

The Collected Tales of Prim

By: Wyland

As Told Him by Primiphi
With Additions by Tia Wildleaf

Foreword

When the author first recorded a Tale, he had no idea what he had stepped into. To his everlasting surprise, the stories of the irrepressible gnome Prim have entertained and delighted readers. For this and the encouragement of his friends to keep chronicling the adventures of Prim, the author wishes to express his gratitude.

This collection is intended to gather up all the non-major Tales of Primiphi Piltrum “Prim” Stannumshard and her friends into one document for convenience. The Tales are here presented in (roughly) chronological order, starting after the Major Tale imaginatively named “Prim Tale Two” and later renamed to “Gnomish Plunder” onboard the *Scurvy Plunder*, so the reader may better understand how each Tale relates to the others.

As the author merely relays the Tales as told by Prim, he makes no guarantees as to the accuracy of the events herein chronicled. He, Prim, Tia, and the others hope you enjoy this collection.

Prim in “A Tale of Perspective”

The ocean roiled in the storm, sending waves crashing against the wooden hull of the ship. Rain deluged the crew as they worked feverishly to see the vessel through the rough weather. At the helm, a gnome barked orders as her rain-soaked blonde hair whipped about in the winds, giving her an appearance which was – when one took a moment to consider it – only slightly wilder than what she usually wore.

At the prow of the ship another gnome stood witnessing the battle between the forces of nature and the captain and crew of the *Scurvy Plunder*. Prim watched as a large wave approached the ship. She felt the deck tilt as Captain Lilly spun the wheel, turning the vessel to face the wave head-on. Prim held on to the rails as the ship pointed higher and higher, climbing the wave. And then the bow came crashing down as the ship crested the wave, the spray of the ocean washing over the redhead, momentarily hiding her from view.

She let out a few coughs after the water passed. She checked the rope at her waist, its ends anchoring her to the rails. She felt the deck tilt again. Looking up, she saw another wave coming at them, Lilly driving them to it with a mad determination Prim admired in the pirate captain.

The bard's face lit up with a wild smile. After her months of idleness in the frozen northern regions, she could not express the joy she felt at being on the move again. Her cheer had lasted all through the weeks of the journey to date, infecting the captain and her crew. When the storm had been sighted a few hours back, Prim had immediately demanded to see it firsthand. She had defied Lilly's orders, tying herself in place with unimpressive knots the pirate had grumpily re-tied.

Once again, the ship crested, and the ocean momentarily buried Prim. After the water passed, Prim laughed a laugh comprised of one part excitement, one part defiance, and perhaps more than a little part insanity.

She had never felt so free.

An hour later, Prim plucked at her fiddle, trying to perfect a few measures of a tune she was composing. She sat cross-legged on Lilly's bed in the captain's quarters. Her clothes were all hung on a line, drying out. She had wrapped a towel around her wet hair.

She nodded to herself with a smile, satisfied with her latest effort, and set the bow to the strings. Before she could start her tune, however, the door to the cabin swung open with a crash.

Lilly furiously strode in, pausing only to turn and slam the door shut behind her. She stomped over beside the bed, where she stood, water dripping and pooling beneath her.

“Do ye want to be explainin' what ye be thinkin', Primiphi?” she demanded.

“Whatever are you on about, Dandelion?” Prim asked, moving the bow. The music of the fiddle filled the room.

“Don't ye be playin' that when I be hollerin' at ye!” Lilly shouted, leaning closer and bringing her hand up as if to knock the instrument out of Prim's hands. She caught herself and stopped well short, but her meaning was clear.

Her behavior earned her a cocked eyebrow from the redhead. “Goodness, Dandelion,” Prim said, lowering the fiddle. “You really are annoyed.”

Lilly thrust a finger at her. “Annoyed? I be furious, Primiphi! Ye be riskin' yer life – fer what? A lark?”

“I told you,” Prim answered calmly. “I wanted to see the storm. After my recent trip to the north, I am quite thoroughly tired of being stuck indoors, kept out of sight. Our current voyage has had little to commend it for excitement beyond the weather. And yet, you always hide me in here when a storm comes through.”

“Of course I be movin' ye in here!” Lilly said. “Ye be useless in a storm! And me crew no be needin' yer distractions!”

“Your crew performed admirably, as you always knew they would,” Prim said. She raised her fiddle to her shoulder again. “You pay them enough when I am onboard, after all.”

She began playing again, the music filling the cabin. Lilly ground her teeth.

“Ye could've been washed overboard,” she growled.

Prim rolled her eyes. “With the knots you tied?”

“Riggin' could be fallin' on ye.”

“You take care of your oddly-named ship, Dandelion. I trust the *Scurvy Plunder*. And I will not be tucked away like a fragile doll anymore,” she finished with a tone of finality, interrupting her song to point at Lilly with her bow for emphasis.

Lilly stomped her foot irritably as Prim resumed playing. “I should be stringin' ye up on the decks and whippin' ye in front of everyone, I should be,” she said.

Prim laughed, the music stopping as she brought the instrument down once again. “Is that a threat or a promise?” she asked lightly.

“Ye always be makin' jokes,” Lilly said, shaking her head. “I do be serious, Primiphi.”

“I know. You always look sexy when you get so serious.”

Lilly sputtered, blushing. “I – ye – Blast it all, Primiphi!” she finally cried out. “Ye be makin' me look silly in front o' me crew!”

“Oh, goodness,” Prim said, waving off Lilly's concerns. “I do that no fewer than four times a day.”

The pirate let out a roar of frustration. “Why do I be puttin' up with ye?” she demanded, glaring at the bard.

Prim gave her a seductive smile. “Because you know the more I annoy you, the more playful I am in your bed,” she said with a wink. She resumed playing.

Lilly stood watching Prim for a moment before pushing her eyepatch up. She gazed at Prim, looking her up and down. The pirate grinned. “Oh, how I do be forgettin' just how dangerous ye can be when ye be gettin' trig and wantin' somethin',” she said. “Tho' I be warnin' ye, Primiphi: Do be careful what ye be wishin' fer.”

Prim frowned as she considered Lilly's words. “Is that some sort of threat, Dandelion?”

“It be a promise, it do be,” Lilly said. And the pirate began laughing, a laugh of wicked delight, the sort of laugh which sets a person on guard rather than at ease.

Prim's skin formed goosebumps at the sound. “Dandelion, just what – ”

Lilly started yanking her coat off, eyeing Prim with a primal expression which caused the bard to unconsciously scoot back on the bed. “Ye do be wantin' to put that away,” Lilly said, nodding toward Prim's fiddle.

“Woa! Wait just a moment!” Prim protested as she wisely took Lilly's advice and set the fiddle aside. “You are soaked through, you know!”

“Yarr, ye no need be worryin' 'bout catchin' cold, Primiphi,” Lilly answered as she tossed her boots into the corner. “I do be thinkin' we'll be warm enough, we will be!”

And with that, she jumped into the bed after Prim, who let out a playful squeal.

The next morning, they arrived at an island known by the crew to be a good source of fresh water and citrus fruits. With the *Scurvy Plunder* at anchor, Lilly and a select squad gathered in a boat and headed to shore.

Prim had invited herself along, of course. “I find it rather ironic we are on a mission to gather citrus,” she had said. “On the *Scurvy Plunder*, I mean. Since the citrus is to avoid coming down with scur –”

“Yarr, we do be gettin' it!” Lilly had shouted, her men laughing.

Now in the boat, the crew sang as they rowed. Prim led them in a silly (and suitably vulgar) shanty. As usual, they quite enjoyed her singing and antics as she playfully danced on the gunwale. As the bard had a knack for breaking out lesser-known tunes, the men also knew they could count on her to keep the material fresh – in multiple meanings of the term.

The boat hit the beach. Prim deftly jumped into the shallow water. While the crew dragged the boat ashore, she made her way to the dry land and fell forward, eyes closed. Laughing, she rolled onto her back and swung her arms and legs across the sand.

“Oh, Dandelion!” she cried as she felt a shadow fall onto her. “You may be a creature of the sea, but ever will I prefer the land! And after so long in the cold lands, this warmth is simply divine!”

“I do suppose, when one has been chilled for an extended duration, a small island in the temperate regions would seem uncommonly warm,” an unfamiliar voice answered in a dull tone. “Fair enough.”

Prim opened her eyes to find a man looking down at her. He wore a robe made of dozens of patches stitched together, no one quite like any of the others in either size, shape, material, or pattern.

“Hello, up there!” Prim said, grinning. “I must say, that is surely the most delightful outfit I have ever seen.”

“There are many more so, and many less so,” he said, his voice still flat, and Prim wondered if he ever expressed true interest in anything. “Then again, what delights some would doubtless disturb others.” He continued as he looked toward the rowboat.

Prim followed his gaze. The pirates were now approaching, hands on weapons. “Yarr, who be ye and what be ye doin' to Primiphi?” Lilly called out.

“I presume your second question is the one you are most interested in at the moment, considering the state of your friend,” the stranger answered. He turned back to Prim. “Some would appreciate assistance, and others would prefer none,” he told her, offering her a hand up.

Smiling, she took it. “Thank you. Does that properly categorize me?” she asked, eyes twinkling as he helped her to her foot.

“In a certain manner, it would, Primiphi,” he said, releasing her hand and idly wiping sand from his own on his robes.

“Just Prim will do.”

“Very well, Just Prim,” he said as Lilly arrived, the other pirates fanning around the trio.

Prim let out a merry laugh. “You are a most intriguing individual, are you not?” she said.

“If one has not met many individuals, perhaps,” he said.

“Ye no be answerin' me first question,” Lilly said.

“Yes, many would be upset at not knowing someone's name, especially after having just revealed a compatriot's to said person.”

“Ye be mocking me, ye be!” Lilly fumed as Prim giggled.

“I do not think he is,” she said. “Rather, I think he just has a different point of view on things.”

The man perked up, the first sign of interest he had yet shown. “You are unusually perceptive, Just Prim,” he said, emotion now in his voice. “Or is it merely a lucky guess?”

“Do I look like I ever guess?” Prim asked with a mischievous grin.

“You look like one who is used to keeping others off-balance,” he answered. “You prefer they do the guessing.”

“I do not know if I should be tickled or insulted,” Prim said, laughing.

Lilly nodded to her crew, who all drew their weapons. “Enough foolishness. Ye be tellin' us yer name now, ye scar-faced bilge drinker, or we be stringin' ye up.”

“I see you are a dreadfully singular-minded person,” he said, his voice toneless again. “Then again, such determination could prove useful in combat, which might explain why you all look so rough. With Just Prim, here, excepted, of course.” He courteously nodded toward the redhead.

“Yer name, ye flounderin' sluggard, or yer head!” Lilly cried, drawing her own sword.

“Such crudity,” he said. “Though it is rather effective, as I do prefer my head remain unharmed and in my own possession.”

“Do you always take the back route to your point?” Prim, who had been watching him with great interest, asked.

“There are many paths to destinations,” he said. “Some are quicker than others, yet still may not be the best – ”

“Yarr, that do be it!” Lilly shouted, stepping toward him. Prim quickly slipped between her and the man. “Outta me way, Primiphi!” the captain snarled.

“Calm down, Dandelion,” Prim said before turning toward the man. “I think what the Captain here is saying, in her own way,” she told him, “is the best route at this juncture happens to also be the quickest.”

He studied her a moment before answering. “I judge you are wise on this topic, Just Prim.” He coughed into his hand. “Ahem. I am called *Perspectivus*.”

“Great!” Lilly said, shrugging Prim aside. “Now ye can enjoy the view as ye hang from yonder tree.”

“There is no need for that,” Prim said. She grabbed the irate pirate in both arms, holding her back from attacking him. “Our new friend here simply has a different approach to the world, is all.”

“He can be havin' whatever approach he desires once he do be swingin'.”

“Forgive – mph – Dandelion,” Prim said to *Perspectivus*, straining as she held the pirate back. “She can be rather direct even in the best – hey! Stop that! Or keep it up ... – the best of times.”

“There is much to commend the forward approach,” he said. Dandelion stopped trying to shove Prim aside.

“Ye do be *agreein'* with me?” she asked him.

He shook his head. “No, merely noting how some would view your methods with approbation. Others, meanwhile, would consider them the techniques of the fool.”

“So now I be a fool, do I?” Dandelion cried. Prim quickly resumed holding her back as the pirate swung her sword wildly, striking only the air. The other pirates roared and moved in.

“Dandelion, stand down, please!” Prim shouted.

“Why you be defendin' the lice-infested, yellow – ”

“We cannot simply leave him without understanding what is going on. And he just thinks differently. I find it fascinating.” The bard cocked an eyebrow and grinned at Lilly. “And I think you know how studying such things improve my energy and performance later.”

The pirate stopped struggling and looked at Prim, a small blush forming on her cheeks. “I do be sayin' it before: Ye be a trig one,” she said softly. “Yarr, fine!” she angrily declared, sheathing her sword and crossing her arms.

“Thank you, Captain,” Prim said delightedly.

“Ye no best be thankin' me, Primiphi. I do be havin' several ideas for yer recompense tonight.” She grinned wickedly. Prim and the other pirates laughed.

“I shall keep that in mind,” Prim said as the pirates put away their weapons and resumed their work. “So, why are you here?” Prim asked Perspectivus.

“Why are any of us – ” he began, but Prim quickly cut him off with a wave.

“No, no, how careless of me,” she said. “I meant, why are you on this island? How did you come to reside on it? And how long have you been here.”

“A long time, or a short time,” he said. “Some would say not long at all. Others would say a pair of moons. As for how I arrived, it was most uncomfortable, though others would say 'most' is an exaggeration, for there are certainly worse ways to arrive. In a deceased state, for example. Meanwhile, the *why* of it is rather simple: I preferred it to drowning.”

Prim laughed merrily. “Yes, I expect one would.”

“I no be certain,” Lilly mused. “I do be thinkin' I would be preferrin' he be drowned and done with.”

He nodded gravely. “I do not doubt you are the only one, young captain. Not the youngest of captains, of course.”

Lilly put a palm to her forehead. “I think I do be seein' how he be thinkin' now. It do be givin' me a headache.”

“It is the nature of my magic,” he solemnly intoned.

“What kind of magic is it?” Prim asked.

“I am a seer, Just Prim,” he said. “I see things in many ways, as others of different outlooks and backgrounds would.”

“Which explains your name.”

“That it does. I chose it myself, much as you – ”

“And do you have to know the people,” Prim interrupted, “the ones whose viewpoints you consider? Do you have to have met them, or does your magic present it to you?”

“The latter,” he answered. “It is how I knew you are one who is used to keeping others off-balance. You are quite skillful, though others possess more. Then again, I wonder if you truly seek mastery or if it is merely a means to an end. Perhaps it is just amusing to you.”

Prim laughed. “The only things I wish to master are my music, my dance, and my discoveries of the beauty of the world.”

“All very fine endeavors. Or fanciful fritterings.”

“Frittering is just fine with me,” she said, dancing and singing.

Lilly and Perspectivus watched her for several minutes. The other pirates started returning with various stores of fruit and fresh water. They paused their work to enjoy the show, as well.

“Was that not a delightful show?” Prim asked when she had finished.

“It was, I should say,” Perspectivus agreed. “Though the nobles of Petiga would turn their noses up, no doubt.”

“Their loss,” Prim said. “I shall simply have to avoid Petiga, then, and they shall never enjoy the sight of my exquisite ass.” She winked.

“It is a fine one, as such things go, or rather plain, really,” he said. Prim stood frozen as he continued. Lilly looked back and forth between her and Perspectivus, astounded. “The Bondage Ninjas would doubtless

have seen more exquisite, having much experience with capturing and securing young damsels.” The crews' jaws gaped. One man dropping a barrel – no one noticed. “The Tråkigt nomads of the Varmtorr desert are renowned for the lovely curves of their maidens. And the Knights of –”

“Captain, I do think I am getting a chill,” Prim said coldly. She spun on her heels and walked toward the rowboat. “I think I shall return to the boat while you work. I find this disappointing isle to be dull and pointless,” she declared. “There is not a thing on it worth a bother.”

“Now, whatever has upset Just Prim?” Perspectivus wondered aloud. “Oh, I see. Some would be proud of the backside she possesses.”

“Yarr, some would be,” Lilly agreed. “And others would be gettin' mighty angry if some empty-skulled blowhard do be callin' her anythin' less than perfect.”

The crew surrounded him, several holding daggers out, one holding ropes, all muttering angrily – to a man, they felt highly protective of their visiting bard. Perspectivus put a hand to his chin in thought. “Once again, some would say my social skills are lacking,” he mused.

Hours later, after the pirates had gathered their supplies and left him on the beach, Perspectivus sighed. He was hanging naked from a tree, his chaotic outfit now scattered in pieces across the beach, the wind taking much of them out to sea. A dagger was sticking out of the trunk nearby, a gift from the pirates. Several welts on his skin provided evidence of the lashings the pirates had inflicted on him, though they had been careful not to do any real damage. Lilly had reasoned Prim may be angry but would still not wish true harm on the man.

He looked around at his situation again, then out to sea, where the rowboat had arrived at the *Scurvy Plunder*. “Some would say this is quite fair.” He considered a moment, then chuckled. “Most would, actually, as she was right: It really *is* exquisite.”

Prim had remained quiet as the pirates finished their work. She sat in the rowboat the entire time, facing away from shore, arms crossed, her back ramrod straight. She said nothing still as they set back out hours later.

“Come on, do be speakin', Primiphi,” Lilly said in the mess hall later as the cabin boy brought over plates and mugs.

The redhead merely grunted.

“The crew do be needin' a song,” the captain continued. Prim said nothing. “And they do be lovin' yer *exquisite* dancin',” Lilly added.

Several crew members cheered. Prim grinned despite herself.

“Oh, very well,” she said with a laugh. She stood, prompting cheers from the crew. “But only if you all cheer – and cheer loudly – at the proper and exquisite moments!” she said, hopping onto a table. “Do not worry – you will know when they are!”

They all laughed as she hopped onto a table. “There once was an idiot with no sense of taste! Hey, ho, tie the man down!” She began singing, dancing merrily to laughter and cheers once more as the *Scurvy Plunder* continued to sail straight and true.

Prim in "A Scaly Tale"

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

"Come again?" Prim asked, her fork in the air. "Is there a problem?"

"Is there ever," the tavern master said. "Third one this year."

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

"I hear tell some traders were hit, too," another patron said. However, talk of valuables were drowned out by concerns over the missing maidens.

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

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

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

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

She finished her meal, listening to the men grimly discuss the town's woes. When she finished, she thanked the tavern keep, hitched her fiddle case onto her shoulder, left a few coins to pay for the meal (since she clearly had not raised any spirits this night), and went outside.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Prim coughed in a cloud of dust and debris. "Piss biscuits," she muttered as shadows appeared at the rim of the hole.

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

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

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

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

"You insolent--"

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

"You dare--"

"And I mean that literally. You clearly do not worship soap. I'm surprised any maiden survived to be your sacrifice."

The leader sighed and turned back. He examined the skies. "You'll soon be quiet, little one."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“My lord--” Dafty began.

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

“Now see here--” Dafty tried again.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Mind if I have a drink?” Prim asked brightly, taking a mug from a table as she walked to the front of the room. “I've had the craziest year ever. I must say, it makes for a fine song.”

Prim in "Revenge Tale"

The slippery rock upon which the gnome hopped shifted, dumping the girl into the water. She barely had time to surface before the current dragged her over the edge.

Prim thought desperately of her tribe's techniques for surviving going over waterfalls. "Step one: Don't go over any waterfalls," she recalled.

Advice which would have been useful about five seconds ago, she thought as she plunged into the water at the base of the fall.

"Step Two: If you are fool enough to ignore step one, don't try to surface immediately. Swim away from the falls, then surface when you are no longer under bubbles."

Ignoring instinct to follow the bubbles, she kicked out and struggled to escape the churning water. While her rapier threatened to drag her down, her fiddle case countered the effect, trying to pull her up. The counterbalance allowed her to swim fairly effectively. At first, Prim felt she was making no progress, but little by little the water settled and the bubbles disappeared. Finally, she swam upward. Breaking the surface, she gasped for air.

"Brilliant," she muttered as she lay back in the water, catching her breath. "Right brilliant, Primiphi. A display of ineptitude for the ages. Too bad you had no audience."

Having thus admonished herself, she swam to shore and flung herself onto the dry ground. After recovering for a few minutes, she forced herself to stand, shaking wearily -- the entire experience had sapped her strength.

While it was not a cold day, it was early autumn, and a slight chill was in the air. By nightfall, it would be quite cool, and her wet clothes would be the death of her.

Spotting a suitable spot for a campsite nearby, she gathered wood as she approached. With a fire going, she stripped. Using thin cord from her pack, she tied a line near the fire, upon which she draped her wet clothes to dry.

Lifting up her belt, she drew the rapier from its sheath. Frowning at her lack of anything to wipe it dry with, she settled for shaking the water off the blade before thrusting it, point down, a few inches in the soil beside the fire.

A few minutes later, with the rest of her belongings strewn about on the ground to dry, she sat on a log and began brushing her hair. She watched the water as she worked, the movement fascinating to the eye.

A rustling of leaves, hard to catch so near the falls, alerted her to the presence of someone else. She quickly stood. As she grabbed her sword, a dark-haired woman came into view, dashing through the trees. Her shirt was gone, her breasts bouncing in her undergarment as she ran.

"Please, they're right behind me!" she cried desperately.

Prim stepped forward, blade ready. "Get behind me," she said.

The strange woman slid to a halt behind the gnome. "Oh, thank you, thank you," she began, reaching to hug Prim desperately, but the bard stepped forward to keep herself free to move.

Meanwhile, two brutish men jogged toward them, laughing.

"What 'ave we 'ere? Our pretty ducky find a duckling?" one asked.

"Ain't it our lucky day," the other added.

Prim brandished her rapier. "What horrible manners," she said sternly. "You two can be on your way, then."

"I think not, love," the first said, smiling and revealing a number of ruined or missing teeth.

“We want to have some fun. Then a guy we know will pay top dollar for you,” the second added, also smiling, and also displaying a distinct lack of oral care.

Prim sighed. “Not just rude, but slavers. Always slavers. Well, have at me, then,” she said, giving them a radiant smile.

And then she spun, bringing the hilt of the sword into the stomach of the woman, who had been creeping up on her. The stranger gasped and keeled over. Prim kicked her onto her side, then reached down and picked up the rope she was holding, one end tied into a noose.

“Really, now,” Prim admonished, putting the tip of her rapier to the woman's neck as she lay, helpless. “You come at me, chest clean and unblemished, and expect me to believe these two filthy scoundrels -- and I mean filthy -- grabbed at you? With nary a scratch from dashing through the undergrowth?”

The woman finally gathered breath to respond. “Cheeky little gnome,” she spat, glaring. “It'll be that much more fun to break you, now.”

Prim rolled her eyes. “Little, right. You two,” she turned to the men, who had merely gawped at her and their companion since Prim had spun. “Will you surrender, or am I going to have to slice her throat before taking care of you both?”

The men looked at the woman, uncertain. She sighed. “Give it up, boys. As we thought, she's clearly a skilled adventurer.”

“Naw, I'm not giving up to no little gnome girl!” one snarled, raising a club from his belt.

“Me, neither!” the other said, doing the same.

“Such a bother,” Prim sighed as the pair charged...

An hour later, Prim checked her clothes, feeling much better in the woman's outfit, oversized as it was. Finding her own garments dry enough, she changed into them and sighed. “Much better,” she said, turning around for full effect. “Wouldn't you agree?” she asked her companions.

The woman offered several angry, gagged grunts from the log, over which she had been tied, naked. Her wrists were stretched before her and secured to a tree, her backside was in the air. The men said nothing, too horrified to have been defeated, stripped, and tied to trees by a “little gnome girl” to even mutter into their gags.

Prim gathered up her belongings, then set more fuel on the fire. “You should be able to get free before the fire cools off,” she said, setting a dagger beside each of her foes, near enough one of them could eventually get a blade and cut themselves loose. “I suggest you give up the criminal life. It clearly does not suit you.”

She snapped a small branch off a tree, then peeled the leaves off. “Now, then, a bit of proper punishment is in order before I go.”

The men were tied to a tree, hugging it from either side. Prim had easy access to strike their backsides with the switch. After a few blows to each, it was the woman's turn.

She glared at Prim as the gnome walked over. “So angry,” Prim said cheerfully. “This is the least you deserve, you know. I would punish you more, but I find your incompetence to be a mitigating factor, which is why you are still alive.”

With that, Prim struck the woman's backside with the switch. The would-be slaver cried into her gag, straining against her bonds.

“That was cute!” Prim laughed. “Can you do it again?”

She struck again, and again the woman let out a gagged little squeal. Prim giggled. “You're so cute when you're fussed, Squeak!”

“Squeak” glared at her, blushing mightily, then let out another squeak as Prim doled out more punishment, laughing merrily as she did.

When she had finished -- after a bit more punishment than she had initially intended, but she was enjoying Squeak's ... squeaks -- Prim tossed the switch aside. She leaned down to the woman's ear, whispering quietly.

“Your dagger is nearest, Squeak. You should get free first. I would not trust your friends.”

Straightening up, she waved cheerily and walked away. “Ta-ta!” she called.

Three years later ...

The burly man pulled Prim from over his shoulder and dropped her onto the floor, the bard letting out a muffled yelp as she landed on her backside. He then dropped her pack, rapier, and fiddle case beside her.

The fetching man turned toward the deputy behind a desk, thrusting a parchment at him. “There,” he said. “One red-haired gnome by the name of Prim, as per the bounty. Pay up.”

The deputy nodded. “Yep. That's clearly the one,” he said, pointing to another wanted poster on the wall. “Ain't real certain what all she's supposed to have done, to be honest. Not heard of most of the crimes on her list, but a warrant is a warrant.”

He came around his desk and knelt down to untie her legs. “I'd be careful untying her,” the burly one said. “She's a slippery one.”

“I can't leave her roped up,” the deputy said, helping her to her feet. “It just ain't right.” He shoved her toward the cell.

“At least leave her gagged,” the fetching man suggested. “Trust me. She bewitched our friend into killing himself. You do not want her speaking.”

The deputy sighed. “Fine.” He walked Prim over to a cabinet, instead. From inside, he grabbed gnome-sized manacles. Soon, he had her ankles hobbled and her wrists cuffed behind her back to a chain around her waist. The cloth gag he replaced with a ball gag.

