanks to us."

"True."

Tia tossed a throw pillow at Prim. "Would you cheer up? We just *won*, you know!"

Prim smiled. "Yes, we won – this round. The next round is getting that money back. And after that, there will certainly be another crime to stop, more citizens to save."

"Hey, what's with the brooding?" Tia asked. "You're the one who got us started down this road."

"Yes, I did, did I not?" She smiled, a feeling of pride stirring inside.

"And you sure as hell aren't stopping," Tia said, grinning and taking a sip of beer. "Not now you've got me hooked."

"Have I?" Prim asked, taking a sip of her own.

"What? Of course!" Tia cried. "You're good at getting us into fights! And much better ones than in the ring!"

Prim laughed. She shelved worries of tracking down the money and future conflicts with the Captain for later. "I would imagine there are plenty more in our future," she said. "And we can win them all –" she suddenly jumped into Tia's lap, throwing her arms around her.

"Hey, mind the beer!" Tia cried, trying to shove Prim off herself.

"– Just so long as I have you with me!" Prim finished.

Tia stopped fighting and smiled. "Wouldn't miss them for the world," she said. Suddenly, she let out a little snort of laughter. "I just realized: I doubt the *nitja* recruiting centers will be getting many takers after tonight!" She said with satisfaction, her distaste for the word still quite clear in her tone.

Prim let out another giggle. "No, I would imagine not."

"Ah, did you hear that Pickernits as I pummeled him?"

"He does have a surprisingly high-pitched scream."

As they laughed together, a woman on the television spoke to the camera as images of handcuffed nitjas being escorted by police flashed on the screen behind her. "And so this plot was foiled by what would seem to be the city's newest heroines. What does the future hold for Hummingbird and the Finisher?"