“We use these gags for casters,” he said simply. “The collar is for troublemakers,” he added, locking one around her neck as she rolled her eyes. Leashing her, he pulled her into the cell. The deputy then picked her up and set her on a bench before locking her leash to a ring in the wall.

“Satisfied?” he asked as he closed the cell door on her and locked it.

“Not really,” the fetching man said, glaring at her. “But it will have to do.” She winked over her gag. He snarled and turned to the door. “Come on, time to pay us.”

The deputy counted out their reward, and the two men turned to leave. The fetching one stopped at the door and glared at Prim, hesitated a moment as if thinking of a clever line, then sighed and stormed out, Prim giggling into her gag.

The deputy gathered up her belongings and locked them in another cabinet.

A few hours later, the sheriff arrived. “And who is this?” he asked, looking at the gnome. “Surely, this is not Prim?”

“Aye, she was brought in a bit ago,” the deputy answered. “The hunters suggested we keep her secure. Claimed she bewitched their friend into suicide.”

“Is that so? Well, then, let's not take any chances.” He went to the first cabinet and brought out a device with leather straps. Unlocking her cell, he walked in and removed her ball gag. Giving her no time to bewitch him, he crammed a large plug into her mouth, stretching her jaw wide. The plug was attached to a leather panel

which covered the lower half of her face. Straps secured it around her head and below her chin. Two other straps rose up at an angle, meeting a ring between her eyes. A single strap then ran over her head, connecting to the buckles in back, securing the harness on her. Additionally, a leather blindfold was attached below the top strap, held in by it and straps around the sides of her head. Finally, earmuffs on the blindfold strap deafened her.

Prim fumed. It was one thing to be chained, collared, and gagged. This, however, was ridiculous. Blinded AND deafened? Why would the sheriff do this to someone he never ...

The thought trailed off as Prim made a connection. Whoever had set that bounty on her, with its list of made-up crimes, knew the sheriff. Which meant someone was going through a lot of effort on her behalf. Which was only proper, of course. Still, it meant she might be in more trouble than she expected.

The bard hummed into her gag, having little else to do. Hours passed. She felt someone strapping her thighs together.

“Now, really,” she thought in irritation, still humming, as the strap was pulled tight and buckled. “Do you think I can do much as it is?”

Her companion applied a second strap above her knees, then a third between the two. Her ankle cuffs were removed, replaced by three straps below her knees, at mid-thigh, and around her ankles.

The man -- she was certain it was a man, doubtless the sheriff -- secured her elbows together with a strap before unshackling her wrists and applying more straps to her wrists and forearms. Still more fused her arms to her back, running around her chest above and below her breasts.

She was then lifted up and thrown onto his shoulder, a hand on her backside to steady her -- an action Prim considered inevitable. He carried her for a bit, then set her on her knees. She felt the walls of a box. He pressed the back of her neck down. She bent further, folded up tight, as a lid closed shut above her.

“Well, I’m a nicely packaged prize. At least they are taking me seriously,” she thought grimly as she was lifted and set onto something. It was likely a wagon, she realized as she felt it begin to move.

Her journey lasted hours, the gnome humming all the way. Finally, the wagon stopped. Her box was lifted and carried for a while. She could tell they were descending stairs. Then she was set down and ... nothing happened.

Prim worked to keep her cool. All this attention and respect, then they just drop her and forget about her? Of all the insults she had suffered at their hands, this was by far the worst. They should be overjoyed to have Prim -- PRIM -- in their clutches, impatient to take her out and play with her, not engaging in waiting games to tick her off!

She sighed and resumed humming.

Finally, Prim felt the lid opening. Hands lifted her up. She sighed as she was finally able to stretch.

She was lifted onto someone's shoulder, her backside slapped. She made no noise -- the smack was entirely expected. Whoever had her wanted to humiliate her. Prim was having none of that.

The woman -- with hands and shoulders that small, it must be a woman -- carried Prim a few yards and set her on her feet. Her captor removed her chest straps, then worked her clothes off, removing and reapplying straps as needed. She then attached something to Prim's wrist straps. The gnome's wrists were then pulled into the air, forcing Prim to bend at the waist, her naked backside sticking up.

Then a blow landed on her bare rump, from a crop by the feel of it. She paused her humming, wincing, then resumed her music. Another blow fell, with the same result. Seven times further she was struck, each more forcefully than the previous, as if her captor was becoming frustrated. Though the pain caused tears to flow down her cheeks, Prim continued to make no cry into her gag, merely resuming her incessant humming.

Her captor removed the rope or whatever it was holding her wrists to the ceiling, then roughly shoved her onto her side. The bard landed with a grunt, then resumed her music.

Hands attached a leash to her collar. And then, at last, her captor began working Prim's head harness off. Even with the muffs on, she picked up angry, unintelligible words. As the muffs came off her ears, she heard the woman furiously speaking.

“--think you are all that! You are nothing but a little slave! And you will learn your place, even if I have to keep at it all week!”

Prim had been pondering the entire journey who could be so angry at her to go through all this trouble. She blinked as the blindfold came off, then flexed her jaw as the plug was pulled from her mouth.

“Hello, Squeak,” she whispered, her voice cracked. “Mind getting me a bit of water?”

Squeak let out a roar of anger. “How did-- When-- How dare--” the dark-haired woman sputtered.

“How dare I ask for water? I'm rather parched.”

The woman ran a hand through her hair. She was wearing a black leather dominatrix outfit, complete with stilleto heels. “Fine,” she growled. She walked to a table, her heels clicking with each step, and poured water from a pitcher into a mug. Returning, she knelt and helped the bound Prim drink it.

“Thank you,” the gnome said. Squeak laughed derisively.

“You would THANK me, slave? Ha! We'll see how grateful you are when I'm through with you!”

Prim shrugged. “If you say so, Squeak. So far, your performance has not been impressive.”

“You infernal BRAT!” the woman cried. “How can you be so calm? You don't even know how long you've--”

“It's four-thirty in the morning,” Prim said calmly.

Squeak's jaw dropped open. “How...?” she began, trailing off. Prim merely waited. Finally, Squeak managed to ask, “how did you know?”

The bard smiled. “A trick I developed years ago for situations just as this one. The tune I wrote is precisely six minutes long.”

“So you keep track of the repetitions, you keep track of the time,” the woman groaned.

“Exactly. Do you think you're the first to tie me up?”

The woman sighed. “I had thought--”

“You had thought I would be disoriented and terrified, squealing and blubbing so I would know how you felt that day by the river?” Squeak nodded, her face darkening.

“You have no idea--”

“I have a fair idea of how humiliated you were, you silly girl,” Prim said, grinning. “I'm the one who did it to you, after all.”

“Yes, you were!” Squeak said, flaring up. She pulled at Prim's leash. At the same time, she pressed the end of the crop into Prim's cheek. The pressure pushed the side of her face against the floor. With her collar lifting and her face pressed down, Prim could not move. “Yes, yes, that's it,” Squeak said, exultantly as Prim was prevented looking straight at her. “Submit, you little--”

“And there we go, resorting to 'little,’” Prim said. Despite the crop pressed to her cheek, she looked up into the other's eyes. She gave a dangerous smile.

“You are a lousy domme, Squeak,” she taunted. “I have never had a top so at my mercy before.”

“At YOUR mercy?” Squeak jeered. “I'm not the one all tied--”

Prim laughed derisively. “Come off it, Squeak. We all know you are no domme. I don't even know your name, yet you continuously respond to 'Squeak'. What kind of Mistress allows such a thing?”

“Well, I--”

“You so clearly enjoy being controlled, Squeak. It really is quite cute.”

Squeak dropped the leash, astounded, and stepped back. “Cute?” she gasped.

The crop no longer pressed against her, Prim raised herself up to look at the woman. “You really have no idea what you are doing, Squeak. You clearly have an intense desire to use your fancy toys, but you have no idea how to make a girl submit. Meanwhile, there is this primitive dungeon you have going, probably a basement in some ramshackle house outside town. All your money since our meeting has been funneled into it, no?”

“Oh, but of course, there was the bounty -- not an insulting price, by the way -- and taking care of the sheriff. That was a risky move, bribing him.”

Squeak nodded weakly. “I was worried I would land in prison. But, I got lucky.”

Prim grinned. “You recognized an authority who could be bought. There are plenty of them in the world.

“And then you have a collection of delightful toys,” Prim continued, winking.

Squeak blushed. “Umm, well, I wanted to ... keep you ...”

“Keep me nice and secure? You have the equipment to do it, no doubt. Did you practice with your toys? You seem reasonably competent with them.”

The woman blushed. Prim laughed.

“You did! You tied yourself up!”

“I- I- I just wanted to be sure--”

“Be sure they worked? Ha! Don't lie to me, girl!” Prim spoke this last in a harsher tone, causing Squeak to instinctively stiffen at an attention stance. “You can pretend all you want with those fools you travel with, but you will not insult my intelligence. You put the toys on because you were drawn to them.”

“I-uh-I-” the woman stammered.

“You are a total sub,” Prim said. “Quit pretending to have grand plans of revenge. Whatever you thought you were planning, in the end, you wanted me spanking your bare backside while you struggled helplessly in bondage.”

Squeak said nothing.

“You bought a collar your size, didn't you?” Prim demanded.

The woman flushed furiously. “Y-y-yes...”

“Put it on.”

Squeak stood trembling a moment, looking down at Prim, who smiled. “I am much more a sub than a domme,” the bard said in a kindly voice. “But I can show you ways we can have such fun together – more than you imagined in your wildest dreams.”

The woman hesitated a few seconds longer. Then, her face set as she made a decision.

“You're a sub, not a domme?” she asked.

“Pretty much,” Prim answered. “But I know where to find dommes. I was trained at the Temple Formosa.”

Squeak's eyes grew wide. “Really?”

Prim grinned. “Put that collar on, then untie me. I will prove to you my training, sweet Squeak. But before that: I really need a few minutes of private time. I've been tied up for twenty hours, you know.”

After showing Squeak the ropes ... and straps ... and more ... all day, Prim lay against her in bed. “You'll make someone a fine sub,” the gnome told the human. “You responded really well to my instructions.”

“Fank oo, frimm,” Squeak said through her gag.

“I’ll see to it we find you a good homme,” Prim said, yawning. “Oh, sorry, been quite some time since I slept last.”

“S ofay. Get fer fefst.”

Prim nodded and put her head between Squeak's breasts. Her wrists were cuffed around the woman's chest. Their collars were leashed together. Squeak's wrists and feet were chained to the bed.

“I think I can reach the keys when I wake up,” Prim said. “Though you should probably not move...”

The bard drifted off to a restful slumber, Squeak smiling happily.

Prim, Tia, and Alynnya in "To Tease a Ranger"

Once again, Tia found herself glaring at her image in the mirror. The image showed her wearing bunny ears and fishnet stockings. Again.

"How do you manage to get yourself into these ridiculous outfits?" she asked the reflection grumpily.

"Oh, come now, Hot-Tits," Prim chided behind her. "It's only natural to wear what looks great on you! Besides, you want that new axe, right?"

Tia sighed and picked up a tray from a nearby table. "Right, right. But here? Serving drinks in this get-up again?"

"It's a great way to earn coin," Prim said as she fussed with her hair flame.

"I thought perhaps we could earn money by, I don't know, helping a smith or tanner or going on a hunt or something," the warrior moped as they walked into the main area.

"Pish-posh, Hot-Tits," Prim scolded, stopping and putting her hands on her hips. "We could work months there and come away with only enough for a handle. No, this is how a gorgeous pair of gnomes gets some cash."

"By showing off our assets?" Tia sighed.

Prim grinned. "Oh, no, not quite, Hot-Tits." She raised a hand up. "Bustier liberatus!"

On the floor behind her, a bunny girl's top came down, as if invisible hands were more than a little naughty. The girl cried out in shock and embarrassment, dropping her tray of drinks, whereas the crowd immediately indicated its approval, generally through whistles and suggestions of ways the bunny waitress could keep warm in this sudden chill.

"Prim!" Tia hissed, putting a hand to her head as if to hide.

"What? Her tips will go through the roof. Besides, she loves this sort of thing."

"Wait, isn't that your friend? What was her name," Tia struggled to remember. "Starlet?"

"The way you played, I figured she was your friend, too, Hot-Tits," Prim answered with a grin.

Tia blushed furiously. "Just remind me to get chains and locks for my top," she told Prim as she walked down to begin serving.

"Oh, Hot-Tits. I'd never use that spell on you!" Prim said defensively. As she made to follow Tia, she softly added with a grin, "in public."

Prim and Tia in "Troupe Tale"

"That's it! No more bunny girl nonsense!" Tia cried as she flung a pair of bunny girl ears across the dressing room.

Prim looked over from where she sat on a stool, brushing her hair in front of a mirror. Assorted makeups and perfumes were scattered on a counter beneath it. "Calm down, Hot-Tits."

Tia rounded on her, finger thrust at her accusingly. "No, Prim! Not this time! I want to hear no more crazy excuses to get me wearing this ridiculous getup again! I've had a week of it -- a WEEK! I'm done!"

Prim rolled her eyes. "Fine, fine. We'll move on to phase two of earning some coin."

Caught off-guard at Prim's quick submission, Tia dropped her arm to her side and gaped. "Next phase...?" her voice trailed off. And then her eyes narrowed. "Wait, why are you back in your regular outfit already?"

"Oh, my shift ended hours ago, Hot-Tits," Prim answered, smiling and sniffing at a perfume bottle. She blanched, wrinkled her nose, and set it aside.

"And what have you been doing while I have been here making a fool of myself?" Suspicion filled the warrior's voice.

Prim gave Tia her most winning smile. "Shopping, of course."

"And where did you get the money?" Tia growled, knowing the answer already.

"Oh, the manager was most kind to give me both our wages and tips, Hot-Tits. I figured it would be easier that way. I noticed you did not exactly get along with him..." Prim grinned again, a twinkle in her eyes. "I suspect his shin will ache for a week after that kick."

Tia huffed. "He grabbed my ass--"

"--The lucky fellow," Prim interjected.

"He is LUCKY I didn't rip his arm off," Tia finished, menace in her voice. "I would ask where my share is, but I have an idea ..." She paused as she noticed a case on the floor beside Prim. "I have an idea 'what did you buy with my share' is a more useful question," she finished.

Prim laughed, her voice musical. "Oh, Hot-Tits, you have me figured out, do you not?"

Tia sighed and started removing her bunny girl outfit. "I take it that case contains phase two?"

"That it does," Prim confirmed.

Tia frowned. "Do I want to know?" she asked, throwing aside the clothing and gathering up her hides

Prim smiled, hopped onto her feet, and leaned down to open the case. Reaching in, she lifted out a small pair of drums connected together.

Tia scoffed. "More instruments? How do you plan to bang on these silly little drums while playing your fiddle?"

"They are not silly. They are bongo drums, played with just the hands, no sticks needed. And they are not for me, Hot-Tits," Prim said, smiling, her voice serene. "They are for you."

Tia froze, stunned, before bursting out in guffaws of laughter. Prim continued smiling, patiently waiting.

After a moment, Tia finally calmed down. "You're mad. I can't play--"

"You can learn, Hot-Tits." The tranquility in Prim's voice began to disturb Tia. "We have plenty of time."

"Oh, do we, now?" Tia asked, arms crossed. "And I suppose you have our next move all planned out, do you?"

“Naturally.” That same calm, satisfied tone.

Tia growled. “What is with you, Prim?”

“Oh, it is just a lovely evening,” the bard answered. “Finish changing, Hot-Tits. I will be outside. Oh, and here,” she tossed a small pouch to the warrior before kneeling down to return the drums to their case. “The tips you earned after I got our wages, plus what was left after our investment.”

Tia caught it, then watched as Prim left with a peaceful, satisfied air about her. Strangely, Prim's tranquility created feelings of concern in the warrior. What, she wondered, was going on?

She hastened to dress, slung on her pack, and then glanced at the case with the silly drums Prim had spent their money on. With a sigh, she slung it over her shoulder and walked outside to find Prim.

The bard was dancing under a tree, softly singing in a strange language. A few passersby had paused to watch, curious. No, it was more than curiosity, Tia realized. They seemed strangely enthralled by Prim's routine.

She again looked at Prim's performance. The bard's movements were fluid and graceful, timely but unhurried. Even when she moved quickly, her words delivered in a quick staccato, there was no sense of haste. It brought to mind fields of flowers with hummingbirds flitting from blossom to blossom while butterflies fluttered lazily in a gentle breeze.

Slowly, Tia realized a calm was building within herself, brought about, no doubt, by Prim's artistry. She felt tensions inside her subsiding, the tranquility of the bard pushing aside the warrior's worries and doubts. And she felt Prim's simple yet deep joy as she worked her art, a joy which touched a part of Tia she had forgotten all about in her years of wandering.

She remembered the feasts of her tribe in her youth. People smiling as they danced or sang or played instruments. Tia had enjoyed and endured them in roughly equal amounts. She had once asked their shaman why they made such a fuss. He had smiled indulgently and simply said life itself was to be celebrated. Tia had thought him nuts and told her master as much.

He had laughed. “To find anything to celebrate in this life does require a bit of madness,” he agreed. “But, the wonder of it all -- the beauty we find or make -- is the reason we carry our blades, little one.”

Then, she had agreed merely to be polite, inwardly doubting them both. Now, she thought she began to understand the old man and her teacher. She had always fought merely for strength, to defend those unable to defend themselves. She had accepted it was the proper thing to do, that her warrior skills came with responsibilities.

As she watched Prim, a powerful certainty filled her as a realization formed. Surely, such wonders as what danced before her should be protected. This was truly why she trained and fought. Beauty in all forms should be protected. It was only natural a warrior should risk it all if necessary to keep the light at home behind her safe.

She reached back and felt the drum case, another realization dawning on her. Prim had not purchased the drums as some trick or prank or in a moment of sheer foolishness. Prim had bought them as an invitation for Tia to join her.

Perhaps she need not merely protect beauty, after all. Perhaps she could help create it.

Prim finished her performance. The small crowd that had formed clapped appreciatively, and the bard curtsied graciously. She then approached Tia.

“Forgive me, my friend,” she said, smiling softly. “Sometimes, though, I just feel an unstoppable urge to dance and sing.”

Tia nodded. “And you should always do so.”

Prim gave her another smile, the beauty of it touching deep within the warrior. “Shall we be going, then?” Prim asked.

“Going? Where to?”

“To wherever our feet next take us, of course,” Prim answered.

Tia laughed. “You cannot stay still, can you? Always looking for the next new thing to see. Ah, well.” She hitched up her pack's straps on her shoulders. “Personally, I was looking forward to an inn for a change, but that was just a moment of weakness. I'm ready whenever you are.” She set off, then turned and smiled, adding, “tomorrow, you can show me what I'm supposed to do with these silly things.”

Prim beamed happily and hurried to catch up.

Prim and Tia in "Wrasslin' Tale"

Tia grunted as she fell back, the mud of the ring oozing into places she would rather not think about right now. Her foe wasted no time and pounced at the gnome. The warrior rolled aside, hindered by the squishy surface, but avoided the woman's grasp.

"Well done, Hot-Tits!" Prim cheered from outside the ring. "You are putting on quite the show."

Tia stood and spared a glance at her friend to discover the bard was idly primping her hair. "Oh, for the love of--"

She was interrupted as Bunny Bitch, her old foe back at Da Boss's club-slash-slavery ring stood. "Oh, this show has hardly started," she said. "I'm so going to make you pay..."

She lunged at Tia again, the warrior grabbing her wrist and sending her along to fall on her face ... at least, that had been Tia's plan. Unfortunately, her muddy hands slipped, resulting in Tia stumbling, off-balance. The mud under her feet took care of the rest, and the gnome fell on her face, now thoroughly covered in the muck.

Reflexively, she twisted onto her back and kicked upward, which was a good thing, as Bunny Bitch had been moving to grapple the downed gnome. She dodged the kick but promptly slipped, landing on her rump.

The rowdy and extremely seedy crowd cheered at the mess both girls were in, with cat calling and demands for more action filling the air.

"This is the WORST money-making scheme you have come up with yet, Prim," Tia growled.

"You are doing great, Hot-Tits," Prim cheerfully answered. "You're really working them into a frenzy!"

Bunny Bitch again came at Tia, who decided to attack this time, instead. Lunging under the bigger woman's guard, she grabbed her around her thighs, knocking her off balance to land on her side. The woman responded by grabbing her hair and yanking, causing the gnome to cry out. Fortunately, Tia's hair was short enough Bunny Bitch quickly lost grip with all the mud. The two once again separated.

"You little bitches have no idea what I've been through since you wrecked everything," Bunny Bitch snarled as both combatants stood.

"Yeah, yeah, cry me a river," Tia replied. "If you recall, Da Boss was planning on selling us."

Tia started the attack this time. "Go get her, Hot-Tits!" Prim encouraged.

After another round of slimy tussling, hair-pulling, and loss of balance, the pair disengaged.

"And who do you think he would sell after you escaped?" Bunny Bitch asked, fury and a bit of hysteria in her voice as she began to lose all control.

"The risk of working in that business, sweetheart," Tia replied.

Bunny Bitch cackled. "You should talk."

Tia blinked, confused. "Wha-?"

Her foe sprang at her. Caught off-guard, Tia soon found herself wrapped up in the woman's arms. "You know the rules here, don't you?" Bunny Bitch asked before lifting Tia and falling on top of her.

Normally, such a move would knock the air out of a person. However, the mud absorbed enough of the blow to allow Tia to keep her senses. She was pinned by her bigger opponent, surely, except for the mud.

Which, of course, was half the fun of such an event, Tia realized as she quickly slipped under Bunny Bitch's grasp and squeezed out from under her. As she worked her way out, her backside was quite immodestly presented to the audience, who cheered appreciatively. "And that is the other half of the 'fun'," she thought irritably, recalling the tiny bikini she was wearing as a loud whistling sounded. She had no doubt that one was Prim.

Bunny Bitch seemed confused at Tia's speed in the muck. She flung an arm out to try and catch the gnome, but Tia rolled onto the human's back and trapped the woman's upper arm between her thighs.

While the woman -- a clearly inexperienced fighter -- focused on getting her arm free, Tia struggled to reach her neck. As Bunny Bitch finally got herself loose, Tia wrapped her arms around her foe's neck in a headlock.

"Game over," she taunted as Bunny Bitch flailed wildly in a panic.

The woman played her last card, trying to flip onto her back to crush the gnome beneath her. Tia was quickly onto her scheme, though, and planted one foot to counter the spin while squeezing her foe's neck.

"Best yield," she suggested. "Or else I might pop your ugly head off your shoulders, the way you're squirming around."

It took a few moments, but finally her foe conceded, tapping out. The crowd cheered, and Tia stood and walked over to Prim.

"Exquisite work, Hot-Tits!" the bard cheered, motioning to slap on her back before deciding she wanted nothing to do with the mud.

"Exquisite?" Tia asked suspiciously, flicking mud into Prim's face and laughing.

Prim sighed at the mess but laughed in good cheer. "Well, you did give us a nice shot of your lovely tush--"

"I thought as much," the warrior interrupted with a laugh. "Well, I'm glad that's done. How much did we get?"

Prim gave her that smile Tia had learned to dread.

"Oh, no," Tia moaned. "It's not done, is it?"

"Three more rounds to go!" Prim said brightly.

"Prim! Why didn't you tell me to begin with!"

"Would you have agreed?" Prim asked.

Tia blinked, thinking. "I'm not sure I agreed to the FIRST match..."

"Exactly! But don't worry, after you win the purse, we'll be on our way!"

That night, Prim worked furiously on the lock to their cage.

"We'll be on our way, didn't you say?" Tia asked, calmly leaning against the cage wall, arms crossed.

"Not now, Hot-Tits. I need to concentrate," Prim said in a tense voice.

"Did you know the champion has to keep defending her title every week?"

Prim grunted as her pick slipped in the lock. "I may not have heard that rule," she answered as she started again.

"And they keep the champion locked up to ensure her participation?" Tia continued.

"I must have missed that in the brochure," Prim replied testily.

"Did I mention this entire thing was a bad idea?"

"Only about a hundred times," Prim muttered. Her pick once again slipped, the tumbler resetting. She put a hand to her face.

“Hey, Prim.”

“What?” she asked, reaching for the lock again.

“Is this the worst money-mking scheme you have come up with?” Tia asked.

“Yeah, yeah,” Prim grumped as she started again working the tumblers.

“Hey, Prim.”

“What?” Prim snapped irritably, glaring at her friend.

Tia cracked a grin. “I told you.”

A high-pitched cry of frustration and anger rang into the night.

Prim & Tia in “Unbelievable Tale”

The immense explosion utterly destroyed the beautiful manor house, sending shockwaves that were felt by the townspeople three miles away. They looked about at one another in fear, not sure what to make of the rumblings but quite certain it meant bad luck for someone. Just whom would suffer the bad luck became a topic of serious debate not ten minutes after.

Meanwhile, at the crater where Lord Adinos's manor once stood, two small, naked figures coughed as they struggled to help each other out of the wreckage, chains linking their wrists and ankles while leashing their collars together.

“What -- what happened?” Tia gasped between coughs.

Prim did not answer for a moment, instead struggling to catch her breath. Finally, she found her voice. “I am not sure. I think I did something amazing, though.” She wiped her face, trying to get the grime and soot off.

“Oh, really?” Tia asked scornfully before coughing again. “Was that before or after you offered for us to bang his incubus?”

“Before, but after the succubi,” Prim replied without batting an eye. Tia let out a huff. “Oh, relax, Hot-Tits,” Prim said, rolling her eyes. “I was just stalling. Mostly.” She began trying to fix her hair, running her hands through it, even as they crested the edge of the crater and looked back.

“No one's going to believe that was a cult summoning demons back there,” Tia said with a frown.

“Nope. It is quite unbelievable. And all the evidence...” she idly gestured toward the wreckage.

“They'll probably blame us. That guy was quite popular, and we're strangers.”

“Yup.”

Tia looked at the metal links binding them. “You would think these chains would be convincing.”

Prim chuckled, fidgeting with her hair flame. “They would be, if the town had not just lost its wealthiest resident who employed three quarters of them and provided the town its only real reason to exist in the first place.”

Tia frowned. “Yeah, who builds a town next to ...” she shuddered.

Prim shrugged. “We cannot blame folks just trying to eek out a living. And now their home will doubtless fade away into a ghost town. I would feel sorry for them if--”

“If it wasn't for the fact they'll be sending someone out to check and be none too pleased to find their lord and patron thoroughly vaporized,” Tia finished grimly. “They'll be wanting a hanging, for sure.”

Prim nodded. “In the meantime, we are on foot, chained, and starkers. We are lost in an unfamiliar, allegedly-haunted forest home of spirits.” She grinned. “In short: We have all the advantages.”

Tia laughed, and the pair set out ahead of the inevitable posse, Prim already composing a song of their adventure as they disappeared into the forest.

Prim and Tia in "I Told You" Tale

Author's Note: Some Tales were scribed as the two bickered at an incredible pace, and the Scriber could hardly catch all the words spoken and had no time to embellish the literature. This is the first, though undoubtedly not the last, such Tale.

"I keep telling you..."

"Shut it."

"They love to have an excuse for tighter bondage."

"Prim, I am so not in the mood."

"If you would have just acted all sweet and be the helpless damsel, like I did..."

"I am -- oomph -- NOT a helpless damsel."

"Right. I think you can still waggle your toes at someone. Very fierce, Hot-Tits."

"Dammit, Prim, when I get loose, I'll show you fierce!"

"Right. Because you'll get free anytime soon, straining like that. You know you're just tightening the knots, right?"

"Always with the lectures. You think your way is the only way that works?"

"Are you saying you can get yourself loose and rescue me by way of brute strength?"

"Just you watch me!"

"So, little ol' me should sit back and wait for fierce, tough you to save us, is that it?"

"That's right, I'll get us loose soon!"

"Hrmph. Fine. Have it your way. I'm not escaping."

"Wait, what?"

"Eek. Save me, O Fierce One. I am helpless. Eek. Eek."

"Now, hold on, escape artistry is your job."

"But you're so fierce, Hot-Tits. Now is your time to shine."

"I'm not going to carry you! Pull your own weight!"

"But I am so little..."

"DAMMIT, PRIM!!"

Prim and Tia in "Rough Evening Tale"

"Not happening," Tia said.

"Do it. Dooo it," Prim needled, pushing a mug along the table over to Tia.

"Absolutely not, Prim."

"After our last time out, we both could stand to unwind a little."

Tia gestured around them. "In the Devil's Due? Are you mad?"

"That makes it more exciting!"

"Foolhardy is more like it," Tia said. She crossed her arms and sat back. "There is no way I am getting into a drinking contest alone with you in the DD."

Prim pouted, idly picking at a scratch in the tabletop. "Such a disappointing visit. Starlet Slut is not here. For that matter, nobody else we ever play with is around."

"We?"

"Oh, come now, I have seen how you behave, Hot-Tits. You enjoy our visits to the DD almost as much as I do."

"How would you know?" Tia asked with a grin. "If I recall, you were blindfolded last time I 'behaved' here."

Prim stuck her tongue out. "I still say that was a mean thing to do."

"Then don't cheat, silly."

Prim smiled and raised a second mug in acknowledgment of the point before having a deep drink.

"Woa, slow down!" Tia said.

"If you are going to be responsible, then I shall not," Prim said with a wink as she refilled her mug from a pitcher between them. "One of us, at least, shall be relaxed after the night is through."

"And you expect me to carry your exquisite ass to our room after you pass out, don't you?" Tia asked.

"Come now, Hot-Tits," Prim chided, having another drink. "I am a gnome who can hold her drink, you know."

"Famous last words."

Prim laughed merrily, a light flush on her cheeks, and held out her mug to bump Tia's. They both drank, Prim rather more deeply than Tia.

The redhead smacked her lips and looked around. "You know, Hot-Tits, I rather fancy a match."

"The pool table is still ruined after a certain someone ... 'stained' it," Tia reminded her.

"That was not my fault, Hot-Tits!" Prim said with a giggle. "Blame Starlet Slut."

"Well, it was your idea, if I recall."

"And a fun one it was, too! Everyone had a great time. I still do not see what the fuss was all about." Prim took another drink.

"What has gotten into you tonight?" Tia asked.

"Not enough," Prim said, pouring more from the pitcher. "Meanwhile, let us play a game of darts."

"There is no dart board. Not since a drunken gnome broke it performing –"

“Right!” Prim said. “Easily fixed!” She rummaged in her pouch, producing her makeup kit. She stood and walked (swaying only just) to a wall and began ostentatiously smearing a large lipstick dot. Giggling, she then wrote “hit me, win nothing,” above it.

“Well, that's definitely the DD's style,” Tia said as Prim returned to have another drink. “I suppose we've knives enough around here.”

“Exactly, Hot-Tits!”

The pair flung various sharp objects toward the dot, the patrons of the DD cheering their antics.

“There. Four to one,” Tia said as her knife found the mark an hour later. “And I think that is our last contest for the evening,” she added, looking at her companion's inebriated state – for Prim had not stopped drinking, her aim becoming worse and worse with each game.

Prim shrugged and returned to the table, visibly swaying as she walked. “I really think you should call it a night,” Tia said as she joined her.

“Imma alright,” Prim said, slurring her speech slightly. “And I really need this, Hot-Tits.” She hiccuped and took another drink.

“I think you need to put that down and – ”

“I think I don't need mother henning!” Prim said loudly. Tia cocked an eyebrow at her. “Can't a gal just unwind without a lot of fuss?”

“In the DD?” Tia asked, trying out a grin to calm her friend down.

Prim giggled. “I've got mah Hot-Tits here to protect me,” she said with another hiccup. She looked at Tia with a serious expression. “I've been so long with no one to keep me safe,” she said.

Tia felt herself blushing. “Prim, no need – ” she began, embarrassed.

“Pish-posh,” Prim said. “Just been so lonesome. All these adventures I have. And always have to be so cheerful. 'Make us laugh, Prim.' 'Do a dance, Prim.'” She had another drink.

“I don't recall anyone ever saying that,” Tia said gently, confused.

Prim waved a hand. “It's just when I'd get someone pushy all telling me to entertain everyone. This one time was particularly bad, Hot-Tits...”

She drank deeply, hiccuped, then looked at Tia with a baleful expression. “The pain of it ...”

Tia frowned. “You don't have to talk about it, Prim.”

“But I wanna. Always Prim the cheerful, Prim the silly. Nobody ever cares about the pain I suffered.”

A moment of silence passed. “What happened?” Tia finally asked.

“*Orange* happened!” Prim said loudly.

Tia blinked. She waited for Prim to explain, but the redhead was silent. “Umm ... Forgive me, Prim, but what about orange?” she finally asked.

Prim pointed to her head. “Orange, Hot-Titsh! The man made me wear orange! With this hair! I can make anything look gorgeous, of course, but come on – *orange*? It was agony – pure, una-hic-dultered *agony*!”

Perhaps due to her utter shock at the nature of Prim's dramatic revelation, Tia managed to keep her face entirely still but for a subtle twitch at the corner of her mouth.

“And I had to wear it ash I'd performed for hundreds, Hot-hic-Hot-hic-Titsh! And all the orange bannersh and flagsh, everywhere!”

Tia frowned a moment. “Banners and flags? Prim ... Were you hired for some kind of event?”

Prim nodded. “Shome town annivershary or shom – hic – shuch.”

“So ... you were wearing a uniform?” Tia asked.

Prim slammed her mug down. “*ORANGE!!!*” she shouted and burst into tears.

Tia was at a loss. “I – Prim – I – ” she stammered. “Orange. You poor thing,” she finally said.

“It wash horrible!”

“I can imagine. In front of so many people. I'm amazed you survived,” Tia said, consolingly.

Prim nodded, sniffing.

A few moments passed, Prim recovering from her outburst. “What about you, Hot-Titsh?” she finally asked.

“What do you mean?”

“I told you sumfin' shameful – ”

“Oh, really?” Tia asked, trying to keep the scorn out of her voice.

“You never tell me anything about yourshelf,” Prim said. “All thish time, all theshe ad-hic-adven-hic-ad-hic thingsh we did together and shtuff.”

“Well, I – ”

Prim stood on her chair and leaned over the table. Her bleary eyes focused intently on Tia's. “Tell me shomething,” she demanded.

Tia frowned. Prim had a point, she realized. The redhead had always cheerfully told Tia of her own past (however much of it Tia believed was another matter), but the warrior had never returned the favor. Perhaps it was time to open up, after all. Besides, Prim's drunken glare still managed to be formidable.

“Oh, very well,” Tia began, clearing her throat. “You see, in the tribe I came from, there was one – ”

She was interrupted by a thud as Prim flopped onto the table, knocking over the pitcher. The redhead began snoring loudly.

“Perhaps another time, my friend,” Tia said with a smile. She shook her head and let out a chuckle. “And here is where I carry your exquisite ass, as you expected....”

Prim & Tia in “Retribution” Tale

Prim spun around merrily, her new dress flowing about. “Finally, after weeks in the wilderness, a cleansing bath and something nice to wear!” she said excitedly. “Do you like it, Hot-Tits?” she spun again, other pedestrians stepping aside but unable to avoid smiling at the cheerful gnome.

Tia rolled her eyes, having lost count of the number of times she had answered this question. “It is lovely, Prim,” she said as they approached an intersection. “And, yes,” she continued, interrupting her friend before she could so much as open her mouth to ask. “The shoes are cute. Yes, the gloves are adorable. Yes, the dress does compliment your exquisite ass most beautifully.”

Prim laughed and spun once more. “Oh, you are the best, Hot-Tits!” she said before giving the other a tight hug.

As they crossed the muddy street, Prim eyed an object fallen on the road. She stopped and picked it up, then noticed a matching one and plucked it up, as well. Examining them, she found them to be a pair of die. She gave them a shake, then grinned wickedly.

“Are you not the cheating pair?” she quietly asked them. “Not quite the thing to be caught – ”

She was interrupted by a hand shoving her aside. Taken by surprise, she stumbled, her arms windmilling, then slipped in a patch of mud. With a soft cry of shock, she fell on her backside.

“Make way for the Baron, peasant!” she heard a man cry. Looking over, she saw an entourage around a fancy carriage moving down the street.

She stood and shook a gloved fist at the man who had shoved her. “Fine time to say so!” she shouted. She stepped forward when Tia grabbed her other arm.

“Don't,” the warrior said. “You'll get yourself thrown in the dungeons.”

“He ruined the dress you bought me!” Prim said, twisting free of Tia's grip and dashing toward the carriage. A guard spotted her and made to grab her. She ducked under his reach and then under the carriage. On the other side, she hopped up and leaned into the window.

“Hey! You!” she shouted. “Lord Poofypants! Your idiot man shoved me onto my exquisite ass! You owe me a new dress for what that ninny did!”

“Get this filthy peasant off my carriage!” the baron shouted.

A guard grabbed Prim and yanked her out of the window. She twisted from his grasp and fell lightly onto her feet before angrily blowing raspberries up into his face.

“Whoever let that scum touch me had best have a good reason for his failure!” the baron called out. The guard trying to grab a hold of Prim turned, distracted.

“Cheapskate!” Prim yelled at the noble before turning and dashing off into the crowd which had formed to watch the commotion.

Tia watched her friend fidget by their campfire and patiently waited. She knew Prim would eventually lose control and begin ranting about whatever was on her mind.

Not that Tia had to guess. After their encounter with the baron, Tia had not seen Prim until around one in the morning. The redhead had acquired new clothes and then quietly slipped into their room at the inn via the window – on the third floor.

“Oh, good, you are ready,” she had said to the fully-awake warrior. Tia knew Prim too well to expect it safe to linger, after all.

The two climbed out – Tia using a rope – and made their way to ... the sewers, where Prim had discovered a way out of the city without alerting the Watch. Past a broken grate, they had stepped out of the city. Prim had picked up a large pack she had hidden, and they had then trudged through a forest all day. They hid their passage as best they could, and Prim refused to stop for more than a few minutes at a time to catch their breath.

“The nerve of that guy!” Prim finally blurted out.

Tia nodded, hiding a grin behind her hand as the floodgates loosed. She had a fleeting concern she enjoyed these moments more than was wise, but Prim's continuing rant chased her worries away.

“I finally get to be clean and wear an outfit befitting my gorgeous beauty –”

“And exquisite ass.”

“And exquisite ass,” Prim agreed. “And his man goes out of his way to ruin it all! No warning! And does Lord Poofypants –”

“Not your best nickname.”

Prim shrugged. “I was angry. And can you blame me? My exquisite ass covered in muck! And not a word of apology!”

“Nobles don't tend to apologize,” Tia pointed out.

“But they usually give people fair warning to move aside! This guy clearly enjoyed flaunting his power! Well, he got what was coming to him, I say!” she finished, putting a fist into her palm with a triumphant smile on her face.

Tia politely coughed into her own fist. “And whatever it is he got is why we're running away?”

“We are not running away,” Prim said. “We just wanted an early start and to not bother the Watch, is all.”

“Right. So, what did our dear baron get, anyway?”

Prim shrugged and grabbed the pack she had acquired earlier, dragging it over to Tia. Expecting anything, the warrior opened it and reached in as Prim sat back down with a huff, arms crossed.

First, Tia found several yards of expensive, colorful silk cloth. “I thought maybe you could make us some nice outfits or something,” Prim explained.

Tia then removed several bottles which emitted flowery scents. “Oils and parfums,” Prim said.

“To clean up after the mud,” Tia said. Prim nodded.

Next, were breads and fruits and a ham, enough for a few meals, as well as a bottle of fine wine. “Getting a bit beyond the usual bounds of justice?” Tia asked. Prim merely let out an irritated tech sound.

Reaching in again, Tia found ... belts. Confused, she felt around inside and found a collar, a ball gag, and various other items of an unusual (and clearly kinky) nature.

“Okay, Prim.” She waved her hand over the items. “Explain.”

“I was angry,” Prim said simply, not meeting her gaze.

“And?” Tia prompted.

“And I wanted him to suffer for it.” She continued looking off to the side.

Tia waved a finger in a “go on” motion.

“So...” Prim hesitated, then threw her arms in the air in exasperation. “So I decided to hit him where it hurts people like him most.” She settled back and crossed her arms again, glaring at the fire, cheeks puffed in her anger.

Tia allowed her a moment before breaking the silence. “And just how does this affect him?” she asked.

With a sigh and roll of her eyes, Prim fished in her pocket and pulled an item out. She tossed it to Tia. Examining it a moment, Tia gasped, eyes wide. “Prim!” she cried. “This is – ”

“His personal seal, yeah,” Prim said. “I nicked it by accident.”

“Accident?” Tia asked, astounded. “How does one accidentally steal – ”

“Well, it is his own fault, carrying that around in the open like that!” Prim said defensively.

“How is your – taking this his fault?” Tia asked. She had nearly said “stealing this” and had wisely changed tact.

“He had it in his front pocket! Anybody could inadvertently –”

“On purpose,” Tia interjected.

“ – reach in and swap it with a pair of loaded dice!” Prim finished, ignoring Tia's addition.

Tia cocked an eyebrow. “Loaded dice? Where did you get – You know what, never mind that.”

“The fool should have noticed it, but he was too busy yelling at his guards. Probably still has not noticed it, the way he was so careless.”

The warrior idly turned the seal in her hand, momentarily lost in thought. “So, you swiped his seal and bought all this stuff ...” she trailed off, then burst into laughter.

Prim, seeing Tia's good humour, relaxed and joined the laughter.

“You are so – *naughty!*” Tia said between laughs. “How's the baron gonna explain this?” she asked, pointing to the collar and other assorted paraphernalia.

“That would qualify as 'not my problem', Hot-Tits,” Prim said.

“Oh, but his reputation is gonna ...” Tia trailed off, then burst into more laughter.

“Personally, I hope he consoles himself with a nice game of chance with his friends,” Prim said bitterly.

“Friends who wouldn't be impressed by a rigged game,” Tia noted. “And who have a lot of soldiers at their beck and call.”

Prim grinned in reply.

“Did I mention you're a naughty one?” Tia asked, and both laughed.

“I also ordered quite a lot of food,” Prim said. “Our generous baron is throwing a scrumptious feast for the common folk today. That should earn him a bit of good will, no?”

“And cover our getaway in all the confusion? Delay their chase?”

“That, too.”

And they burst into laughter together.

After they finally settled down, Tia looked sternly at Prim. “There is just one problem,” she said.

“Umm ...” Prim said, Tia's expression suddenly making her feel guilty. “And what would that be, Hot-Tits?”

“You stole a noble's seal. That's quite the crime.”

“Oh, Hot-Tits, nobody knew about it,” Prim protested.

“And you got me involved.”

Prim held up a hand, thumb and index finger barely apart. “But only just a little!”

“I could've been tossed into the dungeons with you.”

“Oh, pish-posh, Hot-Tits, Prim said airily. “As if that would be something new.”

“And you think yourself clever?”

“Well, I do admit a certain pride of – ”

“Not this time, Prim” Tia interrupted, standing and towering over her seated friend, fists on her hips. “You aren't getting away without punishment for this one.”

Prim wilted under the glare of her companion. “Meep,” she managed to say,

“Now really, Hot-Tits!” Prim complained. “This is just mean!” After a moment, she added in a low voice, “as usual, you twisted sadist ...”

“You know you deserve this,” Tia said between bites of ham. “Which you enjoy, you naughty masochist,” she also added in an undertone. She took a long drink of wine.

Prim tugged at the cuffs holding her wrists around a tree behind her. Belts held her legs folded against themselves. She even wore the collar, a padlock securing it around her neck.

“Hot-Tits, it smells so good!” she said.

“Tastes better,” Tia replied, taking another bite.

“This is pure torture!” Prim moaned. Tia ostentatiously bit a hunk of bread off the loaf in response. “You know I have not eaten since breakfast yesterday!”

“Not my fault you get so single-minded you forget to eat,” Tia said, her mouth full.

“How can you be so cruel?”

“Easy – I eat the good food, drink the fine wine...”

“And what if I catch cold without my clothes on?”

Tia let out a guffaw. “You? Worry about being naked and a chill?”

Prim pouted. “Fair point,” she admitted grumpily. “I am not exactly at my best!” she added.

Tia grinned and brought the wine over. “This'll warm you up, you silly sneakthief.” She raised the bottle to Prim's lips.

Prim drank and smiled. “Much better, O Mean Administrator of Cruel Punishment,” she said after Tia lowered the bottle.

“Glad you approve, O Troublemaker and Nuisance of the Highest Order,” Tia said.

Prim gave Tia her most dazzling smile. “Okay, I have learned my lesson. Can I eat now?”

Tia put a hand to her chin in thought. “No,” she said.

“No?”

“I think you should sing for your supper.”

Prim laughed. “Sing? Oh, I could do that eas – mmph!?”

The last was due to Tia cramming the ball gag into a rather confused Prim's mouth. She secured the straps around the bard's head.

“There. You always talk too much,” Tia said, playfully tapping the ball. “So this should help keep your backtalk to a minimum. Besides, that's not the kind of singing I had in mind, you goof.” She gently ran her fingers through Prim's hair.

Prim blushed furiously, heart suddenly racing.

Tia went to the pile of toys the bard had purchased in the baron's name. "Now, let's see what this does," she said, holding an item up and bringing it over to Prim.

"Oh, I do think I like this one," Tia said moments later. Suddenly, Prim let out a gagged squeal. "I think we both like it, actually."

Prim & Tia in “Ring the Bells” Tale

The otherworldly cacophony of noise which the goblins evidently considered “music” greeted the reluctant gnomish bride as she stumbled into the aisle. Her veil fluttered as she struggled to maintain her balance, aided not in the least by the leash attached to the silver collar around her neck.

White ropes secured the young gnome's wrists together in front of her, with more wrapped around her waist to secure her hands at her stomach. Still more rope hobbled her ankles, leaving her just a few inches to shuffle along. A rather large white ball rested between her lips, a strap holding it in place. A small lock bounced about behind her head, ensuring she would not be removing the gag any time soon. She looked at the alter where the human groom stood, knowing he held the key, and tried not to think of just when and in what room he planned to unlock the gag filling her mouth

As a sort of final insult, the ball came with a little bell on it, which tingled merrily every time she moved her head. *Prim is never going to let me forget this*, Tia thought irritably. *That is, if she manages to get me out of here*

The leash pulled taunt again, and she stumbled forward a few more steps. She glared at the goblin, with the only result being he gave her a smug grin and another tug on her leash. As she struggled both to keep up and retain her balance, the groom spoke up.

“Be gentle with Fastus's bride!” he ordered. The goblin frowned and lowered his head in obedience, giving Tia a side-glare. She had a feeling he was planning some future unpleasantness for her.

As if being married to that self-centered fool isn't unpleasant enough, she thought.

She finally arrived at the dias, taking a moment to step up with her hobbled ankles. Fastus put his arm around her, his hand feeling quite free to take liberties. She growled into her gag, eliciting a chuckle from the groom.

“Where is the cleric?” Fastus demanded.

A trio of goblins half-pushed, half-carried a fat man in a robe. He held a bottle in his hand, from which he took a large swig. Finishing, he let out a loud belch.

“Whash the name?” he asked.

“Fastus,” the groom said.

The cleric nodded, then composed himself into a serious manner. “Dearly beloved, today hic we mourn the hic –”

“It is Fastus's wedding, you fool, not his funeral!”

“Oh!” the cleric said with a start. He looked at Tia, who glared back. “And the bride – ”

“-- Is quite happy and eager to be wed,” Fastus said. The goblins around the cleric laughed, one of them flipping a knife in the air and catching it.

“Well, I s'pose ...” he looked at Tia with a sympathetic expression. She nodded and rolled her eyes. Asking a drunken priest to resist a chapel full of goblins was a recipe for disappointment.

“Hurry and get on with it!” Fastus demanded.

“Right,” the cleric said. He coughed into his hand, then cleared his throat. “My dear ... goblins, we gather here today to hic see to the union of ...”

Tia mumbled her name into her gag.

“Guess that'll do,” the priest muttered. “And one hic Fastus in holy matrimony.” He paused and looked them over again. “Or somethin' vaguely resemblin' it.”

“There is no need to editorialize,” Fastus said, tone menacing.

“If anyone should hic have any reason,” the priest continued in a louder voice, “let him hic speak now or forever – ”

Suddenly, the doors flew open, and in burst Prim. “Out of the way! Out of the way!” she cried, running down the aisle.

The reason for her cries quickly became apparent. An angry horde of chittering rodents and squawking songbirds chased after her.

“Oh,” Prim added, raising a finger to the air, “and I also have *plenty* of reasons why this person should not wed my Hot-Tits!”

The animal horde chasing her promptly mingled with and got distracted by the goblin crowd. Chaos ensued, as rodents scurried up green-skinned legs to bite and claw while birds landed on wirey-haired heads and pecked away angrily. Quite naturally, the goblins were not keen on this behavior and were soon swinging fists or kicking feet. As they generally hit each other more than the intrusive animals, their efforts soon resulted in goblin-on-goblin brawling. Decorations flew through the air while chairs were cracked over skulls. At some point, enterprising goblins decided to fling the food at one another, luring the critters over to bite and peck at the treat-covered goblins.

Fastus, after a moment's shock, had snarled, “how dare she try and ruin our perfect day!” (Tia wondered whom he considered to be included in “our” but was unable to break her enforced silence.) He moved among the sea of agitated, bickering goblins and critters, knocking heads and trying to bring about some semblance of order. The cleric shrugged, grabbed a bottle, and stumbled over and fell in a corner. He laughed and took a swig.

Tia immediately began struggling with her wrist ropes. Seconds later, out of the mayhem, Prim leapt up beside her. “Well, Hot-Tits, do you think perhaps we should have gone around, after all?” she asked, grinning. Tia merely glared at her. “Oh! That gag is so cute!” Prim gleefully cried out, reaching up and flicking the bell on Tia's gag.

Tia growled in annoyance and mumbled incoherently into her gag as the chaos continued around them.

“And is it locked on?” Prim giggled. “You really got yourself into it this time, did you not?” She asked as she fussed with and straightened Tia's dress.

The warrior, giving up on Prim being at all serious, angrily struggled in her ropes again.

Suddenly, Prim wrapped her arms around Tia's neck. “You know, I still want my prize,” Prim said softly. “Although, to be honest,” she added with a thoughtful grin, “I always thought *I* would be the blushing bride.”

“MMMPH?!?!?!?” Tia let out a squeal of shock. She shook her head frantically. Though the pair had played with Aly several times, they had only played together once – and that was Tia playing the dominant for Prim. They had only ever shared a single kiss, and that was when they had thought a witch was going to plunge them into a dimension of unspeakable darkness. This was different, and Tia was not certain she was ready for it.

“Relax, Hot-Tits,” Prim said, leaning into her, their bodies pressed against each other, their faces mere millimeters apart. “You know how I feel about you, my dear Tia...”

Tia closed her eyes, freezing in a mixture of confusion and desire as she felt Prim's breasts pushed up against her own, and the bard's hands ... working on the lock to her gag. The very moment she realized Prim's intentions, she felt a click behind her. She opened her eyes and gave the bard an annoyed glare.

“I know, I know,” the redhead said with a wistful smile as she removed the lock and began unstrapping the gag. “Now is not the time. We should focus on our situation.” She gave Tia an annoyed frown as she worked at the ball between her teeth. “You really are rubbing off on me, you know,” she added petulantly as the ball popped free.

“Prim!” Tia gasped, for she had noticed Fastus had begun organizing a few of his less-moronic followers behind the bard.

“You are welcome, of course, Hot-Tits,” Prim said

“Not that! Behi – ”

“It is indeed a most exciting tale, how I followed you for days and yet evaded all your captors!”

“This is not the time – ” Tia tried again, desperately, to get her friend's attention as Fastus's group began successfully chasing off the rodents from their area.

“Not that they were particularly observant, admittedly,” Prim said with a frown. “But what they lacked in perception, they made up in numbers!”

“Speaking of percept – ”

“Of course, I have a knack with the little animals,” Prim continued on.

“Would you stop rambling and – ”

“It is a talent I have had since – ”

Frustrated, Tia quickly shuffled forward and kissed her babbling friend. Prim's eyes opened wide in shock as their lips met, her body freezing as her mind struggled to process the event. And then she melted, eyes closing.

Despite only intending the kiss to last long enough to jolt Prim into paying attention, Tia found herself oddly reluctant as she withdrew from it. And then the seriousness of their situation returned to her.

“Now will you be quiet and listen to me?” she asked, trying to disregard her heartbeat suddenly pounding in her chest.

Prim smiled dreamily, eyes unfocused.

“We can't stand here nattering all day!” Tia said.

Prim giggled and nodded, still dazed.

“Focus, Prim!” Tia cried desperately.

“Right ...” Prim said in a distant voice, still smiling broadly. “Focus”

“You haven't rescued me yet, you silly goof!” Tia nearly screamed in frustration.

Prim raised her fingers to touch where Tia's lips had met her own, eyes half-closed.

“Dammit! Would you wake up already?”

“Wake up? Am I dreaming?” Prim asked. “I must be ”

“You ninny, he's nearly here!” Tia shouted, scuffling backward.

“He?” the bard asked, confused. “Who he?”

“*FASTUS*, he,” Fastus said from behind, grabbing both of Prim's arms and lifting her up. He spun her around. “So, you are the one who would dare interrupt my most perfect wedding?”

“Perfect?” Prim asked derisively, and Tia let out a sigh of relief to hear her friend's wits back in her voice. “You do realize your so-called choir sang in no fewer than seven separate keys, two of which the gods themselves banned from this world? And with good reason, I might add.”

“You dare insult such purity? They sang from – ”

“Their backsides, yes, I would agree. Goodness, the insult you have thrown onto my dear Hot-Tits with this gaudy affair is almost as intolerable as having the unmitigated gall to try and marry her right in front of me!”

“My marriage plans are – ”

“Delusional, yes, that we can agree on. Additionally, what credentials does that cleric have? A Rithian grand master drinking championship belt?” Over in his corner, the cleric let out a belch before taking another swig from the bottle in his hand.

Fastus suddenly laughed lough and long. He lifted Prim further up to bring her eyes level with his. “Oh, you are a talkative little one, are you not?” he asked.

“I do more than talk,” Prim said with a sly expression. “I know tricks.” She leaned forward as much as she could in his grip. “Very naughty tricks. Want to see my favorite?” She winked.

“Oh, I would not miss this for the world, my little friend. Do, go on. Amuse Fastus before he determines your fate.”

“Very well, O Noble Lord,” Prim said with as much a curtsy as she could muster in his grip. “Notice I have nothing up my sleeves.”

“As Fastus has both your arms in his control, he would say it does not matter what you might happen to possess in your sleeves, even should you be wearing any,” he said with a grin. “But he accepts your claim, for amusement if for no other reason.”

“Oh, I think you will be quite amused,” she said with another grin. “Meanwhile, you will notice I have nothing between my breasts.”

Naturally, he looked down at Prim's cleavage. “Lovely as they – ” he began.

And in an instant, Prim's foot connected with the bottom of his chin, knocking his head back.

“*Ta-da!* Just like magic!” she cried as his eyes rolled up. He dropped her, and she landed lightly on her feet before he stumbled and toppled backward. “Clay jaw,” she added derisively, self-consciously adjusting her shirt.

She froze, looking at her hands, confused by this unexpected sense of modesty. Then she saw Tia watching her and smiled. She turned to the crowd of Fastus's followers and skittering rodents.

“Listen up!” Prim cried out, her voice booming with magic. The gathering stopped their activity, freezing and looking at the gnome. “The mighty Fastus has fallen!” A dark aura appeared around her, flashes of violet lightning surrounding her. “You have to the count of three before I cease controlling my rage and show you the penalty for coming between me and my Hot-Tits! Except you,” she added, pointing to the drunken cleric. “I expect you could not stand, anyway. Feel free to keep drinking.”

“May the gods bless the both of you this day!” he cried with a hiccup, raising the bottle to the gnomes before raising it to his lips again.

Prim turned back to the crowd. “Well?” she shouted, holding out her arms, lighting gathering into balls of energy at her hands.

The goblins and wildlife took flight. In moments, the gnomes were alone, save for the cleric, who laughed uproariously, belched, and passed out, the bottle rolling away a few feet.

“Very professional chap,” Prim said with a grin as she turned toward Tia.

“Cute show,” Tia said.

“Is it not, though?” Prim asked, sending an angry-looking purple orb over to Tia. It merely floated right on through, an illusion.

“You would think the lack of sound would have given you away,” Tia said.

“As I said, they were not a particularly sharp-eyed lot,” Prim said.

They stood looking at each other for several seconds. “So, Prim,” Tia began, suddenly feeling more self-conscious under Prim's gaze than she had even with the goblins and Fastus. “I suppose I should thank you.”

“Whatever for, Hot-Tits?” Prim asked with a mischievous grin.

Tia frowned. “What do you mean? For chasing after me and getting me out of this wedding business!”

Prim airily waved a hand. “Pish-posh, did you think you were going to get away from me, Hot-Tits? Running off to get married. I never pegged you for one to elope, you know!”

“Are you kidding?” Tia said angrily. “You think I wanted to marry that buffoon?”

“Well, what else is one to think? Oh!” Prim said brightly. “I get it!”

“Finally...” Tia grumbled.

Prim stepped forward and put her arms around Tia's neck again. “You wanted to make me jealous! You sly fox!”

Tia blushed. “What are you going on about?”

“I am onto your plan, Hot-Tits,” Prim said, leaning in close. “Such a naughty one, you are.”

“There was no plan, you – ” Tia began hotly, when Prim popped the ball gag into her mouth. “Mmph –!” she complained.

Prim giggled as secured the straps. “Really naughty,” she said. “I think we shall have to find a suitable way to punish you for this!” She snapped the gag's lock shut.

Tia glared at her and furiously shouted into her gag.

“Oh, such a filthy mouth!” Prim said as she took up Tia's leash. She sang cheerfully as she led Tia down the aisle, the warrior not finding it within herself to put up a fight.

“You know, I am not as strong as you,” Prim told her. “I had to leave most of our equipment back where you first ran away for your wedding.”

Tia again protested her innocence into her gag. They arrived at the door. Prim turned around and used Tia's leash to pull her in close.

“I did, however, make certain to bring your favorite toy. You know, the one you had such fun with using on me at the tree?” She gave Tia a wicked grin.

Tia desperately shook her head and tried to pull away. Prim laughed merrily.

“Come along, Hot-Tits!” she said, leading Tia outside. “Time to face your punishment.” She smiled lovingly at Tia and cupped Tia's cheek with her hand. “Or reward for your success at making me so very, *very* jealous,” she said softly, winking.

And Tia finally smiled around her gag. There was no stopping Prim once she had made up her mind, and it was not like she did not deserve it, after all

Prim and Tia in "Gaming with Aly Tale"

"How did we end up back here?" Tia asked in exasperation as she spotted the all-too-familiar sign of the Devil's Due.

"Fate, I suppose," Prim answered, primping her hair flame. "Come on, Hot-Tits. I have a good feeling about tonight!" She walked toward the tavern, slipping past a pair of shady men of questionable morals with a smile and the practiced ease of the short folk in big folk lands.

"Why doesn't that comfort me?" the warrior asked before hitching up her pack and following. A proper glare opened a path for her between the men.

Inside, Prim scanned the room, examining the patrons. Tia noticed the barkeep nodding to a man seated with his back to the gnomes. This fellow turned and, apparently recognizing Prim, grinned a grin that made Tia want to rip his arms off and beat him with them.

"Well, well, our favorite ranger is here!" Prim said cheerfully, pointing to a blonde woman sitting alone at a table. Or, at least, trying to be alone, if the rather painful-looking hold she almost casually had on a man's wrist was any indication.

Tia chuckled despite herself as the would-be suitor stomped off, rubbing his wrist and clearly muttering what was no doubt something rude. "Starlet? Does she ever go anywhere else?"

"Why would she?" Prim asked, walking toward Aly.

"I don't know – good taste?" Tia stopped, a sudden question popping into her mind. "Why do you call her that, anyway?"

"Fourth wall," Prim blithely replied.*

"Huh?" Tia blinked, confused.

Prim waved at Aly, who blushed as soon as she spotted the gnomes and tried to cover it by taking a quick drink from her mug.

"Hello, Starlet! From your bright red face, I gather you are thrilled to see us," Prim said

Tia rolled her eyes. "Straight to the point, as ever," she muttered.

"Hello, Prim, Tia," Aly said in an attempt at a casual tone, but a slight rise in pitch gave her away. As if realizing her mistake, she took another sip.

"Hi again, 'Starlet'," Tia greeted, allowing reluctance at the nickname into her voice as she dragged over a pair of small folk chairs.

The ranger rolled her eyes. "My name is Aly, Tia."

"Forgive Hot-Tits," Prim said brightly as hopped up to sit. "My fault entirely. We had you tied and gagged and squealing happily before proper introductions could--"

Aly and Tia both coughed. "Right, I remember what happened," the blonde said, blushing again.

Prim beamed. "Judging by the return of that delightful flush on your face, I would say--"

"Right," Aly quickly interrupted. Her voice was a bit higher again, prompting a giggle from Prim. "Aren't you two going to get drinks?"

"Fair point!" Prim hopped down and walked to the bar. The Devil's Due prided itself on not deigning to provide table service to those customers who were free to walk. Demands by said patrons tended to result in punishments designed to make them qualify for such service, after all.

** Is Prim really being meta here, or is she simply messing with her Hot-Tits here? Your guess is as good as the Scriber's.*

“What do you have there?” Aly asked Tia, pointing to her case.

“They are called bongo drums,” the gnome answered. “Prim seems to think everyone should dance, sing, or play music.”

Aly grinned. “Sounds like her. She once told a friend of mine she had the most lyrical gagspeak.”

Tia laughed. “I'm not surprised. How have you been?”

“Oh, the usual. I can hardly get a mission that doesn't involve some perverted plan to take over something or other with ... well,” she hesitated, “... unusual means ...” the ranger finished.

“Now, do not be so fussy, Starlet,” Prim chided, setting her and Tia's drinks on the table before sitting down again. “Perverted plans can be quite entertaining, after all. For example, how about another round of poker?”

“No,” Aly promptly said.

“Oh, come on, you won last time...”

“I don't recall winning the game,” Aly said, confused.

“I don't mean the game,” Prim grinned. “I meant your fun on top of the table, then your night with two others in bed. You seemed quite thrilled.”

Aly flushed again. “How did you--” she began before putting a hand to her face. “You peeping little gnome.”

Prim smiled shamelessly. “You were quite exciting to watch. I noticed you used a few tricks I taught you.”

“Remind me to lock you away in a box next time,” Aly grumbled.

“Speaking of next time...” Prim began.

“Oh, here we go,” Tia said, taking a deep drink. Aly smiled at her, half-rueful, half-playful before having a drink as well.

Prim pretended to ignore the interruption. “I was thinking we could spice things up with another game.”

Aly sputtered and coughed. “Seriously?” she managed to get out after a moment.

“Absolutely! The three of us could play a few hands, have a few drinks, and then have ... lots of fun.” She gave Aly her trademark mischievous grin.

“And we would agree to this ... because?” Tia asked.

“Oh, come now, Hot-Tits. Where is your sense of adventure?”

“We're broke again, aren't we?” Tia asked cannily.

“Relax, Tia. Somehow, I always end up paying for you, anyway,” Aly observed.

“You say that as if it is a bad thing,” Prim replied. The others shared a look, then laughed together. “I take that as agreement!” Prim said, clapping her hands together gleefully. “I'll find us a deck.”

She stood and wove through the tables and slipped behind the bar. With a wink to the barkeep and his grinning friend, she grabbed a pair of old decks he kept there before slipping outside the back door.

Looking around the alley, she quickly took assorted cards from one deck and slipped them into the other. She then returned inside, unaware of the hulking figure watching her from the shadows.

Replacing the shortened deck behind the bar, she casually returned to the table and set the cards in front of the others.

“And now we are ready!” she said cheerfully, sitting back down.

“Last time, if I recall,” Aly said, eyeing Prim suspiciously, “you had a few cards hidden in your brassiere...”

Prim perked up. “Is that a request to feel my breasts?” she asked cheekily. “Well, since you asked so nicely...” She put her hands behind her head and thrust her chest forward.

Aly blushed. Tia chuckled. “You should have expected that,” she pointed out.

“Right. Just no more cards in your top, Prim, okay?” the ranger said.

“Sure, sure. You'll not find a one there. I learned my lesson last time...” she rubbed her backside and eyed a chalkboard with her name on it under the heading “Ol' Spanky Champion”.

Tia opened her mouth to speak, but Prim quickly interrupted. “If you want to frisk me, Hot-Tits, I would not complain.”

Tia blushed but persisted. “Very well. Stand up.”

Prim giggled as Tia searched her. “Such strong hands, Hot-Tits...”

Tia grunted, then returned to her seat. “Alright, I found no cards.”

“Great!” the bard cried as she snatched the deck. “Let's begin! Winner gets the losers for the night!”

She began dealing, carefully slipping a few key cards from the deck to her clothes as the others examined their cards.

Some time later, Tia complained for at least the tenth time, arms crossed under her bare breasts. “How are you cheating us, Prim?”

“You frisked me, Hot-Tits,” the fully-dressed Prim said.

“<You must be cheating>,” a naked, bound, and ball gagged Aly added.

“Yes, didn't you lose last time even with your cheating?” Tia agreed. “What gives this time?”

“Come now, can a girl not improve with practice?” Prim asked, shuffling the deck, unaware of a large figure walking up behind her.

“Hello ... Fenrir, wasn't it?” Tia asked the figure.

Prim looked around to find the large furry beast glaring at her. “Oh! Hello--”

Before she could finish, the wolfish beast grabbed her foot in his mouth and lifted her out of her chair to dangle upside down. “Hey!” she protested before he shook her vigorously, resulting in several cards working themselves loose from her clothes and fluttering about.

Fenrir then dropped her unceremoniously onto the floor and huffed.

“<You coulda done that BEFORE I got naked>,” Aly complained as the beast turned and walked back outside.

“Owww...” Prim moaned, rubbing the back of her head. “There was no need to be so rough...”

She stopped as she noticed the cards around her. “Dammit, that was a good plan, too.” Looking up, she saw her friends' glares and let out a guilty giggle. “Why so grumpy?” she asked sweetly, gathering up the offending cards. “Haven't you been having fun?”

Tia and Aly looked at each other, grinning. “You were right,” the gnome said. “She simply cannot help herself. Time for what we agreed on.”

Confused, Prim asked, “agreed on?”

“When you went to get the deck,” Tia explained. “Aly and I made a deal. For when we caught your cheating. Though Fenrir caught you, I think it still holds.”

Aly giggled and nodded.

“Err... So, what is this deal?” Prim asked, smiling winningly in a heroic effort to cover up her sudden nervousness.

Her companions exchanged another, rather wicked look that did not comfort the bard one bit.

“<We should show her in a more private setting>,” Aly suggested, words all muffled.

“Oh, definitely...” Tia agreed, grinning.

“Come on, Hot-Tits!” Prim cried out. “This is just mean!”

“Quit complaining,” Tia said from on the bed. The trio had moved to a private room upstairs. “I can make it worse.”

“But this is horrible!”

“<Too bad, cheater!>” Aly added, still gagged, also from the bed.

“Quiet, you,” Tia said, playfully swatting the ranger, who was bound lying under her, with the crop.

“If I cannot join the fun, then at least let me watch!” the blindfolded Prim whined from the floor. She tugged at the ropes securing her arms behind her back and keeping her legs frog-tied. “Such beauty as your play -- I must see!”

“If you don't quiet down, I'll put you into one of those pleasure-denying priestess outfits Starlet told me of earlier,” Tia threatened.

“The Followers of Lathenae?” Prim asked in horror. “But they are so into logic, they deny themselves worldly pleasures! Their robes are horrible! Even I couldn't show off my exquisite ass in such a miserable getup!”

“Exactly.”

“You're so mean, Hot-Tits!”

Tia grinner at Aly. “So I am. Now, one more word out of you, Prim, and it's into the robes for you!”

“Awww...” Prim whined, before quieting down, recognizing defeat. Tia grinned and turned back to the human she was straddling.

“Now, if I recall, you enjoy it both naughty and nice, little Starlet...”

Prim and Tia vs Crazy Stepan

As the crazy slaver left the room, the parrot flew over to land on Tia's head. Normally, she would have tried to swat at it, despite her wrists being held over her head and cuffed to the pole behind her. However, the gnome was exerting all her effort on the most singularly important task ever to challenge her:

Keeping a straight face.

A silence fell, interrupted only by the bird preening its feathers. Tia was not fooled. *Any moment, now*, she thought. And she was correct.

“Can you BELIEVE that guy???” Prim suddenly erupted.

Tia wanted to say something but decided not to risk breaking her calm expression.

“Of all the nerve! I have been collared more times than I can count, and ALWAYS they know what a find they have!”

Keep it together, Tia.

“Everyone knows I am the most gorgeous, knock-down sexiest, cutest, most magnificent--”

“Fuckyes!” the bird agreed.

“--hottest, amazingest, marvelous, EXQUISITE--”

Tia's lips quivered dangerously.

“--alluring, remarkable, astoundingly beautiful--”

“Fuckyes!”

“Don't you start with me, bird!”

“Fuckyes!”

“Is that all you say?”

“Fuckyes!”

Tia snorted.

“Are you finding something funny, Tia?” Prim asked angrily.

“Fuckyes!” the warrior burst out before laughing boisterously.

“Oh, haha!” Prim grumped. “And I suppose you think my 'azz' is too small, too!”

“Fuckyes!” the parrot and warrior said together, and Tia lost all control, laughing so hard she would have fallen to the floor had she had not been shackled. The parrot, disturbed by its perch moving and shaking, flew over to Prim's head and resumed preening.

“Hey, watch the hair!” she snarled, trying to shoo the bird with her shackled hands.

“Fuckyes!” the bird replied before chewing on a strand of the bard's red hair.

“HEY! What do you think I am, your pacifier?”

“Fuckyes!”

“You're messing up my hair!”

“Fuckyes!”

“Is that all you can say?”

“Fuckyes!”

“You should learn something new to say.”

“Fuckyes!”

“Hell, no!”

“Fuckyes!”

“Hell, no!”

“Fuckyes!”

“HELL, NO!”

Tia let loose another round of wild laughter.

“Dammit, Tia! Get a hold of yourself!”

“Y-Y-You're one t-t-to talk!” Tia managed.

“Fuckyes!” the bird agreed.

“Hell, no! You stay out of this!”

“Y-You're being b-b-bested by a b-b-bird!” Tia said before laughing even harder.

“What iz going on?” The slaver had returned. “Why all diz noize?”

“Oh, we're just having a rollicking time here, pal,” Prim said, glaring away from the giggling Tia.
“Aren't we, bird?”

“Fuckyes!” it agreed.

“Maybe we need ze gagz for you two.”

“Fuckyes!” the bird agreed again.

“Hell, no!” Prim protested.

“To me, bird,” Stepan said.

The bird remained perched on Prim's head, now cleaning a leg. Tia hiccuped as her laughing fit finally subsided.

“Ha!” Prim gloated. “He just told you 'hell, no'. Maybe he has taste, after all.”

The slaver looked stunned. “Bird, you tell me 'hell, no'?”

The bird flew over to his shoulder. The trio looked at it in surprise.

Stepan recovered first. “You like zat, bird? You like 'Hellno'?”

“Fuckyes!” it answered.

Stepan gently stroked the parrot. “Very well. Hellno it is.”

“Fuckyes!”

“Fank you, tiny-azz slave,” he said to Prim, who was gaping, jaw low and eyes wide. “Hellno. A good name,” he said as he turned and walked out of the room.

“Fuckyes!”

Tia's lips curled mirthfully again. Prim looked to her, still in shock. “What ... what just happened?”

Tia snorted. “You just named a parrot that only says 'fuck, yes' Hellno, Prim.”

And her loud laughter once again echoed throughout the room, a bemused Prim finally cracking a smile.

Prim & Tia in "Practice Tale"

There are few people in Rith who could withstand the ferocity of a barbarian of the gnomish tribes without wilting, especially when said barbarian had successfully (even if inadvertently) tapped into the Gift of the Rage. Fewer still can avoid blanching and stepping away from the pure, uncultivated savagery in the faces of those warriors who, once battle is joined, set aside mere obstacles such as pain in their pursuit -- nay, demand -- of victory. And even the stoutest would hesitate after said warrior had lodged an axe in a tree mere inches from them.

Prim merely rolled her eyes.

"Really, now, Hot-Tits," she chided, reaching for Tia's stone axe and, with some effort, dislodging it.

"You chose to step beside my target," Tia growled, gesturing to the mark cut into the bark. "What's the big idea interrupting my practice, anyway, just to knock me?" She held out her hand for the axe.

Prim handed it over. "I am not here to belittle your fighting prowess, Hot-Tits."

Tia began swinging her axe and club again, practicing her forms, while Prim watched with interest. The pair had managed to hold onto a few coin and splurged at an inn for a few days of rest and relaxation under a proper roof.

"What ARE you here for?" she asked in a rather menacing tone which warned Prim it would perhaps be wisest to let the matter lie. Naturally, the bard ignored the warning.

"As I said, I think you should practice escapology. You need to be able to get yourself free from much more than you have shown yourself--"

"I got loose from those goblins, didn't I?"

Prim nodded, crossing her arms and idly leaning against the tree. "Yes, but your hands were sloppily tied in front of you."

"So?" Tia winced at the childish tone in her voice. She tried to cover it by throwing her club at another marked tree away from Prim.

"So, you have not shown an ability to get out of anything more restrictive than the simplest, feeblest efforts," Prim said.

Tia turned and walked to stand inches from Prim. The bard noticed a hint of flames dancing in her eyes. "So, I'm simple and feeble now? Who got you away from those damned cultists? Who is always doing the fighting once your twisted tongue or childish attention span has gotten us in a world of hurt?"

Prim nodded. "I did not insult either your fighting skills nor your bravery, Hot-Tits. I merely said you are pretty much helpless to anyone halfway competent with knots."

"Well, that's your job," Tia snarled, spinning away on her heel. "Mine is to fix your messes." She retrieved her club and began her forms again.

Prim considered a moment, then, with a sigh, held out her hand. "Your axe, Tia."

Startled at the use of her name, Tia stopped her practice and handed it over. She watched, amused, as Prim used the weapon to chop a branch until she could hold it like a sword. The bard returned the axe to her companion.

Pointing the branch toward Tia as if holding a rapier, she said, her face impassive, "on guard."

Tia laughed. "I don't think I've ever seen you fight before. This should be good."

She raised her weapons and lazily pressed into Prim's guard, using her club to batter at the sword while striking with the axe. The bard effortlessly knocked aside the club and sidestepped the axe but did not attack back.

Tia grinned. "Not bad. Try this one."

Faster than before, she came in swinging both weapons. Prim could not deflect both so simply sidestepped again. Tia, expecting the dodge now, used her momentum to quickly spin and attack again so fast Prim could not make a strike of her own without also getting hit. Instead, Prim casually ducked the attack.

Now Tia found herself impressed despite herself. "Okay, you know a few tricks to avoid an attack. Do you ever fight back?"

Prim remained silent, her face giving nothing away.

"Fight back!" Tia growled, fury building inside her at Prim's dispassionate demeanor.

They went another round, Prim once again avoiding everything Tia threw at her, using her sword to deflect rather than block.

Disengaging again, they eyed each other. Both were panting from their exertions. Despite this, Prim maintained her quiet, determined poise Tia found incredibly frustrating.

"Fight me!" Tia now roared, attacking more fiercely than ever. Again, Prim avoided directly blocking the warrior's weapons, though now she thrust her branch toward Tia, who knocked it aside with her club and brought her axe down. Prim sidestepped the blow, pinning the weapon down with her branch and stepping into an elbow toward Tia's face.

With her right hand pinned and left hand off balance with the weight of the club, Tia should have been helpless to stop the blow. Which is why she simply dropped the club and open-palm struck Prim's kidney, knocking her aside with a painful grunt.

"Damn," the bard said, coughing and holding her side. "Thought I had you."

Tia grinned. "You fought by rules," she said, reaching out to help her friend to her feet. "You forgot there is no rule I can't abandon my weapons."

Prim laughed as she was pulled to her feet. "Fair enough. That's why you do most of the fighting."

Tia frowned in thought. "I see," she admitted after a moment. "You can hold your own on my job. I should know a few of your tricks."

Prim smiled. "Exactly, Hot-Tits. Just because I cannot fight as well as you does not mean I should not know how to fight at all."

Tia tossed her weapons over her shoulders in defeat. "So that's why you grabbed all that rope the goblins had. Alright. I give in. Tie me up."

Prim's huge smile caused Tia to wonder just how big a blunder she had just made.

Half an hour later, the pair were back in their room at the inn. On a rug on the floor, Tia grunted as Prim pulled another rope tight on her bare skin. The bard had insisted the pair strip down for this practice.

"I told you, hold your breath and remain as big as you can," Prim admonished from behind her, playfully slapping Tia's shoulder. "Then you can relax, shrinking down to make slack."

"Well, I didn't expect all this!" Tia complained, eyeing the elaborate rope work fusing her arms behind her to her chest as well as all the cinches holding her legs in what Prim had called a frog-tie. "It's always been just a few loops at wrists and ankles!"

"Oh, so there are rules to tying someone up, now?" Prim asked, a rather devious twinkle in her eyes.

Tia gave her a flat look. "Fair point," she admitted. "Still ..." she trailed off, a furrow between her brows, her mouth twisted in concern.

"Problems, Hot-Tits?" Prim asked.

The warrior sighed. "I'm not sure..."

"Just blurt it out, silly," Prim said as she knotted a cinch.

“Okay. So, I guess I can see why *I* have to be naked to practice rope escapes -- but why are *you* naked, too?”

Prim giggled. “Because reasons, Hot-Tits.”

Tia let out a world-weary sigh and looked at the ceiling. “You are just using this as an excuse to get us both bare-skinned, aren't you.” It was less a question and more a simple statement of fact. “I should have known better...”

“Come now, Hot-Tits!” Prim said, playfully offended. “My plan was not JUST to get us naked together! I meant what I said about your escapology skills and their importance!”

“And the rope between my legs is for...?” Tia asked.

“Realism.”

Tia glared over her shoulder. “I've never been tied up with--”

Prim finished a knot then moved in front of the warrior. “Okay, the crotch rope was not strictly necessary,” she admitted.

“Of course,” Tia said grumpily. “You just added it for your own pervy reasons.”

Prim smiled, putting one arm around Tia to rest her hand on the small of her back, her other hand reaching down to playfully pull on the warrior's crotch rope. “Of course I did,” Prim said softly. She leaned forward, their breasts touching. Tia felt her skin flush and a fire build between her thighs as the rope did its magic at Prim's command. She instinctively leaned back in a weak attempt to get some distance, but the redhead held her firm.

Suddenly, a desire to hit Prim came like a flash within Tia. It was so unexpected, so unlike herself, it caught her off-guard. For a moment, she was grateful to be tied. Prim mistook Tia's reaction as need, for which the warrior was grateful as she tried to shove aside the unwelcome urge to violence.

Then Prim leaned in further and whispered into her friend's ear. “I still want my prize, Hot-Tits...”

Prim let out a soft moan. It had to have been Prim, Tia thought, for it certainly was not herself. No, despite Prim's knowing smile, Tia had definitely not moaned.

And then Prim tugged the crotch rope, and this time there was no doubt who was making what sounds.

“Prim ... I ... ” Tia tried to speak, her voice rising in pitch. She pulled at the ropes encircling her seemingly everywhere, yet they held her fast and secure. And the realization of just how helpless she was finally hit her in full. She was entirely dependent on Prim. And she was entirely at the mercy of the bard, as well.

So, why could she not think straight?

“Yes, my Hot-Tits?” Prim asked, voice low, moving her knee forward between Tia's bound legs, rubbing the insides of her thighs.

“I'm not sure ... ” Tia began, but Prim put a finger over her lips.

“Shh, Hot-Tits,” she whispered softly. “Let me take care of you.”

And Prim began kissing Tia's neck, eliciting another moan from the warrior. She moved down, now, kissing as she went, until she got between Tia's breasts, where she began gently licking. One hand reached around to cup and squeeze Tia's ass, the other resuming its duty on the crotch rope.

Tia pulled and strained at her bonds, no longer trying to escape but, rather, enjoying the strange comfort of their confining hold. She found it odd how the ropes both conformed to her body yet held her secure, allowing just a bit of play while denying movement, much like a lover's teasing touch.

Prim moved to lick Tia's breast, taking her time, winding her way toward her target. Her tactics worked brilliantly, as Tia's breathing intensified and her need became clearer and clearer. As her friend let out another moan of longing, Prim struggled to maintain her own composure. All these months of scheming and planning and dreaming of this moment, of getting interrupted time and time again, of worrying that her friend would

never feel the same -- all the frustrations and concerns were melting away as Tia responded more positively than Prim could have ever dared imagine. A feeling of triumph and exultation built within her, growing with Tia's every movement and utterance. She had never wanted anything more, and to be this close was a sweet agony.

“Oh, Prim...” Tia began, her chest heaving, her emotions roiling. “I... I mean ...”

Suddenly, a scream from outside rent the air.

The gnomes froze, looking toward the window. “Was that--?” Tia began.

Prim felt her hard-won victory crashing around her. “Nothing, it was nothing, just an owlbear having a successful mating--” she said quickly, desperate to continue where they had been. The scream repeated, now joined by another and then more.

“No, that was no animal,” Tia said, her demeanor rapidly returning to her usual, serious one. Prim's heart sank.

“I'll cut you loose,” she said, somehow avoiding a sigh. She quickly stood and dashed to the pile of her clothes, rummaging about and returning with a knife. She speedily cut Tia free.

The pair stood and rapidly put on their clothes, avoiding each other's gaze. They dressed silently. Tia was too busy trying to sort her feelings -- both of pleasure and that strange, brief anger -- to engage in meaningful conversation. For her part, Prim was struggling to come to terms with not just another failure but one so close to success she had let herself think she had reached her prize before it was cruelly snatched away.

After they finished dressing and gearing up, Prim reached for the door. “Shall we adventure away?” she asked, managing to hide most of her disappointment in her voice.

Tia grabbed Prim's wrist before it reached the handle. The bard looked up at her, surprised. “Something wrong?” she asked.

Tia pulled her into a close hug, arms around her, holding her tight. After a moment, she gently pushed the now-stunned Prim away, hands on her shoulders.

She grinned. “Now we can be heroes,” she said.

Smiling back, her innate cheer returning and plans for her next attempt to get her Hot-Tits already forming, Prim opened the door.

Prim and Tia in the “Tale of Aly's Bet”

(With Special Guest Appearances)

“Come on, ladies, have a seat,” Prim said cheerfully. “The show's about to begin! You won't want to miss any of this.”

“Oh, really? And what, pray tell, are we going to be watching?” Aya asked as she settled into her seat.

“You'll love it. It's a little something, a bit of a fashion show, Hot-Tits and Starlet put together for us.”

“Leave me out of this,” Tia growled.

“Don't be so fussy!” Prim admonished. “You won, didn't you?”

“No thanks to you.”

“It was entirely thanks to me, Hot-Tits.”

“Good point. I would not have gotten involved in the first place if it hadn't of been for you.”

“Exactly!”

“Excuse me, but what is going on?” Elspeth asked, bemused, as she set her bow behind her chair.

“You'll see soon enough!” the bard replied.

Aya stroked her chin in thought. “I have a feeling our gnome friends here have gotten a poor ranger into a spot of trouble, Elspeth.”

The archer smiled and blushed. “Naughty trouble, I take it?”

Tia grunted. “Is there any other when Prim is—”

“Right, then!” Prim said brightly. “It seems everyone is settled in. Come on out, Starlet!”

From the side of the stage, Aly shuffled to the center, unable to walk due to her ankles being shackled together. Her wrists were also secured in front of her. A ring gag in her mouth completed the ensemble.

Prim started clapping and cheering, leading the others and causing the ranger to turn red.

“Well, you were correct, Prim,” Aya said, eyeing the blushing ranger. “I do love this.”

“Toldya!” the bard chirped.

“Oh, Aly, you really do look hot up there,” Elspeth said, garnering a wink from the bound ranger.

“Is that supposed to be a maid outfit?” Aya asked, grinning. “It is hard to tell with all the missing material.” Aly blushed even deeper.

“Missing in all the right places,” Elspeth added.

“At least she fills out that top,” Tia added. “Oh, wait, what top?”

“It's perfect for her,” Prim said. “It emphasizes her best features.”

“I'll say,” Aya agreed.

“How did you get her to agree to this?” Elspeth wondered. Tia let out another angry grunt.

“Oh, Hot-Tits, are you jealous?” Prim needed.

“Jealous?” Tia asked, incredulous. “Why on Rith would I possibly--”

“You could have thrown the contest, if you're so jealous. Or, we could even get another outfit for you. I'm sure Starlet would enjoy the company.”

Aly winked. Tia settled for rolling her eyes with a sigh.

“So, back to Espeth's question...” Aya prompted the bard

“Right, well, Hot-Tits was questioning why she even comes here,” Prim began.

“And I still am,” Tia interjected.

“Starlet, meanwhile, was looking her usual self: Unhappy she was not tied up in a sexy outfit.”

“Yes, that sounds like Aly,” Elspeth nodded.

On stage, Aly rolled her eyes. “How does she do this to me every time?” she wondered. “And why do I end up paying for her drinks to do it to me?”

Prim continued her tale. “So, I came up with a way to solve both their troubles. A bet, with the loser getting to show off for the winner. And guests.”

The two human guests laughed. “What did you--” Elspeth began, but Tia furiously cut her off.

“I DON'T WANT TO TALK ABOUT IT!” she snarled.

“Yep, jealous,” Aya said.

“Definitely,” Elspeth agreed.

On stage, Aly decided it was time for more attention on her and turned to the side, arching her back to emphasize her feminine curves.

“Oh, what a nice ass you have, Starlet,” Prim said, grinning. “Almost as exquisite as my own.”

“Goodness, did I just hear you correctly, Prim?” Tia asked, so stunned she forgot she was annoyed.

“I did say 'almost', Hot-Tits....”

Prim and Tia in "A Good Laugh Tale"

"Just once, I would like to pass through a town without something trying to stab, slash, vaporize, strip, or bang us," Tia complained as the duo looked at the mayhem in the streets before them, the screams of terror strangely mixed in with, of all things, squeals of laughter.

"Well, sometimes it is a pleasant mix of the lot,"

Prim pointed out cheerfully. Tia merely grunted in response. "Should we do the brave hero thing?" the bard prompted.

Tia shrugged off her pack and drew her weapons. "What are those things, anyway?" she asked, nodding toward the large, green pod-like creatures moving about on four strange legs. One of them had opened up to expose several arms, which had grasped a pair of young now-naked maidens and was currently tickling them mercilessly.

"Tickling tidgets," Prim answered, also dropping her pack.

Tia, who had stepped forward ready to brawl, drew up short. She cocked an eyebrow at Prim. "Tidgets? What the heck is a tidget?"

Prim crossed her arms with a huff. "Are you blind? *Those things* are tidgets!" She helpfully pointed to one of the pod creatures.

Tia shook her head doubtfully. "I'm not sure you got that one right. Tidgets..." she giggled and leapt into the fray, Prim behind her.

"They open up and feed off tickling," Prim explained as she followed behind. "They use some sorta slime to melt away clothing. Created by sauced, kinky mages."

"Like that's a surprise!" Tia said as she approached one of the creatures. As expected, it opened up and reached its arms at her. She rolled under them and sprang up inside its guard. With a warrior's glee, she began hacking off limbs.

Prim, meanwhile, had run over to another pod which had cornered a young lady. The bard turned and playfully smacked her own backside. "Hey, greenie, would you not prefer a turn at the exquisite?"

The tickler turned to the gnome, grabbing at her. Prim merely ducked and dodged acrobatically, giggling and taunting it.

Another tickler came toward her. "Oh, eek, they have great taste and really want me, Hot-Tits!" she called out, giggling.

"You better take this seriously!" Tia snarled as she hacked another tickler limb off.

"Oh, relax, Hot-Tits, and enjoy the fun!" Prim said as she avoided her two ticklers' attacks. "You have been needing to hack something apart for weeks, anyway."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Tia shouted angrily as she finished off her foe and began charging another.

"You have been grumpy of late, even for you." She laughed as a third pod moved toward her. "Maybe we should let them have a go at you. You could use a good laugh!"

Tia, furious now, had forgone any nifty rolling or dodging to get inside the pod's reach and had settled for simply hacking it apart bit by bit. "Me? Grumpy? Why ever would I be when I am traveling with the world's least serious companion ever?"

"Come now, Hot-Tits!" Prim said as she dodged the trio of pods' attacks. "I can be serious, you know?"

"Right. Name one thing!"

"I am serious about collecting my prize, of course!"

Tia screamed in a mixture of rage and frustration and let loose a flurry of blows. The poor tickler stood no chance.

Tia stood beside her defeated foe, catching her breath and taking stock of the battle. "Prim! Watch your back!"

A fourth pod had wandered over to the crowd. Prim laughed and rolled right up to it, springing up and kicking off it in a manner most creatures would find extremely insulting.

"Come on, big boy, join the fun!" Prim called.

The pod opened, revealing not arms but--

"Eww! Tentacles!" Prim shouted, shivering in revulsion. "This one is some kind of disgusting mutant!!"

Then hands grasped her. "Meep!" she cried out as she was triumphantly hauled backwards by one of the ticklers. "No no no!" she yelled at it. "Put me down, blast it! Hey! Hot-Tits worked so hard to make those hee hee hey stop it hahaha!!!"

Tia, having now dispatched the tentacled pod while the trio fought for Prim's attentions, found two had given up on the redhead and turned toward her. It took a few minutes of work, but the warrior managed to slay them both. All the while, high-pitched peals of laughter accompanied her.

"HAHAHA HOT-TITS HEEHEE GOOD SHOW HAHA COME ON HAHAHA GET ME HEE DOWN!!" Prim shouted as the creature tickled her relentlessly.

"Sorry, I gotta be the hero, save the townsfolk," Tia said, grinning up at her helpless friend.

"HEE HEE DAMMIT HAHAHA HOT-TITS!!"

Tia charged the one holding two maidens. She found it surprisingly easy to defeat. Apparently, its focus was entirely on play rather than the highly annoyed gnome with an axe.

"Th-thank you," one of the girls gasped out.

"No problem," Tia said.

"What about your friend?" the other asked.

Tia grinned. "Oh, let her have her fun." The pair oggled her, confused. She winked and casually strolled over to the final pod. "Having fun, Prim?" she called up to her helpless friend.

"HEE HEE YOU HAHA SLACKER HAHA GET ME HEE HEE DOWN HAHA!!!"

"That's not a very smart attitude to take with the one person able to get you down, you know. Besides, you look cute squirming helplessly like that."

Prim's next words were unintelligible, lost amidst her giggles and laughter.

"Now, really!" Tia said in mock-offence, winking at the townsfolk who were now gathering around to watch the show. She put her axe away. "You can stay up there, then."

"HAHAHA PUH HAHAHA PUH-LEEZE HAHA NOT THERE NO DAMMIT HAHAHAHA!!!"

"You stay up there until you're ready to treat your rescuer with respect!" Tia called up before turning to a man in an apron, figuring him to be a cook. "So, what's there to eat around here?"

"Doesn't missus want to help her?" he asked, confused and pointing to the struggling Prim.

"Oh, soon enough," she said dismissively. "Prim went to such effort to get it riled up at her. She's having too much fun for me to end it now."

The man laughed weakly. "But them terrors won't stop," he said. "It'll kill her."

"Terrors?" Tia asked, completely ignoring the part about her friend's life in jeopardy. "Terrors? Tickling terrors?"

“That's right, miss,” a woman said.

“Hear that, Prim?” Tia called up. “They are called tickling terrors, not tickling tidgets!”

“HEE I DO NOT HAHA CARE IF YOU HEEHEE CALL THEM HAHA,” Prim shouted. What name she did not care about was lost in more giggles, though Tia was certain the term to be rather impolite.

“What is a 'tidget'?” the man asked.

“Beats me,” Tia answered before yawning and stretching. “Goodness, that was an excellent workout. How about that meal?”

“HEEHEE ANYTIME HAHAHA WOULD BE GOOD HAHAHA!!!”

“Right, right,” Tia idly muttered, drawing her axe. Almost lazily, she proceeded to hack apart the terror's pod. Realizing the threat too late, the terror tried to grab Tia, but she easily stepped aside and hacked at it again. With a strange gurgling cry, the creature went limp and still.

Prim landed sprawled out, too exhausted even for her acrobatic skill to save her. She lay on the ground giggling and squirming. The dust clung to a fluid over her entire body, soon covering her in mud.

“Come on, let's get you washed,” an older lady said kindly. Soon, she and a few other women had hauled Prim to a tub and were scrubbing her.

Tia collected their packs. She returned to find the cook waving her at from a doorway to what was clearly the town inn. Inside, she found a hearty meal waiting for her.

Several minutes later, as she contentedly leaned back on her chair, a warm meal in her belly, Prim sat beside her.

“Don't heehee touch me hee,” Prim said, smiling.

“Sensitive, are we?” Tia asked. “What's with the cute dress?”

Prim shrugged, which set off a few giggles. “They felt they hee owed me.”

The cook brought her a meal, looking away, seeming embarrassed for the bard. “Thank you!” Prim called out cheerfully.

“You're not bothered at all, are you?” Tia asked as Prim began eating.

“Why should I be?” Prim countered. “I am now famous here!”

Tia laughed. “Yes, no doubt about that!”

“And you got your good laugh, no?” she asked, eyes shining.

“I cannot deny it.”

Prim smiled happily. “Plus, I learned some things,” she continued.

“Oh? Like what?”

“I learned I am ticklish in places I never imagined.”

They both burst into laughter.

Prim and Tia in “Wagon Ride Tale”

“Such a delightful day for a ride,” Prim said. She took a deep breath of the air and let it out. “Crisp, clear, just a slight chill to perk one up – magnificent.”

“There you go again,” Tia growled from beside her.

“Whatever do you mean?” Prim asked with a tone mock-offense, her smile betraying her humor. “I was merely commenting on our excellent luck when it comes to a trip on a wagon and the weather.”

“Luck?” Tia scoffed. “And how do you figure luck has anything to do with us being tied up and naked again?”

“Well, being tied up with my Hot-Tits is always good fortune,” Prim said with an impish grin.

Tia rolled her eyes and let out a sigh. “What is it with you? Any other person would be throwing a fit one way or another in our situation.”

“And that would accomplish what, exactly?” Prim asked, cocking an eyebrow.

“I don't know!” Tia said loudly. “But it would at least be normal!”

Prim laughed lightly. “You cannot seriously be claiming you would prefer the ordinary,” she said after a moment. “I know you too well to believe that for a second, my dear Tia.”

“Dammit, Prim!” Tia growled again. “I'm tied up, naked, getting hauled off toward yet another auction block – ”

“Pish-posh, Hot-Tits, at least be accurate!” Prim said. Now it was Tia's turn to cock an eyebrow. “Have we yet made it to the auction house before taking our leave?” Prim answered her friend's unspoken query.

Tia frowned in thought. “Well, now you mention it ...”

“Precisely!” Prim said brightly. “So, relax, enjoy the ride, and do not get too fussed over how we got into it this time.”

“Oh, here it comes,” Tia sighed again.

“I mean, as a rule, these things just seem to happen to us, right?”

Tia eyed Prim sideways. “Right. A certain ninny just happens to keep getting us into these situations...”

“Why, Hot-Tits, I cannot help but get the feeling you are impugning my innocence.”

The warrior scoffed. “Your innocence long ago gave up and left for greener pastures.”

Prim laughed again, and now even Tia let out a low chuckle. “While there is some dispute about that claim,” Prim said, “this time, at least – ”

“ – Don't ...”

“This time, there is no doubt as to the identity of the ninny who got us into the back of this wagon.”

“Come on, Prim, I said don't.” Tia winced as her words sounded like a whine in her own ears.

Prim continued. “I mean, really, of all the times I allegedly – ” Tia snorted at the word “ – committed various acts which may or may not have resulted with us bound and naked – ”

“I think we can safely skip the 'may not',” Tia interjected.

“I never, not even once, was so foolish as to actually *sign a contract* with a clause that resulted in us bound and naked,” Prim finished. “I mean, honestly ...”

“How was I supposed to know?” Tia growled. “I thought it was just an agreement for another stupid waitress gig, like you've gotten us into how many times, now?”

“Well, technically, it was such a contract,” Prim conceded.

“Thank you!”

“You just really should read all the way through, especially when it starts using complicated words in other languages like *ad litem*, *ad valorem*, and *a posteriori* and – hey, do not fall asleep!”

“I’mmm – ” Tia began to retort but found herself yawning. “I’m awake,” she finished lamely. As Prim gave her a piercing look, the warrior blushed. “Okay, well, all that legal babble just puts me to sleep.”

“And, thus, here we are,” Prim said. “Tied up and naked in the back of a wagon, because you signed a contract that was putting you to sleep.”

“Fine, fine, rub it in,” Tia grumbled.

“I believe that is what I am doing.”

“There is still one thing I don’t quite understand,” Tia said thoughtfully.

“And what is that?” Prim asked.

“I get that I signed the contract and all. But, how does that result in you here with me?”

Prim grinned. “Did you think I was going to miss the chance to be tied up and naked with my Hot-Tits?”

Tia laughed. “I should have known,” she said. “Any normal person would have avoided joining up with me and, instead, found a way to get me out of here from outside.”

“And yet, you have me,” Prim said. “Sitting beside you, instead.”

“I guess you were right, then,” Tia admitted.

“About what?”

Tia looked over and smiled. “It is a lucky day, after all.”

Prim sat silent, blushing furiously, for a solid fifteen seconds as a flustered Tia looked away, her eyes flicking toward her companion every few seconds. Finally recovering, Prim smiled and leaned against Tia, resting her head on the warrior’s shoulder. Tia relaxed and smiled gently.

The pair quietly watched the scenery slowly pass by.

Prim and Tia in "Fancy Tale"

At the first sight of the small hamlet, the gnomes realized the town was filled with a most extraordinary energy typically reserved for fairs. Wherever the weary pair looked, they saw activity -- the sidewalks were filled with folks moving hither and thither or perusing vendors' wares, squeezing vegetables or haggling over cooked meats skewered on sticks. An unusual number of wagons were parked in the street, the workers busily loading or unloading crate after crate.

What stood out the most, however, was the inordinate number of fine carriages for the important folk. The two gnomes, fresh from the wilderness and wearing hides Tia had scraped together, felt distinctly out of place amidst such a collection of "fine folk" going about their business.

"What have we stumbled into?" Tia asked, stepping aside as a messenger in fancy garb and a bubble of self-importance hustled by.

"I am not entirely certain," Prim answered as she adjusted her hair flame. Tia smirked as her companion was clearly self-conscious in her skimpy hides and minimal makeup when surrounded by so much high society.

The warrior snagged the arm of a passing boy. "Where's the store, lad?" she inquired. He directed her, and she tossed him a coin.

"Give me your skins," Tia told Prim.

"I have been wanting you to take these for weeks!" Prim said cheerfully, dumping the few she carried onto Tia's arms and stretching.

"Right, right. But now we'll have a little coin for once. Without bunny girl outfits." Her face twisted in irritation at the thought as she set off to sell their catch.

They walked toward the general store, passing more street vendors on their way over. "Buy new boots, little miss?" one called out to Tia. "You look like you could use a pair with some quality to them," he continued with a wink.

The warrior, who had made both gnomes' footwear herself, glared at the man, who wilted and turned away. Prim giggled but said nothing lest she offend her proud friend. After all, she enjoyed wearing what Tia created.

Another vendor they passed by offered pastries. "A sweet treat for a sweet gnome?" the lady suggested. Both gnomes declined, but Prim noticed a small group of children standing back and looking longingly at the sweets and frowned.

They arrived at the store. "You stay out here," Tia growled.

"Whatever for?" Prim asked, offended.

"Because you'll sweet-talk the owner into trading all this for a bolt of nice cloth you've no hope of sewing into anything useful, which you'll then trade to someone else for a hair pin, which you'll promptly lose to the next group of goblins we come across."

Prim giggled. "Fair enough, O Shrewd Trader." She melodramatically bowed Tia into the store. The warrior walked straight and erect like one of the important folk, grinning as she entered the store.

A few minutes later, she stepped outside, her coin pouch significantly heavier, to find Prim gone. She heard fiddling, however, and headed toward the music. She found her companion performing for the group of children they had passed earlier. She was capering about, playing and singing a merry tune.

Tia noticed the kids each had a pastry and were delightfully eating as they laughed and cheered the bard. She sighed, but smiled as she shook her head. She walked over to the vendor.

"How much did she promise?" she asked, nodding her head at Prim.

Settling the account, her purse now a bit lighter, she joined the crowd forming to watch the performance.

"Fascinating lady," a voice near her said. She turned to see a tall man in an elegant suit. His bearing let her know immediately this was a man used to the higher society, even without the suit. His golden hair was impeccably combed, not a hair out of place. His green eyes were watching her intently; his lips curled in a gentle smile. "You're active friend, I mean," he said with a slight nod toward Prim.

Tia let out a small laugh. "Active' is one way to describe her, yes," she answered, figuring there was no harm agreeing with the obvious -- Prim was currently hopping about on a hitching post, pretending clumsiness while somehow miraculously never losing balance.

"Ah, so I was correct in my assessment of your friendship," he said. "Excellent. Permit me to introduce myself. My name is Alastair Tillman, servant to the Ponsonby family."

"Tia Wildleaf," she answered with a simple nod.

He smiled. Tia thought it might be an indulgence of her refusal to play by his class rules. He continued. "I am interested in your friend's talents. No, no, nothing so uncouth as that!" he quickly added, raising a hand palm toward her to forestall her, having seen her expression darken. "I am in need of an opening act and a Master -- or Mistress," he added with another polite bow, "of Ceremonies."

Tia cocked an eyebrow, then thrust a thumb toward Prim, who was now running around pretending her pants were on fire, much to the delight of the children. "She's the entertainer. I'm just the muscle."

"Ah, yes," he agreed, "but you are -- forgive me for being so forward -- both beautiful and exotic. I am certain our audience would be thrilled to meet you."

Tia shrugged off the flattery. "As I said, you'd need to talk to Prim," she said, annoyed to have to repeat herself. "Feel free to hang around until she's finished with her current performance."

Alastair smiled and bowed again. "Very well."

The two waited several minutes as Prim continued her performance for the kids. Finally, she escaped her audience and skipped over to Tia, panting from her exertions.

"Hello again, Hot-Tits!" She said brightly. "Get your business taken care of? Who is this fine gentleman?"

Alastair looked confused. "Hot-Tits?" he asked politely.

Tia rolled her eyes. "Prim, this is Alastair Tillman. Alastair, Prim. He has a 'proposition' for you."

"For you both, actually," Alastair said as he bowed to Prim, who curtsied in return.

"Very well," Prim replied. "What has the dashing Alastair Tillman have in mind for us?"

"Miss...?"

"Primphi Piltrum Stannumshard."

Alastair nodded politely. "Miss Stannumshard, I could not help but notice you are quite the performer. I am in need of one with your skills. I am also in need of an emcee, and your friend Miss Wildleaf has the proper bearing."

"Sounds interesting," Prim said. "What is it for?"

"My master is part of an organization that holds an annual meeting, where they show off their ... techniques," he said somewhat evasively. "Unfortunately, due to a miscommunication, we are short of help. I was tasked to find it."

"And then you happened to come across us," Tia said.

"Quite so, Miss."

"Good Master," Prim continued, "as you may have noticed, we do not have the means to dress as one would naturally be expected for a performance--"

"We're a filthy mess with common clothes," Tia interrupted. Prim rolled her eyes.

Alastair smiled. "That is not a problem, ladies. I can provide for proper lodging and attire in addition to a generous fee. After all, I am in a bit of a bind."

"Great! When do we start?" Prim asked brightly.

An hour later, the gnomes walked into the fancy bathing hall. They were naked, holding their towels and soaps. Prim wasted no time hopping into the warm water, sighing. "Come on in, Hot-Tits!"

Tia sighed and joined her friend in a more dignified manner. Prim laughed and splashed her.

"Was that necessary?" Tia asked wiping water from her face.

"Absolutely," the redhead replied.

"I dunno, Prim, seems we should act with a bit more ..."

"Enthusiasm? Great idea!" And Prim promptly leapt at Tia, wrapping her arms around her. She whispered into the now-blushing warrior's ear, "this would be the perfect place to get my prize, you know." Once again, she slipped a hand down low.

And once again, Tia found herself unable to react. While she had expected Prim's playfulness again, the immediacy -- before they had even lathered up -- caught her entirely off-guard. Now she felt her companion's warmth and the softness of her skin so close to her, heard the desire in her voice....

Tia's foot slipped, and she tumbled under the water. She surfaced, sputtering, to hear Prim giggling.

"Not exactly the reaction I was going for," the bard said, reaching down to help her up. "I suppose I swept you off--"

"Stop it," Tia grumbled, prompting another giggle. "No bad jokes."

"I can't help myself, Hot-Tits." She leaned in close again. "You just have that effect on me."

But Tia had recovered herself and gently pushed Prim away. The bard gave a look of longing before resuming bathing, making no further attempts at getting close.

The next day, having enjoyed a stay in a luxurious room, the pair found themselves being fitted with outfits for their performance. While Prim enjoyed going back and forth with the seamstress, perfecting her high-class dress, Tia glared at anyone approaching her.

"I'm not wearing that," she growled at the assistant, who was holding a particularly frilly affair.

Prim rolled her eyes. "Come on, Hot-Tits, it's just the one night."

"I don't care. I ain't putting that on."

"But you simply must wear a dress," Alastair said from where he stood several feet away.

"At least give it a try," Prim coaxed.

Tia merely glared at Prim. "Oh, very well," the bard said with a sigh. "Fortunately, I have a plan B."

An hour later, Tia stood in front of a mirror, wearing a tuxedo. Prim and Alastair flanked her. Behind them, the tailor stood looking rather befuddled to be fitting a lady, but he had managed quite the job in so short a time.

"If I might say, madame looks quite distinguished," he said politely.

"I agree," Alastair said. "I admit I had low expectations of this plan B of Miss Stannumshard's."

"That's where you messed up," Prim said. "My plans are always excellent ones."

Tia side-eyed her but said nothing.

Prim giggled, then brushed Tia's shoulders. "You are quite fetching, Hot-Tits," she said softly.

"It's ruddy uncomfortable," Tia complained.

"That means it looks good!"

"The gloves are silly."

"They look distinguished, and they will help the audience see when you guide them along," Alastair said, showing her his own.

Tia rolled her shoulders. "The sleeves are restrictive," she griped.

"Of course they are," Prim said, brushing the warrior's sides, now. "But, you don't need to go crazy with gesticulations. Just wave the crowd to the next act."

Tia grunted, then reached up and rubbed her upper arm. Then, before anyone could say anything, she ripped the sleeve from the shoulder. Prim flinched to see such a thing of excellent workmanship marred. Alastair's mouth dropped open. The tailor, meanwhile, whimpered, nearly fainting, as she pulled the sleeve off her arm. She then reached to the other sleeve, and now the tailor DID feint, dropping over as she pulled the second sleeve off.

She held up both sleeves, looked right at Prim, and dropped them pointedly. "There. Fixed."

Prim giggled and examined the torn jacket. "Well, that's one way to fit it, I suppose," she admitted. With a touch of magic, she reduced the number and length of loose threads at the tear. "I'll leave a few, though," she said as she worked. "I rather think you look better with them."

"I rather agree," Tia said, mimicking her tone. They both laughed.

"Well, that's both of us," Prim told Alastair. "We're ready as ever. Might as well grab a bite, then head over to the theater."

He recovered himself. "Very well. You two may go. I shall settle the account and attend to our proprietor, here," he said, nodding toward the tailor.

They set off, Tia holding a hand up to look at her glove and complain, Prim swatting it back down.

At the theater, music filled the air, evoking love of beauty, the pursuit of knowledge, and not just a touch of elitist snobbery. The crowd settled into their seats, quieting down to enjoy the bonus of an opening act. Onstage, Prim stood alone at center, her fingers dancing on the neck of her fiddle, her bow arm moving with a mesmerizing mixture of grace and frenzy. For several minutes, she captivated the audience, her music taking them to worlds heretofore unimagined. Spellbound, they could do nothing, held in her power.

At last she finished, holding still for the last note to go completely silent. Prim lowered her fiddle and curtsied to the politely-applauding audience, her elegant dress flowing about her.

"Thank you for coming this evening, ladies and gentlemen," she addressed the crowd. "As you are aware, this year we are taking a break from our regular format. Tonight, we are having our first Intellectual Hour." A very slight, hardly-perceptible tug at the corner of her mouth gave a hint at her frustration at losing the debate for naming this portion of the show.

"Rather than the usual shenanigans, which I am certain are very entertaining, we have a guest commentary on the state of Rithian trade policy in the brooms and cauldrons sector--"

"Prim!" Tia barked from behind the curtains at the side of the stage.

"Oh, right," Prim changed course smoothly. "That petition as a topic was rejected. My apologies, ladies and gentleman. Tonight's topic is in regards to the recent blight on pumpkins in the--"

"Prim!" Tia cried again. "Would you be serious?"

"Pumpkins are a serious business, Hot-Tits," Prim admonished.

"And they are not the topic tonight!" Tia retorted.

Prim gave an exaggerated sigh. "Very well. The topic of sable feline populations will no doubt keep everyone riveted--"

"Try again!" Tia called out, stepping onto the stage.

Prim threw her hands up. "Fine, fine. I'll let our special guest tell everyone. Ladies and gentleman, I am honored to present to you a magician who needs no introduction, whose deeds are whispered far and wide in the coven community--"

"Prim!" Tia cried in exasperation.

--A person of unsurpassed odoriferous maleficence the likes of which our world has never had the magnificent misfortune to have perceived via olfactory means before..." she paused as the back curtain raised, revealing the guest seated behind a desk. "Deathbreath!"

"NYARRGH!" the guest complained.

"Would you just introduce her properly?" Tia shouted again, finally walking over to grab the bard's ear and start dragging her off-stage.

"Ow, ow, watch the hair! Alright, she prefers Bonewitch!" Prim told the crowd as she was hauled off.

"NYARRGH," Bonewitch huffed.

Backstage, Tia shoved Prim, who was gleefully giggling, into a remarkably comfortable chair and sat in a second one.

"Relax, Hot-Tits!" Prim said gaily, keeping her voice discreetly low as Bonewitch continued her commentary. ("NYARRGH.")

"Do you ever take anything serious?" Tia asked.

"Oh, the crowd loved it," Prim said, idly waving a hand dismissively. She picked up a kettle on a table in front of the pair. "Tea?" she asked, pouring a cup.

"Not a fan, but they seem to have nothing stronger," Tia said, taking a biscuit. She noticed Bonewitch's voice grow in intensity. "What do you suppose she's off about now, anyway?" she asked.

"The damsel shortage in Rith," Prim said.

Tia cocked an eyebrow. "Really? You can understand that?" She took her cup and had a noisy gulp.

"Of course!" Prim said, delicately sipping her own tea.

"All I hear is 'NYARRGH'--hey, what's so funny?"

For Prim had let out a giggle. "Sorry, Hit-Tits. You just said 'my armpits smell of elderberries.'"

Tia blushed, then gave Prim a skeptical look. "You're having me on again," she said, shaking her head and draining her cup.

Prim grinned, then turned to the stage. "Deathbreath is really getting into it," she noted.

Tia looked up. Bonewitch had magically moved the desk aside and was ranting ("NYARRGH") and gesticulating. "Hrm, if I didn't know better, I'd say--"

--She's casting a spell," Prim finished. Both gnomes stood, concerned.

"That wasn't in the program," Tia said.

On stage, the floor opened up, and a huge cauldron rose into view. Steams and smokes billowed out of it in eerie colors.

"Nor was that," Prim said.

"Let's get out of here," Tia suggested.

“NYARRGH!!” Bonewitch cried, arms outstretched toward the gnomes. Magical ropes, glowing violet, burst from her hands and ensnared the pair.

“This DEFINITELY was not in the program,” Tia complained. “Hey!” she cried out at one as her clothes were dissolved by the magics. The gnomes were pulled face to face, the ropes winding around them, holding them together. The ropes pulled the gnomes out onto stage next to the cauldron.

“Well, I must admit, this is an exciting change,” Prim said, grinning as their breasts rubbed against one another.

“Stop enjoying it,” Tia growled.

“Can you blame me, Hot-Tits?”

“Seeing as we've been tied up ... yet again ... and I don't like the looks of that cauldron, yes.”

“NYARRGH,” Bonewitch said.

“Oh, would you can it?” Tia snarled. “This was supposed to be a relaxing, non-smutty pass through a town. For once, I wasn't going to have to get naked or put on some bunny girl costume or mud wrestle--”

“NYARRGH,” Bonewitch sighed.

“Yeah, she gets that way when things don't the way she imagines they should,” Prim agreed with her.

“NYARRGH.”

Bonewitch and Prim laughed. “What's so funny?” Tia demanded.

“NYARRGH.”

“I told you to can it!” Tia yelled. She began struggling furiously. “I am so ruddy sick of--”

“Oh, Hot-Tits, I'll never make an escape artist out of you, will I?” Prim sighed, rolling her eyes.

“Don't start with me, Prim.”

“Always with the brute strength. While I am thoroughly enjoying how you squirm against me, you are going about it all wrong.”

“NYARRGH,” Bonewitch agreed.

Tia looked away with a huff. “Umm, what happened to the audience?”

Prim followed her gaze. The crowd was still in their seats but were unmoving. Her eyes narrowed as she examined them. “Some sort of spell,” she said. “See the faint aura?”

“No, I just see red,” Tia snapped. Prim rolled her eyes.

“NYARRGH?”

“Usually.”

Tia glared at Prim, now. “Would you two stop talking about me behind my back.”

Prim twisted back and forth, her breasts rubbing Tia's. “But I am so clearly in front of you, Hot-Tits.”

“YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN.”

Bonewitch, meanwhile, had been tossing various items into the cauldron as the gnomes bickered. Apparently finished, she ordered the magicked ropes to lift the gnomes over it.

“Well, have you gotten loose, escape artist?” Tia asked.

“Funny you should ask,” Prim said.

“You have?” Tia asked, stunned.

“No. It's funny because these ropes are really, really good at holding me. It is as if they are alive.”

“NYARRGH.”

“Eww,” Prim wrinkled her nose.

“I take it I don't want to know?” Tia suggested.

“I think not,” Prim nodded. “But, it does present a bit of a problem.”

“You can't escape.”

“I can't escape.”

“Any bright ideas?” Tia asked.

Prim grinned with that astounding ability to be both sheepish and utterly shameless. “Perhaps you could brute-force your way--”

Tia just glared, unimpressed, deciding words would simply fail to convey the depths of her feelings.

“NYARRGH.”

“What do you mean?” Prim asked, suddenly concerned.

“NYARRGH.”

Prim looked down, leading Tia to follow suit. “What in the name of wonder is that?” she cried.

Below them, the cauldron's contents had risen up as a black mass with purple lightning dancing about it. The mass was pulsating and shifting, trying to form itself into a sphere. A wild wind picked up, swirling around the stage and over the audience. The lightning crackled and spread about the stage.

“Well, that's rather a dramatic way to go about things,” Prim called out to Bonewitch over the wind.

“NYARRGH,” Bonewitch declared.

Prim gasped, eyes wide. “An opening to ...” she began but fell silent.

“To...?” Tia prompted.

Prim shook her head. “I can't say it,” she said, struggling furiously, now. “We do NOT want to go there.”

“I had a hunch,” Tia agreed. “Why is she wanting to send us there?”

“Sacrifice, open a portal for others, summon something horrible,” Prim said, still tugging at the ropes. “Who really cares? It's the blackest, darkest dimension there is. All the good we know -- hope, beauty, love -- it's the opposite. It's just misery and despair and hate. Hatred of goodness, hatred of everything, hatred even of itself.”

“And she's going to drop us in?” Tia asked, stunned. Prim nodded, still struggling frantically. “I'm going to kill that Alastair,” Tia declared.

“I don't think that would do us any good, Hot-Tits...”

“It'd make me feel better.”

Prim let out a nervous laugh. “Always so determined--”

She was interrupted by a flash of darkness. They both looked down. The blackness below them had managed to shape itself into a sphere at last. Suddenly, despair and hopelessness filled their minds, the power of the darkness blanketing their emotions.

“We're out of time,” Prim said, tugging fruitlessly one more time on the ropes.

Tia looked at Prim. “You said it's the opposite of lo--,” she faltered, “--of those things.”

“Yes, Hot-Tits,” Prim sadly said, the despair of the sphere affecting her. “No joy, hope, or anything.”

“What happens if--?” A blast of thunder interrupted Tia.

“NYARRGH,” Bonewitch declared.

The gnomes' eyes met.

“NYARRGH.”

At Bonewitch's command, the ropes began lowering the gnomes.

And then Prim and Tia's lips met.

“NYARRGH!” Bonewitch cried angrily, then fearfully as the sphere lost its shape, writhing as if in agony. The lightning shot out of control, bouncing and arcing throughout the theater. The wind somehow became wilder, then blew away from the blackness, which grew for a moment before splitting apart.

There was a massive explosion of force, destroying the stage and sending the gnomes flying. They held onto each other, the ropes no longer confining them, as they landed and rolled. The crowd, broken of their spell, screamed in terror, though the gnomes could not see them in the sudden, total darkness blasting from Bonewitch's creation.

Moments, or minutes, or even hours later, Tia became aware of light again. She was not certain she had even been conscious. She looked down and realized she was lying protectively over Prim, as if to shield her from debris.

“You okay?” she asked, rolling off.

Prim smiled. “Quite, thanks to you.”

“Me?” Tia asked as Prim sat up.

“A fine idea you had, kissing me.”

Tia blushed. “You kissed me, if I recall.”

The bard grinned. “Either way, it worked. The spell could not handle ...” she trailed off.

Tia, blushing even more furiously, simply said, “hope.”

Prim smiled indulgently, then worked on fixing her hair flame. “Hope, then. Years ago, I taught myself to always have hope. For a moment, I feared it had left me.”

“I doubt anyone would blame you, about to be dropped into wherever it was we were headed,” Tia said, fairly.

“Regardless,” Prim continued softly, “thank you. For my hope.”

Tia wondered if there was a double meaning in Prim's words. “Well, it beat that Bonewitch's spell, at least,” she said, trying to change the subject. “Where is that old hag, anyway?”

The pair looked around. The audience was knocked out, fainted from the terror and the blast. The backstage area was open, everyone there unconscious, as well. On what was left of the stage, several beams had fallen over. The gnomes discovered Bonewitch bent over one, her derriere up in a most unladylike manner.

Tia laughed uproariously. Prim giggled. “So, our foe prepares for the final encounter,” she said.

Bonewitch stirred. “Nyarrgh...” She turned and saw the gnomes.

“Weren't you going to send us to -- where was it, Prim?” Tia asked, cracking her knuckles.

“The name doesn't matter,” Prim said.

“Right,” Tia agreed, her anger growing. “What's in a name? We all know what it would have done to us. And that's just one on the tally,” she continued, her face darkening, menace building in her voice. “I had to deal with that frilly Alastair. I had to get all dressed up for this, and you ruined it. You then tied and stripped us in front of everybody.” Bonewitch, unsettled, tried to scoot back but bumped against the beam she had been on.

“And then,” the warrior continued, angrier still, “you had the nerve to use us in your spell? To send Prim to that place of darkness? YOU BITCH!” she screamed this last, and a dim aura of fire appeared around her, an inch of flame running along her body.

“The Gift of the Rage,” Prim thought, recognizing it.

Bonewitch, clearly also recognizing the flames and her own danger, wailed out another “NYARRGH!” and turned aside to flee.

“Oh, no you don't!” Tia shouted. She dashed forward and leapt at Bonewitch, bringing her fists down on her foe before she had taken two paces. The witch cried out as she was knocked to the floor, a plank cracking.

Tia kicked her in the stomach, sending her flying back to crash against the wall, coughing. The warrior stood, glaring angrily at the witch, then ran at her.

She had given her experienced foe a moment too long to recover. As Tia approached, she disappeared, her hat falling to the floor where she had been, a faint “NYARRGH” echoing in the otherwise-silent stage.

Tia lifted the hat, found it empty, and angrily tossed it aside. She then jumped and turned as hands touched her shoulders.

“It's me, Hot-Tits,” Prim said gently.

Tia sighed. “Yeah, who else is here?” she asked. “Sorry, I thought I had her.”

“She's a slippery one,” Prim said, noticing Tia's aura had faded. She doubted her friend had even known she had it.

And then Prim hugged her. “Gah, really? Now?” Tia asked.

“No, nothing like that,” Prim said gently. “I just wanted to thank you, my brave warrior, for what you said.”

Tia blushed. “Umm, what I said?”

Prim giggled and let her go. “Be that way, Hot-Tits, if you prefer.”

Tia wracked her brains trying to remember what she had said. The details were hazy, lost in her rage -- she could have said anything. She decided to take Prim's lifeline and move on.

“Well... what now?” she wondered aloud.

“First thing's first,” Prim said cheerfully. She grabbed a patron's jacket and put it on. Tia followed suit, and the pair then worked their way backstage. Prim gathered her fiddle case and slung it over her shoulder. Looking around, they found Alastair still unconscious. Prim rifled in his vest and removed his coin purse.

Tia chuckled. “This kind of feels like theft.”

“Nonsense, Hot-Tits. It's merely payment for our services.”

“What services?” Alastair gasped, having woken up.

“Well, we did save everyone's life,” Tia said. “I should expect a little gratitude.”

Alastair scoffed. “Gratitude? For wrecking our theater? I should have known better than to trust low-class filth like you! I'll see you never perform anywhere again, you third-rate--”

Prim smacked him on the head with the coin purse, and he slumped back over. “Third-rate?” she huffed indignantly. “Low-class?”

She turned and gracefully walked out, head held high as though she were royalty. Tia, suddenly feeling a bit self-conscious about her own stomping gait, followed. She paused at the entrance to the main hall and looked back at the wreck of the stage.

“When you put on a show, Prim ...” she softly said with a smile. She turned and followed her friend outside.

Prim and Tia in "Upside-Down Tale"

The gnome pair trudged along the forest path up the steep ridge. "Why do inclines have to be so ... inclined?" Prim complained.

"You're the one taking us this way," Tia retorted. "I suggested we head toward Gottins, if that farmer had the name right, off to the south. You had a feeling we should go northwest. Well, there is your northwest." She pointed at the top of the ridge.

"Yeah, well, that was before I knew about these hills," Prim admitted. She sat on a large rock, stretching her legs and tending to her hair.

Tia sat on a log. "You realize we will be here forever if you stop to rest and clean up every fifty paces?" she asked as she pulled out a partially finished vest from her pack and began sewing. Experience had taught her Prim would be several minutes.

"Fortunately, I am not getting any feeling of haste, Hot-Tits." She rummaged in her gear for her makeup kit, as was her usual routine during a rest.

"Are you sure? You seemed hasty to avoid Gottins, it struck me," Tia noted, then stopped sewing and grinned. "Oh, I see, now. You have been there before, haven't you?"

Prim glanced over, then resumed examining herself in the mirror. "Whatever do you mean?" she asked innocently.

"What did you do? Paint the sheriff's boots pink? Con the barkeep out of his finest wine?"

Prim glared at her. "I'll have you know it was nothing like that, Hot-Tits."

"Oh, but it was something, then?" Tia asked, grinning. "Spill it, Prim."

The bard sighed. "It involved a young lady acolyte, the magistrate's son, and a mule with two tails..."

Tia chuckled. "Oh, this I gotta hear."

Prim quickly put her things away and stood. "Right. We best be getting a move on, Hot-Tits. No more dilly-dallying!" She set off along the path again.

Tia chuckled and followed suit.

Hours later, they finally crested the ridge. Prim dropped her pack and stretched. Tia copied her actions, setting down her own gear. "Well, here we are," the warrior declared. "Nice view. Lots of hills to hike through, too," she added, gesturing ahead.

Prim sighed. "More climbing. Maybe we can weave between those hills over -- hey, what is that?"

She pointed. They stood in a small clearing, the rocks limiting the forest's growth. A dozen yards off the path, there appeared to be a structure of some type where the trees started again.

"It looks like it's hanging," Tia noted. She looked around warily, hands reaching for her weapons.

"Come along, Hot-Tits! Let's see what it is." Prim walked toward it, hopping from stone to stone. Tia followed, disconcerted.

"Perhaps we should continue on?" she suggested. "That looks kind of like ..."

"--a cage," Prim finished. They were feet from it, now. The foliage had covered the shape of the primitive trap from a distance, but up close the device was impossible to miss.

"Who would bother making such a pitiful cage?" Tia wondered.

"Probably goblins," Prim shrugged. "Doubtless, they baited it with some trinket not worth a busted--" She broke off, then squealed as she saw the bait. "Can it be?" she cried, dashing toward it.

“Prim! Wait!” Tia cried, instinctively stepping forward. Before she could recover from her mistake, Prim had grabbed the item, and the cage fell over them both.

“Umm... oops,” Prim said, smiling sheepishly as Tia glared at her. Several goblins approached from the undergrowth, spears pointed at them....

Their captors wasted no time stripping the gnomes and binding their hands before them. The goblins then prodded them along with their spears, forcing them to march down to where they had set up camp.

The only resistance they had allowed came when a goblin reached for the bait. “No! Mine!” Prim cried, thwacking him repeatedly on the head with it. Fortunately for the goblin, it was not particularly hard. Regardless, it was unpleasant, so he left her to it as his fellows laughed.

Having arrived at the camp, the goblins tied the gnomes' ankles and hoisted them, upside-down, from a branch. They then set about dividing the loot and arguing over chores.

“Prim.”

“Hrm?” the bard replied distractedly, studying the bait in her hands.

“Is that ... a comic book?”

“Yup. Latest Boffo. I've been so out of touch, unable to find one.” She flipped a page, then burst into giggles.

Tia growled. “You got us captured over a ruddy comic book?”

“Seems so.”

“This is, without question, the stupidest capture you have gotten us into yet, Prim.”

“Maybe -- but look! It's in excellent condition, Hot-Tits!” Prim held the comic book up -- down -- for Tia to get a better view.

“I don't care. And I suppose you expect me to get us out of this?”

Prim resumed reading. “I cannot very well manage it while reading this, can I, Hot-Tits?”

Tia growled, then began chewing at the knot at her wrist. She knew the goblins -- being moronic creatures ready to brawl over anything (the more trivial the object, the more fierce the fighting) -- would remain distracted for several minutes, which was long enough to get her hands free. She then reached down -- up -- to her ankles, freeing them and falling to the turf with a grunt.

“Well done, Hot-Tits,” Prim said distractedly, flipping another page.

Tia ignored her and, instead, crept over to where the goblins had carelessly tossed aside their spears, as well as the gnomes' weapons. Rolling her eyes at their stupidity, she quietly placed them together. She then took her axe and shattered their shafts.

The goblins stopped their bickering and turned at the sound. Their jaws fell as they saw the very angry, very armed warrior and realized they had no weapons of their own.

“Come on, boys, time to play,” Tia said with a wicked grin, tapping her axe and hammer together. The goblins shrieked as she charged into them, releasing her pent-up rage at the sheer stupidity of it all.

“And here I was once impressed with how Prim handled your kind,” she said moments later as the last goblin collapsed unconscious at her feet. She had refrained from dealing any killing blows, settling for knocking the fools out. “But, you're rather a sorry lot, aren't you?”

“Go get 'em, Hot-Tits,” Prim said distractedly.

“Fight's over, Prim!” Tia said.

“Keep at 'em. Rah rah rah.”

Tia rolled her eyes, then set to gathering her clothes. As she finished dressing, she grinned and picked up an item, tucking it under her clothes. She then collected Prim's clothes and rummaged through the goblins' pitiful belongings. She sniffed something vaguely resembling food, wrinkled her nose, and tossed it aside.

Suddenly, Prim let out a shriek of misery. "No! No no no!!" she wailed.

Tia strolled over, holding the bard's clothes. "Problems?"

"The last page, Hot-Tits!" Prim cried, holding the book out so Tia could see. "It's gone! GONE!!"

"So it would seem," Tia replied dryly.

"What was it all for, if I can't see the ending?" Prim wailed, tears flowing up -- down? -- her face.

Tia rolled her eyes again and, with a single swing of her axe, chopped the rope holding Prim. Despite her emotional state, the bard deftly rolled with the fall.

"We hiked uphill forever," she said, "got captured, fought our way free--"

"You mean I fought our way free."

--and for what?" She threw aside the comic book. "Is all of this just a cruel joke?"

Tia grinned. "Hey, Prim."

"Wha-what?" the bard sobbed.

"You realize they took us back to the bottom? We have to climb up again."

Prim wailed again and fell onto her side. "No, not that damn ridge again!"

"Our stuff is on top," Tia said, cutting Prim's bonds, grinning wider still at her friend's melodramatic performance. "There is nothing for it."

"Just leave me," Prim said darkly. "What's the use?"

Tia threw Prim's clothes on top of her. "Do you really want to die with your hair looking like that? And your tears have ruined your makeup."

Prim leapt up, wiping her face. "Really? Oh, no, oh no oh no!"

Tia chuckled and left Prim to dress, walking over to where the comic book had landed. Opening it up, she took out from under her clothes the last page, which was what she had discovered earlier. She placed it in position, rubbing it flat a moment before closing the now-complete book.

"You sure you don't want this?" Tia asked brightly, holding the comic book out.

"What's the point?" Prim asked irritably, waving it off. "Come on, Hot-Tits. Let's go see what's over the ridge -- again! Perhaps it is better on a second viewing!" With that, she set off, singing a cheerful tune -- with several grumpy asides about dashed hopes and wasted time intertwined in.

Tia smiled. "Never one to stay down for long, my friend," she said softly. She set off after the bard, picturing Prim's delighted face when she would produce the missing page -- after they got to the top. "I think you will owe me a story about a lady acolyte, a magistrate's son, and a two-tailed mule..."

Prim and Tia in "Sun's Out Tale"

"Come on, Hot-Tits."

"No."

"It'll help. Trust me."

"Sure, sure. I'll pass."

"But--"

"Oh, go build a sand castle if you're bored, Prim. I just want to lay back right here and relax."

"You? Relax?"

"It has been known to happen."

"I doubt it. Anyway, I'm just saying, you'll burn in the sun. I prefer your name to be metaphorical, not literal!"

"You know my name is Tia, right?"

"Of course, Hot-Tits. I am telling you, this lotion will protect your skin. See how I maintain my perfect complexion despite the sun?"

"Where did you get it?"

"I made it myself. I have made it before."

"Then it would likely give me lizard skin or hair all over. I will definitely pass."

"You wound me! When has anything I have done for you gone wrong?"

"Need me to count the ways?"

"Hrmph. You're such a grouch."

“That's me.”

“I'm not wrong on this one. Look, I already applied it on myself. See!”

“Sure, sure. Give it time. You'll be begging me to take you to an apothecary in ten minutes.”

“Oh, come now. I'll prove it is safe!”

“Good grief, do you ever keep your top on, Prim?”

“I'm just showing you how confident I am in my lotion. If I wasn't, would I put so much on my own breasts?”

“Remember the tidgets?”

“What's that got to do with anything?”

“You seemed pretty confident you could avoid their grasp, if I recall. Now go play somewhere else.”

“But I like your skin the color it is!”

“Sheesh, do you ever give up?”

“Not where my Hot-Tits is concerned. Oh, you are so cute when you grunt like that!”

“Don't call me cute! And even if you are right, why do you need to apply it instead of me?”

“You cannot very well reach your own back, can you?”

“Riiiiight. You're just trying to get handsy with me. Again.”

“Whatever do you mean by 'handsy'? Ohhhh, I get it. Very sly, Hot-Tits!”

“What is sly?”

“You want me to apply it with my breasts!”

“Wait, huh? What are you--”

“Here I come! Weee!”

“Hey! Hey! Prim! Ack!”

“You're so cuddly, Hot-Tits!”

“Get offa me!”

“Good idea to squirm around so much. It really gets the lotion spread out! But you need to take your top off, too.”

“Dammit ... Fine, fine, there. You really do refuse to give up, don't you?”

“You know it.”

“You nutter. Aren't you done with them yet? And weren't you supposed to get my back – umm, Prim.”

“Err, yes, Hot-Tits?”

“Are our breasts stuck together?”

“Well ... yes ... I think ... Yes, they are quite stuck.”

“STUCK? How did – What did – Why would you do this?”

“I didn't mean to!”

“You didn't mean to? How'd it happen, then?”

“My guess would be my substitution had an unexpected side effect once it got to our body temperature?”

“Substitution"? I thought you said you had made this lotion before!”

“I have! I just couldn't find one of the flowers, so I figured the one I needed was blue, this one was blue...”

“PRIM! How are we going – hey, get your hands offa there!”

“Sorry, Hot-Tits ... They're stuck....”

“Of course they are. You planned this, didn't you?”

“Getting stuck? No ... Hard to enjoy my prize if I can't move ... Or lick ...”

“You and your 'prize' ... How do we get loose?”

“Well, maybe the water would wash it off?”

“Come on, let's – oww – my foot – careful – ah, the sand is hot.”

“Hot-Tits...”

“Less talking, more walking.”

“I think we have company.”

“What? Who? Oh, great. Of course. We'll never live this down....”

“Hello, Starlet! Wanna join the fun?”

Prim & Tia in "Dreamy Tale"

The gnome girl's confusion at finding herself alone in a vast, rocky desert with no notion of how she had arrived cleared up the instant she spotted the large wolf approaching, its fierce eyes locked upon her own.

She stood quietly, patiently waiting for it to get near. When it was a few feet away, it sat on its haunches.

"Fancy seeing you here," the gnome, Tia, greeted it. The beast tilted its head in response.

Having spoken, the gnome discovered a lit cigar in her mouth. She held it in her fingers and eyed it thoughtfully. "It has been a while since I had one of these," she said. She then grinned over at the wolf. "Either of these," she amended, gesturing to the general scene – a dream, she now understood – with a hand. Noticing she wore gloves, she looked down at herself to discover she also wore a familiar poncho with her tribe's markings on it. "Well, I'll be," she muttered, reaching up to find a familiar wide-brimmed hat on her head.

She eyed the wolf. "Is there a particular reason for all this?" she asked, indicating her outfit with her hands. The wolf merely stood and walked away.

"Right," she said, raising her hat to wipe sweat off her brow before chomping the cigar between her teeth and following.

They traveled for a few minutes, or a few hours. Experience had taught Tia to expect time within such a dream to have little meaning.

"You know, I keep trying to piece together just how I ended up here," she finally said. "The last I can really remember, Prim and I were in the woods preparing dinner."

The wolf looked to the side. Tia followed its gaze. She saw herself and Prim around a campfire.

"Come on, Hot-Tits, it would look so lovely on you!" Prim said. She held a ring of flowers and was trying to put them on Tia's head.

Dream-Tia grinned as she watched herself trying to shove the flowers away. "Come off it, Prim," her memory self said irritably. "I'm not wearing it!"

"They really suit you, I just know it!" the redhead persisted.

The struggling pair faded away. Tia frowned. "What, were the flowers poisonous or something?" she asked the wolf. "It would be just like Prim to get them mixed up."

The wolf snorted and resumed walking. "Oh, come now," Tia said, shrugging and following. "You know about the time at the beach, right?" The wolf merely continued the journey. "Yeah, I prefer not to think about it, either," she added as an afterthought.

The pair traveled along a ridge for what seemed like miles but which, Tia understood well, could have been a mere twelve feet. Landmarks such as clusters of cacti or rock formations were unreliable guides, as they shifted and moved when she looked away, discovering an entirely different desert landscape when she looked back again.

"I've always been curious just how you decide what to show me," Tia said contemplatively. "I mean, these little forays always have some point to them, right? You never visit just to say 'hi, Tia, has Prim driven you mad yet? Oh, gotta go, the kettle's boiling.'"

The wolf stopped and turned. Tia followed suit, idly wiping more sweat off her neck.

A younger version of herself was fighting several goblins. Other gnomes were fighting alongside her.

The older Tia smiled broadly. "I remember this," she said. "A patrol had gotten too close to the village. We sure showed them."

The wolf looked up at her as her younger self tripped and barely rolled away from a blow from a goblin.

Tia blushed. "Okay, well, everyone else sure showed them. I survived, I suppose you could say."

The wolf looked back at the scene. “What?” Tia asked. “It was my first real fight, okay? We can't all be insanely capable, can we?”

Letting out a small huff of a bark, the wolf resumed walking. The scene faded. “Ah, bugger it all,” Tia said, puffing the cigar angrily.

They traveled for what seemed like days, the sun and moon crossing overhead. After a few moments, or many days, Tia was convinced the celestial bodies were in a hurry. She began counting the steps out loud after the sun rose for the fourth time, curious how few steps she would take before it set.

The wolf, as if aware of her efforts, stopped again. “Cheater,” she scolded it before turning to the scene it was now watching.

Her memory self was dressed as her dream self currently was, with the notable addition of an axe hanging from her belt and shield slung across her back. She was clearly traveling, carrying a large pack, though her steps took her nowhere, as if the “ground moved beneath her feet” was a literal phrase for her.

“Goodness, what a pack,” Tia said. “Was I really so arrogant to lug all that around? What would Prim have thought. Well, no doubt she would see fit to fill that pack with her usual useless stuff. Makeup in the woods, for the love of ...”

She suddenly frowned, rolling the cigar between her fingers contemplatively. “I was always on the move then, never lingering. Have I ever stopped moving since...” she trailed off as her younger self faded.

The wolf continued on. She did not immediately follow, lost in thought as she was. A soft bark snapped her out of it.

“Coming, coming,” she called out irritably. “Not as if a spirit dream is the place for reflection and deep thinking, right?”

They crossed a stream. She was surprised neither to find the water did not cool her nor that she was dry when she stepped out on the other side. She wiped her brow again. “The water doesn't stick around, yet still I'm sweating in this heat. What kind of dream is this, anyway, that I'm so hot?” The wolf did not answer. “Right, well, I suppose you've got your reasons,” she told it.

A small object flew past her, almost faster than her eye could see. It hovered a moment, and she realized it was a bird – a hummingbird. It flitted over to look at her, inches from her face.

“Go away, fool thing,” she muttered, swatting at it. It danced about in the air, avoiding her hand with ease as she continued flailing at it. Apparently amused by the game they were playing, it continued flitting about her head.

With a sigh, Tia gave up. The bird, seeing her “playful” mood had ended, merrily flew over and landed on the wolf's head. The beast gave no sign it was bothered by this. After a few seconds, the bird emitted a series of squeaks in what it evidently thought was song.

The wolf stopped, and Tia looked over at the scene now appearing. She and Prim were being escorted into a manor house by several armed men. Her dream self wore the ring of flowers Prim had braided earlier.

“This must be what happened after Prim tried to get that on me,” she said, realizing it was true as she spoke. “Wait, she actually got it on my head? Dammit all...”

The wolf let out a short bark.

“Oh, laugh it up,” Tia snarled as the scene faded. The bird flew over to land on her shoulder. She shooped it away. It flew over to her other shoulder, and she sighed. “You better not leave me any presents, you silly thing,” she told it. It responded by singing again. They continued their journey through the desert.

Suddenly, there was a crash of shattering glass. A chair landed near Tia. She looked over to see a building with a busted window on an upper floor. A rope was thrown through it.

“Weeeee!” Prim merrily cried, sliding down the rope with one hand, the other holding her tribe's treasure. She wore only panties, fishnets, and a bunny girl tail.

Tia grinned at the memory.

“Prim! Wait! Should we find some clothes first?” Memory-Tia called down from inside.

“Goodness, clothes, what a weird thing to be concerned about,” Tia said. The hummingbird let out more singing, as if in agreement.

As Memory-Tia joined Prim on the ground, the latter stretched. She took a deep breath, then let it out. “Ah, Hot-Tits, can you smell the fresh air? Such a relief after all that smelly ol' smoke in there! How can anyone stand such stuff?”

The real Tia watched herself frown, then the scene faded. As she walked onward, the wolf still in front of her, she plucked the cigar from her mouth and looked at it.

“Hell, no!”

“Fuckyes!”

“Hell, no!”

She looked as the next memory played, finding herself and Prim chained to posts, a parrot on Prim's head. Tia let out a loud laugh as Prim and the bird argued.

“Ah, I'd forgotten this one,” she said, standing and watching as a furious Prim – someone had insulted her exquisite ass, Tia recalled – inadvertently named their captor's parrot. Even as Prim had made a fool of herself, she could still smile about immediately afterwards, Tia noticed.

“Always ready to laugh,” she said to her friend as the image faded. The wolf resumed walking. Tia lingered a moment, looking at the cigar in her hand again. She tossed it aside as she followed the wolf. “Too ruddy hot, anyway,” she muttered, wiping her brow.

Hours passed, the trio contentedly walking with no clear destination. The hyperactive bird fluttered from one shoulder to the other, apparently having invented a game for itself.

“Come on,” Tia finally said, wiping her brow again. “It's too hot for this. Could you get to the – ”

She was interrupted by a familiar voice, one she had not heard in years. He was laughing. The sound sent a jolt through her as if she had been struck by lightning. She froze, then looked at the wolf. “Don't you dare,” she warned the wolf in a menacing tone. The wolf, who was watching the scene, glanced at her before looking back to the memory.

“I said, *don't you dare*,” Tia shouted, stepping toward the wolf.

The sound of wind began where the memory was. Finally turning toward the memory, Tia found it was now a swirling cloud, shadowy figures moving within, barely discernible. The wind drowned out most of the voices.

“Let's go,” Tia said through gritted teeth.

The bird flew off her shoulder and hovered in front of her, between her and the clouded memory, squeaking insistently. It flew a few inches toward the memory and back, as if trying to guide her toward it.

“You can stay for all I care,” Tia said, walking determinedly away, ignoring the continued squeaks of the bird.

She passed the wolf, who let out another huff and trotted ahead of the gnome to resume its place. The hummingbird quietly returned to her shoulder.

Another memory appeared in what Tia was certain was just seconds. She looked over to see Prim leaping at her memory-self, crying out “Prim strike!”

The trio continued on. Behind them, the sound of the whirling wind was a constant presence. Tia pointedly did not look back at it.

The sound of a fiddle to her side caught her attention. Prim was dancing and playing for some children.

The trio continued on. As they traveled, the heat continued to distract her, building within her regardless of sun or moon. Her companions seemed unaffected, which only darkened her mood. The wolf would look back on occasion, but Tia was having none of it and refused to meet its gaze.

“Uncle, uncle already, ya mad gnome!” a man cried out.

“Hot-Tits, perhaps you should take it down just a tad,” Prim suggested.

This memory was recent, and Tia smiled despite herself when she saw Prim's smile as she bathed.

The trio continued on. The wind howled much louder now, as if the scene gave chase behind them. She wiped sweat off her brow again.

“Come on, Tia,” her own voice said. She looked over to see her memory self bent over, hands on knees. “No weakness now.... You can't lose –” Her voice faltered. She covered her face, then wiped a tear.

The bird flew over to look. Tia stopped. “Prim got herself into trouble,” she explained. “I had to run for ages to catch her up.”

With a curious squeak, the bird flew in front of her face. “What?” she asked. It flew back to the memory, where the gnome there had started jogging, searching the ground intently. “Yeah, yeah,” the gnome grumbled. “I was worried, alright?” It danced about her head excitedly, then landed on her shoulder and began singing again.

“You're a strange little thing,” Tia told it. She looked down at the wolf, who let out another huff.

The trio continued on. A lizard, several feet long, idly sunned on a rock in the middle of their path ahead. As they approached, Tia pretended not to notice the wind affecting her clothes, now, as if she stood on the outskirts of a storm. As she thought of it, a rumble of thunder boomed from behind.

The bird flew in front of her again, looking at her. “What now?” she asked.

It squeaked and flew at her face. She instinctively stepped back. “Oh, no,” she said, realizing the bird's meaning. “We're not going back. Whatever is in front of us, that's our path.”

The wolf turned and barked at trailing clouds. “I said we're not going there,” Tia said, pointing over her shoulder as another rumble of thunder, much louder, crescendoed behind them.

She stepped forward. The wind whipped around her, her hair flying out. The noise was deafening even without the blasts of thunder, which began striking more often. And still the heat, the miserable heat, beat down on her.

The hummingbird again flew in front of her, darting at her to get her to turn around. Tia knew it would not actually hit her and continued walking past it.

It flew ahead of her again, then dashed aside as the lizard's tongue lashed out at it. The wolf barked at Tia.

“Hey, now, no need for that,” she snarled at the lizard, which struck out at the bird again. She stepped forward to shove the reptile off its rock and send it on its way, when suddenly the wind shifted and began pulling her backwards.

“Let me go!” she yelled as the lizard again tried for the hummingbird, who barely avoided it. The wolf growled at the maelstrom. “Not that, the lizard!” Tia snarled at it.

The bird tried again to get Tia to turn back. “Are you mad?” she shouted. “Worry about yourself, you fool –”

The lizard's aim finally struck true. Its tongue lashed out and wrapped around the bird. Tia cried out as the reptile pulled the hummingbird into its mouth.

She was surrounded now by the clouds, the memory she had avoided had caught her. She fought desperately to get to the bird, who seemed to be squeaking a sad tune, its beak sticking out of the lizard's mouth.

Then the lizard began to grow, and a horrible mocking laughter filled the air, louder even than the wind and thunder. Other voices from the memory spoke, and Tia screamed at their words. The last she could see before the cloud completely blocked her vision was the wolf staring at her.

“Hot-Tits.”

Tia groaned.

“Oh, Hot-Tits, thank goodness.”

She struggled to open her eyes, seeing nothing but blur. After a moment, her vision cleared. She was in a cellar – she could see barrels and crates. Prim was kneeling at her side.

“Hey,” Tia managed to say, her voice hardly a whisper.

The redhead pushed a waterskin to Tia's lips. She drank greedily.

“I know it burns,” Prim said apologetically. “I had to give it to you, though. The poison...”

Tia stopped drinking and raised an eyebrow. “You were poisoned, Hot-Tits,” Prim said. “By...” she hesitated as if confused. “I forget his name. Anyway, some specifically unremarkable gnome.” The warrior let out a snort of laughter.

“A lord, no doubt,” she said, her voice stronger after the water.

Prim shrugged, the corner of her mouth turning up slightly. “Perhaps. Anyway, he claimed we have some sort of history together. He wanted vengeance and – ”

“ – And blah blah blah,” Tia said, spinning a finger in the air and eliciting a smile from Prim.

“Precisely. To get what he wanted, he poisoned you.” She pointed to a bandage on Tia's arm. “He planned to keep you in such a state until I cooperated. He then took me to his chambers. Well, I saw to it he would be preoccupied for a while.”

Tia chuckled. “Preoccupied and starkers, I take it?”

Prim grinned. “Good guess. Anyway, his guards are, of course, not going to interrupt his time in bed. So, I borrowed some healing supplies, whipped up the perfect antidote (as I am so skilled, of course), and found you. Do not worry, I will get you out of here.”

Tia reached up and put a hand on Prim's shoulder, giving her a squeeze. “I'm not worried, my friend.”

Prim smiled, tears in her eyes. “Come on,” she said, helping Tia stand. “Lean on me. We should have plenty of time.”

They walked toward the cellar's stairs, Tia's arm over Prim's shoulders. Suddenly, the warrior laughed.

“I recall this fellow once said you would rue warming his bed,” she said.

“Did he now?” Prim asked. “Huh. Well, I suppose he simply got it backward, did he not?”

Laughing together, they stepped onto the stairs.

Prim & Tia in "A Salty Tail"

"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.

Prim & Tia in "Haunted Tale"

The gnome pair once again looked upon yet another fresh town. "Cheery," Tia said. "Is it me, or is everyone down there scurrying about in a bit of a hurry?"

The bard frowned. "And in groups, too. Not a soul alone to be seen."

The warrior sighed and hitched up her pack. "Right. Something is wrong with a town we happen to be strolling into. Nothing surprising there."

Prim laughed cheerfully. "When did you become so fatalistic, Hot-Tits?"

Tia side-eyed Prim. "I don't know. Probably since a certain irritating redhead introduced me to 'tickling tidgets'."

Prim gasped in mock-mortification. "You wound me, my friend! I thought we were not to speak of that incident?"

"I don't recall agreeing to any such thing." She smiled. "Shall we find out what has the good townspeople under a spell of fear?"

The pair walked down the main street, the citizens eyeing them, some in dumbfounded surprise, others more with more appraising looks.

"Not the usual response," Tia said in a low voice. "Normally, they all act frightened of newcomers."

"They must be in need of outside help," Prim said. "They are sizing us up, trying to decide if we can solve their troubles."

"Because nobody can solve their problem from their own citizenry. They have no constable? No deputies?"

"Perhaps we could ask him. I would wager he is the mayor, what with his important-looking strut and sidekicks."

Tia chuckled. The pair stopped and waited for the trio to approach. "Oh, thank goodness!" the important man said. "We have been praying for help!"

"And what help do you need?" Tia growled.

He hesitated, taken aback by her tone. Prim rolled her eyes, stepped forward, and curtsied. "My rather direct friend merely wishes to know how we might aid your fair city, mister ..." she trailed off meaningfully.

"Mayor. Forgive the lack of introductions. We are in such need of ones such as yourself."

"And we are what, exactly?" Tia asked.

"Adventurers, heroes, whatever you call yourselves," the Mayor said with a dismissive wave as townspeople moved in around them. "You see, several of our young maidens have gone missing of late."

"And I saw a group of 'em headed that way, toward the ol' manor," a young boy said. "Not just last night!"

"So, if it would not be too much trouble, would you see fit to help our troubled town?"

Hours later, the gnome pair walked down the indicated path through a wood. "Why is it every forest outside a so-called haunted manor is so spooky?" Tia asked. "It seems like everything is trying to grab at us."

"Probably because the trees are trying to grab at us," Prim said.

"Oh, well, that would do it," Tia agreed, shooing off a branch going for her breast.

The pair continued down the trail toward what the townspeople had assured them was the manor of ... someone

“What's the manor family name again?” Tia asked.

“I dunno,” Prim said with a shrug. “I thought you were paying attention.”

“Eh, gone to one manor, gone to them all,” the warrior said. “It's pretty much always the same, isn't it?”

“Pretty much. Personally, I am looking forward to the lecture of whatever grand plan is in motion that will somehow use lovely ladies in bondage to take over ... something.”

“Or summon something,” Tia said with a shiver, remembering their encounter with Bonewitch.

“Now *that* was spooky. Not my fav – meep!” Prim gasped. She looked with mild curiosity at a branch squeezing her backside. “Exquisite, isn't it?” she asked it before shooing it off and continuing down the path.

After a few hundred more yards, the trail crested a small rise and, suddenly, the manor was below them, dark and foreboding in the moonlight.

“That is not spooky in the slight – ZOINKS!” Prim cried and leapt into Tia's arms, her own around the warrior's neck, as a swarm of bats suddenly flew above the pair, a few stragglers flying near the gnomes' faces.

After the swarm had flown past, Tia looked down at Prim and cocked an eyebrow. “And what was *that* all about?”

The bard grinned sheepishly. “Sorry. They kind of caught me off guard.”

“What, are you afraid of flying rodents?”

“They are not rodents, Tia,” Prim chided, reaching up to ensure her hair flame was unblemished by the bats. “That is a common misconception. They are actually –”

“Whatever they actually are, either stand up or I'm going to drop you on your 'exquisite' ass.”

“So grumpy, Hot-Tits,” Prim pouted, standing up.

They made their way past the gate, one side of which was hanging by a single hinge, and to the entrance. They hesitated.

“Betcha every floorboard squeaks,” Prim said.

“And doubtless there is a constant, chilling breeze,” Tia added, looking at the broken windows. She sighed and pulled a torch out of her bag.

“You know, it does make me wonder why we never bothered with bringing a light to places like this before,” Prim mused, rubbing her hands across her forearms.

“I think you like things spooky,” the warrior answered as she worked to light the torch.

“Yes, it is always a thrill. Did I ever tell you about the time a mad scientist turned me into an elf? Well, he actually just added a foot or two to my height. Said he preferred them tall.”

Tia lifted up the now-burning torch and looked Prim up and down. “You must have really been short, then.” She grinned as Prim stuck her tongue out at her, then reached for the door handle.

It opened with what they considered a customary creak. They saw the floor was covered in dust, with cobwebs hanging off every light fixture. As they stepped in, the floor creaked beneath them. They exchanged a look and rolled their eyes, grinning.

Tia lit a second torch from the first and handed the fresh one to Prim. “Let's get this over with. Whatever might be here, it is going to be in the cellar –”

“Which would doubtless be a dungeon,” Prim interjected. Tia nodded.

“So, split up, find the stairs.”

The bard nodded and set off to the right. Tia took a left-hand hallway. She passed through several rooms – disturbing more than a few rats – before finding a dining room. Reasoning the kitchen staff would have access to both the dining room and the cellar, she continued through and discovered, as she had expected, a door in the

kitchen. She began walking over, when she heard a crash behind her. Turning in surprise, she found a cat dashing off, the broom it had knocked over having caused the noise.

“Stupid kitty,” she muttered, her heart pounding. She turned back to the kitchen door. Striding over, opened it to find a dark, dank stairway spiraling down.

“Found it, Prim!” she called out. After a moment of getting no response, she called out again. With a sigh, she retraced her steps through the house, then followed where Prim had gone.

After ten minutes of searching with no sign of the bard, Tia stopped and frowned. “Seriously, Prim?” she asked the air. “Did you get yourself captured?”

A flash of white at the edge of her vision caught her attention. She spun, holding the torch out. “Who goes there?” she asked. Only silence answered her.

“This is ridiculous,” she said after a moment. She stomped over to the kitchen again, then set off down the stairs. “Always making me rescue you,” she grumbled. “Nothing is ever simple. No, all these girls in trouble, and Prim has to join the fun rather than rescue the lot.”

Suddenly, a haunting voice called out behind her in a long, drawn-out wail. “Tiiiiiaaaaaaaaa,” it whispered.

She spun, the torch shaking in her hand. The voice did not repeat, nor could she hear any sounds other than her own heavy breathing.

Reaching the cellar, she simply huffed and walked to the back wall. Seeing a sconce with an unlit torch on the wall, she reached up and pulled it. Sure enough, it bent forward, a hidden lever. A hidden door in the wall slid aside. Tia walked on through.

“Now, this is pretty much exactly what we expected,” Tia muttered as she saw a hallway with dungeon doors lining the walls. As she passed the first pair of doors, she jumped up and grabbed the barred windows on one, peering inside. She saw a trio of ladies bound and gagged in very little clothing and in a pose not spoken of in decent company.

Shaking her head, figuring to rescue them after she found Prim, she continued on. The hallway ended at a T. Looking both directions, she found a cell in the left-hand corridor was open. A light was coming from inside. She carefully walked over and looked in.

Prim was sitting in a chair, wrists bound to the sides, her ankles secured to the front legs, a pair of ropes holding her shoulders to the back. A ball gag filling her mouth. She had been stripped to her undergarments. When she saw Tia, she grinned sheepishly around her gag.

“Really, Prim,” Tia said, stepping inside. “Are you that pathetic?”

Suddenly, the warrior turned and punched the man sneaking up behind her right in the gut. He grunted and staggered back, holding his stomach. He was wearing bandages like a mummy, some of which were hanging loosely about his limbs.

“Seriously?” Tia asked. “The old 'sneak up while she is focused on her captive friend' routine? And are you supposed to be scary?” She slapped him.

“Ow!” he cried. “What was that for?”

In answer, she grabbed his arm and dragged him into the cell. She sent him against a wall by the simple expedient of putting her boot on his backside. “Stay put,” she ordered. She walked back to Prim and untied her. “Thanks, Hot-Tits,” the bard said gratefully. “Can you believe he was hiding in an alcove behind a false wall? I missed that, heh.”

“And he simply overpowered you?” Tia asked skeptically.

“Well ...,” Prim trailed off, blushing. Her eyes unfocused as she remembered the attack. “He was good with his hands,” she finally said.

Tia scoffed. "Fine." She walked to the "mummy", who had recovered and was standing, watching. "Right. Off with it."

"With what?" he asked innocently.

The warrior sighed and grabbed the bandages over his face, pulling them down to reveal ...

"THE MAYOR!" both gnomes exclaimed.

"Yes, me. The mayor," he said. "I was collecting lovely ladies to sell. It is quite the profitable business. I have done this before, in other towns. And I would have gotten away with it here if it hadn't been for you meddling gnomes!"

They blinked, confused, and looked at each other. "But, you were the one who hired us..." Prim said.

"Oh. Right. Yeah, about that..."

"What about it?" Prim said.

"Well, you see, I don't work alone."

Suddenly, a pair of burly arms wrapped around each gnome, pinning her arms while a hand covered her mouth. The gnomes squealed angrily into their captors' hands, kicking back ineffectually.

"Right," the mayor said. "Secure them like the others, then get the wagon over here. We'll set off as soon as you get it here, hopefully before any townspeople get silly ideas about checking up on their 'heroines'."

Minutes later, the pair found themselves tied together, Tia having been stripped and forced into lingerie, as well. Their breasts pressed against one another, sweat rolling down their skin as they squirmed and mmped into their ball gags. They tugged at the ropes pulling their ankles back and let out muffled yelps or moans as their movements caused their connected crotch ropes to pull and rub against their privates.

Tia, certain Prim was enjoying the situation, would have glared at her if it were not for the blindfolds over their eyes.

Two days later, a wagon rolled toward town, driven by a pair of gnomes in lingerie. Several women in various states of undress were inside the wagon. A trio of men, two rather burly, all quite bruised, were tied naked in a line behind the wagon.

"So, think anyone will be interested to hear how we got out of this one?" Tia asked.

"Nah," Prim said. "I think they would rather hear how hot we looked all tied up and squirming and mmping."

"So long as they don't demand a recreation of the event," Tia said grumpily.

"I don't know, Hot-Tits," Prim said, an expression of deep thought on her face. "We could charge a fortune..."

"NO!" the warrior replied quite firmly. "Not a chance!"

"It was just an idea," Prim said with a laugh.

"You just want to get tied up with me again," Tia accused. "I know you enjoyed it."

"Of course I did."

Tia drew up, surprised at the simple directness of Prim's statement. "Umm, right."

"Is there a problem?" Prim asked sweetly.

The warrior opened her mouth to answer, then sighed. "Forget it."

“Did someone enjoy herself, as well?” Prim teased.

Tia felt her cheeks blush. “I don't know what you're talking about.”

“Have it your way, my dear Hot-Tits.” Prim stretched. “But one day, I will have my prize.”

Tia grunted. “What, that not count?”

“Count for what?”

“For your prize, you goof,” Tia said, throwing her hands up in frustration.

Prim's eyes twinkled. “Perhaps you misunderstand what prize I seek, Hot-Tits.”

“Come again?”

Prim merely smiled and leaned back, shutting her eyes for a nap. Tia shook her head, confused, and used the reins to urge the horses along back toward the town.

Prim & Tia and Friend in “Kinktober Self-Tale”

“Why are we here in yet another creepy manor?” Tia asked.

“Tradition, Hot-Tits,” Prim answered with a grin.

“Right. As in, traditionally, some monster or cultist or other grabs us, and we spend hours tied up.”

“I know! It is always such fun!”

Tia rolled her eyes. “Well, at least there is usually a chance for me to beat someone up after you finally get around to freeing us,” she said.

Prim giggled, not bothering to reply to accusations that she ever did anything less than her best to free them. “To more precisely answer your earlier question: Millistripes seems to be missing again.” She hesitated a moment, then began in a delicate tone, “meanwhile, her devoted tutor – ”

The warrior snorted. “You mean the pervert.”

“Yes, him. I have it on good authority he is on a business trip and will be away for a few weeks.”

“In other words, you started a rumor something pervy was up for auction somewhere,” Tia translated.

“I am afraid he might return disappointed,” Prim said. “But, most importantly and distressingly, our besocked friend has not visited for tea lately.”

“Don't you only do that like every six months or so, anyway? How would you know she has missed any parties?”

Prim wagged a finger at her. “Tut-tut, Hot-Tits. A tea master never reveals her secrets.”

“A loon never does, you mean. So, we're in her so-called tutor's house in order to check up on her?”

“As any good friends would do.”

“And that is why you broke into a window?” Tia asked, a skeptical eyebrow raised.

“Well,” Prim began, brows furrowed, “I did not want to embarrass our friend should she be taking advantage of her tutor's absence in order to – how best to say it – play a little.”

Tia snorted. “You're hoping she's having some private fun and want to watch!” She punched the redhead's arm. “You naughty peeping gnome!”

The bard rubbed her arm. “She is probably upstairs,” she said, pointing toward a staircase. She jogged toward it. “Hurry along, Hot-Tits!”

“Changing the subject? From you, that's a confession!” Tia said, laughing and running to catch up.

At the top, they found a hallway leading in either direction, a rug running along the center of it. “We should be quiet as we approach,” Prim whispered. “I believe her room is in this direction,” she added, stepping toward the left.

“You believe?” Tia asked in an equally low tone, grinning in her turn. “Don't you mean you know, seeing as you've undoubtedly peeped in her window a dozen times?”

“Do not be foolish, Hot-Tits,” Prim replied coolly.

“Twenty times?”

Prim gave Tia a side-eyed glance, which prompted the warrior to chuckle.

“Thirty times?” Tia continued.

Rolling her eyes, Prim whispered, “I fail to see how it matters, and really, who keeps track of such things?”

“You would. Forty times?”

“Forty-one, I think,” Prim answered.

Tia stopped. “Forty-one?” she asked, trying not to burst into laughter.

“Well, that is my best guess.” She started forward again.*

After a few steps, she stopped, hand up. Tia recognized the sign and waited. “It would seem someone wishes to be forewarned of anyone approaching,” Prim whispered. “Millistripes always does that when she is experimenting.”

“Experimenting how?” Tia asked.

In answer, Prim simply grinned and winked. She then waved a hand over the rug, muttering a few words under her breath. A glow formed, forming lines which then spread into a geometric pattern.

“Easy enough,” Prim said softly as she pressed her back to the wall and sidled past the mark. “Simply don't step on that.”

Tia took rather longer to slip past the mark, but soon joined her friend on the other side. They quietly walked to a door at the end of the hallway. Prim peered into the keyhole.

“See anything sexy?” Tia asked.

“Sadly, no,” Prim said. She reached into her hair and withdrew a pair of picks, which she promptly used to unlock the door.

“Not going to knock? She could be in there sleeping or something.”

“Then we shall have fun waking her up,” Prim said with a mischievous grin. “But I rather expect we shall find our friend engaged in a form of personalized learning.”

Tia frowned, trying to sort out what her friend meant, as Prim quietly pushed the door ajar and peered in. “A-ha!” the bard said. “So, I was correct as usual!”

Tia heard a muffled cry of shock. She pushed the door open and looked in. Standing in a corner of the room was their friend Millie, blushing furiously. Several ropes wrapped around her kept her helpless. Another rope between her teeth kept her cries unintelligible.

“Who did this to you?” Tia asked, stepping forward, weapons drawn. She searched the room, but it appeared only the trio was in it.

“She did it to herself, of course, Hot-Tits,” Prim said with a grin. Millie blushed even deeper, somehow. Prim pranced over to the bound apprentice and checked the ropework. “And she did a good job of it, too!” She playfully smacked Millie on the backside as she complimented her, eliciting a gagged squeak of surprise.

“Wait, you tied *yourself* up?” Tia asked the apprentice.

Millie moaned into her gag and looked away, apparently growing more embarrassed by the moment.

“I doubt she intended that, Hot-Tits,” Prim said, pointing to a mannequin in the corner. She then reached down and lifted a book off the floor. “I would say she was trying out a new spell to try on Starlet Slut, only she made an error.” She looked at the blushing apprentice. “Or was it on purpose, Millistripes, you delightful girl?”

Millie shook her head indignantly, grumbling into her gag.

“I reckon she wants loose,” Tia said while Prim thumbed through the pages of the book.

“Ah, I see, here is the spell she must have used,” the bard said. “See? Right here. *Bind och sätt munkavle på den där flickan*. Seems easy enough.” Suddenly, she looked up. “Oh, look, I was right!” she said brightly.

“Wait, what?” Tia cried as several ropes appeared around her. “Are you kidding me?” she snapped at Prim as the ropes snared her wrists and wrapped around her legs.

* Really, Prim? Or are you exaggerating your “achievements” again?

“I was just demonstrating how our friend got into her situation,” Prim explained, sitting on Millie's bed and watching as the warrior struggled against the ropes.

“Yes, you were just demonstrating what a complete and total ninny you – mmph mmm mmmmmph!!” Tia found herself interrupted by a rope gag silencing her as Millie had been the entire time.

“It is fascinating to watch the ropes work,” Prim said. “Though, I wonder...” she trailed off. She stepped beside Millie, then smacked the apprentice's backside again. Millie squealed and instinctively hopped forward.

She bumped into Tia. The ropes, having nearly finished securing the warrior, decided the contact was their cue to wrap the pair together. They wound around the gnome and human, pulling them close and securing them snugly.

Finally, the spell ceased. Prim clapped. “Oh, bravo!” she said. “To think it is intelligent enough to expand to other targets!”

Tia squirmed against Millie and issued various gagged complaints.

“Oh, I know you are having such fun, Hot-Tits,” Prim agreed. “Being close to Millistripes is always a joy and a pleasure.” Millie rolled her eyes, feeling a sort of resignation settling in.

Besides, it really was fun to play with her gnomish friends. And she was certain Tia loved it, too, despite the bluster.

While the two squirmed helplessly, feeling the air warm up as they struggled, Prim studied the spell she had cast. “Ah! Here it is,” she finally said. “You must have said it wrong! Simple enough, but you confused the target word *där*, which means 'there', with *här*, which means 'here'. So the magic chose you instead of that mannequin you have over in the corner. An easy enough error, I should think.” She giggled, shaking her head. “We have all been silly and done things like chant *bind och sätt munkavle på den här flickan* and had to face our own unfortunate if oftentimes unexpectedly delightful ... umm ... results ... err ...” She trailed off as several ropes appeared in the air around her, the ends circling in place as if they were snakes waiting to pounce upon their prey.

“Oh. Right,” she said, tilting her head as she studied one end of rope. “I suppose that might have been an error on my part,” she conceded, dropping the book and smacking her left palm with the bottom of her other fist.

And the ropes attacked her, much as they had Tia and, doubtlessly, Millie before. “Well, I did say we have all done silly things, did I not? And it is a good thing your mentor is away for a few weeks,” Prim told Millie. “We should have plenty of time to enjoy one another's company!”

Tia and Millie shared an exasperated look. “I do believe there is but one thing left to do,” Prim said. “Here I commmmph!” she cried as she hopped at the pair while a rope gagged her.

She fell into them, and the ropes soon secured the trio together, much to the delight of at least one, probably two, and not entirely unlikely to be all three of them.

Author's note: This Tale was inspired by artwork by our good friend Menchi. Check it out at

<https://www.deviantart.com/menchimenagerie/art/Kinktober-Day-25-Mistake-Self-Bondage-895977093>

It was also inspired by a “thing” going around. Apparently, this “thing” involves creating art for each day of October, with a theme for the day. Only it is supposed to be kinky art, so they call it Kinktober. Today's theme was self-bondage. Hence, the picture and now this Tale.

Millie belongs to Jaded Entity

Prim and Tia in "Bounty Tale"

"She loves me. She loves me not."

As she said each sentence, her voice low and hopeful, Prim plucked a petal from the flower she held and let it fall to the forest floor.

"She loves me."

The gnomes were, as usual, wandering around nigh-aimlessly in the wilderness. Evening was coming on, and the pair had set up camp already.

"She loves me not."

Prim had tried, once again, to get close to Tia when some creature in the distance roared, breaking the mood and disrupting her scheme. The warrior had used the distant threat as an excuse to sharpen her axe.

"She loves me."

Somewhere in all that, the two had gotten into an argument, and Prim had angrily stomped off.

"She loves me not."

Prim looked at the last petal in her hand, frowning. She thought of the time she had Tia tied up for escape practice, her plan nearly succeeding. She knew, just *knew* her Hot-Tits wanted to yield and was then on the verge of admitting it when – as usual – they were interrupted.

With a sigh, she dropped the petal and now-bare stem. "Ah, well. Typical." She reached down to pluck another flower when a different blossom caught her eye. "Oh, I have not seen you in quite some time," she told it brightly. She pulled it off the shrub and examined it, spinning it by its stem.

"You are a pretty one," she told it. She fitted it above her ear. "Hot-Tits will like you, too, I am sure."

She searched about, muttering. "Where is your friend? Always together, you two – ah!" she said as she spotted the leafy vine. Snapping a piece off, she braided it around her hair at the back of her neck. Using a thinner piece, she tied the flower to her hair, as well, to keep it secure.

"There!" she said, fluffing her hair. "Quite beautiful. Maybe you two will be the start of some good luck for a change. I have been on something of a bad streak of late. Crazy witches, misunderstandings about tournament rules, horribly-timed mayhem..." She trailed off with a sigh.

"The worst of it all," she called out to the air in a louder voice, "is now some smelly idiot is stalking me from upwind." She waved a hand invitingly. "You can come out, you know."

A few seconds passed silently. Then a man chuckled and stepped out of the foliage several yards behind her. "The wind changed when we passed yonder hollow," he said, pointing. "I am unused to these environs."

She idly turned to face him, arms crossed. He was covered head to foot in black, as though he wished to move about unseen. A short blade hung from his belt opposite a pouch, while a knife was strapped to his arm. He wore a pack on his back, from which she could see half a dozen coils of rope hanging.

"A poor excuse," she said merrily. "How do you expect to grab me if you are not even familiar with our surroundings? Did it not occur to you I might be at home here?"

"It did," he answered. "My client did warn me you have ... remarkable skills, Primiphi Piltrum Stannumshard."

"Ah, so you know my name? I am flattered." She curtsied dramatically. "I do indeed have remarkable skills, being a rather remarkable person. Did your client mention my exquisite ass?"

The man started, confused. "Umm ... no, he did not."

Prim pouted. "How rude of him to not mention it. Or perhaps his memory is failing him. That would explain his extraordinary blunder. You sure he will even remember hiring you?"

“He will, one way or the other,” the man said, menacingly. “No one crosses the Shadow Stalker.”

“Shadow Stalker?” Prim repeated, letting out a snicker.

“You find something funny?” he asked, his eyes narrowing.

“Oh, no, not at all – eek, a shadow!” she leapt aside and pointed to a boulder, her hand shaking. “Best get it, O Chaser of Dimness.”

“You would dare mock me?”

“I’m just trying to help you, Hunter of Murkiness. Here, let me help you find another prey.” She held up her hands together in front of a tree. “Look, a bird!” she said, nodding to the shadow. “Best attack it while the light holds, Pursuer of Puppets.” She made the bird’s wings flap. “What, not interested?” she asked when he did not move. “Well, how about this, then.” She picked up a stick and pointed to its shadow. “Here, over here! Fetch the shadow! Fetch the shadow! Go!” She threw the stick further into the woods. When he made no move, she looked at him, arms on her hips. “Bad, stalker, bad! You didn’t fetch the shadow! No treat for you!” She wagged a finger at him.

He put a hand over his face, collecting himself. “I see, now, why he said to be sure to gag you.”

“I get that a lot, O Seeker of Obscurity,” she said. “I really do not understand it. I have such a delightful voice! All my fans love--”

She leapt aside as, without warning, he ran straight at her in a bull rush. “Really, now, did you expect that to work?” she demanded in a disgusted tone.

“No,” he said, standing straight and turning toward her. “I am merely sizing up my prey.”

“Is that another short joke?” she asked irritably. “Because full marks for being oblique, but zero points for originality.”

He charged her again, and again she effortlessly evaded him.

“Over and over, entirely unoriginal,” she said, primping her hair. “No challenge at all. You are beginning to bore me, Stinker.”

“Not your best insult, my dear,” he said. “Running out of ideas?” He rushed her a third time.

“I am just thinking you are not worth the good ones,” she answered after once more slipping away. “Do you care to try anything new? Or perhaps my beauty has you distracted? Do you like this flower? How about the new hairstyle?”

“Very lovely,” he said, smiling. He then feinted one way and lunged the other, trying to get her from the side. She sniggered and stepped away again.

“Better, Slinker, better.”

“I have other tricks,” he told her, feinting again and then following up with a lunge in the same direction. He fooled her not a bit, though, as she avoided his grasp. “Do you have additional insults?”

“I most certainly do--” she began, but he dashed at her again before she could finish. Knowing he had no chance to catch her, she lazily spun aside, when suddenly she felt her ankle catch on a rope. She tripped, falling down. Despite her surprise, she quickly rolled onto her feet. Before she could move further, though, he was on her, tackling her back onto the ground.

“Crapsticks,” she grunted as he held her tight, one arm around her. “When did you ... aah,” she sighed while he wound a loop of rope around her wrist and pulled it behind her back. “When I was plucking petals, of course. Was I so distracted?”

He laughed. “You seemed to have a lot on your mind, yes,” he said, pulling her other wrist back and tying them together. “I suppose it was the argument with your friend?”

“Yeah, but still, I’m not easily taken unawares like that,” Prim said with a grin. “Good show.”

“Praise from the praiseworthy,” he said, nodding slightly and returning to his work, now cinching her elbows close together. The position forced her to thrust her breasts forward. “Forgive me, but my client was quite specific on how you should be secured and brought before him.”

She frowned. “If you're going to cut the clothes Hot-Tits *just* made for me – aw, come *on*, first the tidgets, now you ...” she complained as he gripped her top and tore it.

“You are a strange one,” he said with another laugh as he unfastened her belt. “What is a tidget – oh, never mind, just stop struggling so much, and I can get this part off you without tearing it.”

“Fine, fine,” she grumpily agreed. “I think you just want to see my exquisite ass.” She wiggled it suggestively as he removed her skirt and underclothes.

“It is exquisite,” he agreed, giving it a playful slap.

“Oh!” she cried. “You're a kinky devil, aren't you?” He chuckled and removed her sandals, eliciting a giggle. “What other fetishes do you have?” she wondered, raising a foot to his face and wiggling her toes.

He merely smiled and took her ankle, tying both her ankles together before cinching her thighs together, as well. He removed a rag from his pouch and wadded it up.

“Oh, there is no need for tha—mmmph...” Prim started to complain when he shoved it into her mouth.

“I'm sorry,” he told her as he tied another rag over her mouth. “But as I mentioned--”

“Yrf flient 'af kwike 'ecific,” Prim finished.

“Yes, he was.” He removed a leather collar from his pack and locked it around her neck.

He examined his work (and Prim's playful squirming) for half a minute, then set about gathering all evidence of their presence. He even collected the flower stem and petals Prim had dropped earlier.

For her part, Prim settled on sitting all tied up and gagged and looking pretty, evincing an air of the completely indifferent.

Finished, he walked over to kneel over her. “Quite the fancy braid work,” he said, examining the vine in her hair. “Considering you just put it on so casually earlier. No need to remove such impressive handiwork.” She smiled around her gag, offering a muffled thanks.

“Don't thank me,” he admonished her. “I'm taking you to my client, remember?” She rolled her eyes in response. “Well, you can pretend it's no big deal. Maybe you know more than you are letting on. Either way...” he lifted her up and slung her over his shoulder. “Either way,” he began again, “you'll be coming with me. And this way you can show off your 'exquisite ass'.” He slapped her backside for emphasis.

She squealed and giggled into her gag. “You really are a strange one,” he said again, shaking his head and setting off.

After an hour, Prim had to give him credit. For one who claimed to be out of his environment, he knew how to hide his trail. Between back tracking and using creeks and streams to his advantage, he quite effectively hid his passage, in Prim's opinion. She recalled the techniques her ranger friend had taught her about hiding one's trail. This man was using them all.

In a thicket of bushes, he had a horse waiting. Releasing its tether, he lay Prim across the front of the saddle, then mounted behind her. As he nudged the horse to a trot, Prim looked behind them, distressed. Somewhere back there, Tia was likely unaware of her capture and getting further away with no means to follow.

Finding her again was going to be such a nuisance.

The journey was quite uncomfortable. He only removed her gag for meals, gagging her again if she spoke so much as one word. At night, he wrapped a blanket around her and tied her up tight to a tree before adding a blindfold. Prim was not certain which was worse: Bouncing around on a horse much too big for her with only a smelly bounty hunter for company or having no conversation to pass the time.

The third morning of their travel, he allowed her to bathe in a stream. He used a chain to leash her to a tree.

“Half an hour,” he said simply, tossing her a bar of soap and a brush. “My client wants you presentable.”

“Well, at least he has some measure of good taste,” she said, stretching ostentatiously before walking into the water. “You could do with some of this, as well,” she told him. “If you want, I can scrub your--”

He held up his hand, forestalling her offer. “Thank you, but I make a point not to get too comfortable with my bounties.”

“So uptight. You should relax. Come on in.”

“Keep it up, and I will regag you.”

“Suit yourself.” She shrugged and worked to cleanse herself, singing merrily. When finished, she checked her flower. He had sprinkled water on it every morning and evening for her in a gesture which had touched her. It was still fresh, so she retied it into her hair. The vine was doing well, so she refreshed her new hairstyle. She picked another flower and crushed its petals, rubbing the scented oil onto her chest. “Unlike some people, I do prefer to smell nice,” she explained.

He merely twirled his fingers in a “get on with it” motion in response.

“Now, now,” she chided. “I’m sure your client has very specific desires and requires a specific level of cleanliness of me and a specific amount of presentation. There,” she finished primping her hair. “You can get on with a specific tie and gag for me.”

He rolled his eyes. “I have a feeling I am soon going to be very tired of that word....” The twinkle in her eyes over her smile, even as he pressed the rag back into her mouth, did not alleviate his concerns.

An hour later, they crested a ridge and saw off to the side the top of an old manor peeking above a wall which surrounded it. Her captor guided the horse along a tree-lined lane leading to the gates. As they rode, Prim eyed the trees, noting they looked anything but trimmed. The edge of the lane was marked with overgrown vegetation. The gate ahead, she noticed as they neared, was misaligned, one side’s hinges stretched near to the breaking point. Vines grew up the walls in disordered patterns, while the paint was dull and chipped in many places. A general air of disuse and abandonment greeted them as they reached the gate.

She turned to look up at the bounty hunter, making an inquisitive sound through her gag. He grinned and shrugged. “Yes, a real fixer upper,” he agreed. “But, the money for you is still good. I suppose vengeance is more important to him than maintenance.”

He dismounted and walked to the gate, opening one door, which squealed loudly on rusty hinges. He then led the horse, with Prim still atop it, into the courtyard.

The manor lawn was in as much disarray as Prim expected, considering what she had seen of the property so far. The grass had grown as tall as the man’s waist. A fountain was murky with stagnant water, while the statue of a male gnome over it was missing an arm. The path to the house itself was made of bricks, many of which were broken, with weeds growing in the cracks.

He stopped before the porch, the boards of which Prim thought looked rather unsafe to traverse. He lifted the gnome from the saddle and tucked her under his arm. Taking care not to step on the worst of the boards, he carried her inside. They crossed a large foyer which may once have been magnificent but was now dusty and dank from leaks in the roof. They entered another room with a simple, wooden gnome-sized chair on a dais with a once-elegant rug now ruined by holes and water stains.

He set her before the dais, then walked over to a pull rope. He tugged it, and a bell rang from another room, promptly followed by a series of clangs as the bell, apparently, fell onto the floor. Prim giggled into her gag as he returned to her.

“Best quit that,” he said, pressing her head down. He clipped a leash to her collar, then. “Be quiet. Stare at the floor.” He stood beside her.

Prim heard the squeaks of floorboards as someone in a room behind the dais approached. Hinges in much need of oiling announced the opening of a door. The chair creaked as someone sat in it.

“Ah, if it isn't Primiphi Piltrum Stannumshard at last,” a gnome said. Prim looked up at him. He was wearing what must once have been lordly finery. Patched, frayed, much too small for the belly he was now sporting, the garments doubtless cost him a pretty penny back in the day. The top of his domed head was hairless, a skirt of grass growing around from ear to ear down to his shoulders.

“I cannot tell you how long I have waited for this oh-so-delicious occasion,” he continued. “When I saw you in town, I knew the time was at hand when I would have you in my clutches at last. I spent most of what fortune I have left on getting you here. Just to make you pay for what you did to me.”

He stood and stepped to stand over her. “Oh, how proper you look down there, kneeling,” he said. “You thought you could pull one over on me, *me*, Lord Taediosum, and not suffer for it, peasant?” He let out a cackle and walked a circle around her, continuing his tirade, not noticing Prim roll her eyes when he was out of sight. “Oh, the indignities I have endured because of you, Primiphi! Years and years of it! All the while, my plans for your fate formed and refined themselves!”

The bounty hunter coughed uncomfortably into his hand.

“What?” Taediosum snarled. “You have a problem, underling? You're getting paid.” He reached into his vest and removed a small money bag. He handed it to the bounty hunter and took the leash from his hands.

“Your work is tolerable,” Taediosum said. “You followed my specific instructions. Now, stand aside and let me be, Stutter or whatever fool name you call yourself today. You've done your job. Leave me to my revenge.”

“Right,” the Shadow Stalker muttered. He collected his money, then looked at Prim, almost regretfully. He shook his head and walked out, shutting the door behind himself.

“Now, my pretty slave,” Taediosum said. “Yes -- slave. You will serve me the rest of your days, and I will see to it you rue ever crossing me each and every one of them as you warm my bed! What have you to say to that?”

Prim cocked an eyebrow.

“Oh. Right.” He reached down and pulled her gag under her chin. She spit out the rag in her mouth and took a few seconds to flex her jaw.

“Well?” he demanded.

She looked at him, eyes squinting as she focused, tilting her head to get another angle.

“*Well?*” he said again, his ire rising.

She tilted her head to the other side. “Hrmmm...”

“*Will you say something, already?*” he shouted impatiently.

“Have we met?” she asked with a pleasant smile.

Taediosum's jaw dropped, then his rump followed suit and hit the floor as his knees buckled. “What did you say?”

“Have we met?” Prim repeated. “Because I have no idea who you are.”

“You cannot be serious,” he said in the same feeble voice. “You don't remember me?”

“Nope.” She said cheerfully. “I specifically have no memory of your specific personage.”

“How?” he asked. He recovered himself and stood up, looking down at her again. “How could you not remember me, *me*, the great Lord Tae--”

“Well, you are not very remarkable, are you?”

He staggered again as if from a physical blow. “Not remarkable? *'Not remarkable!?!'*” he repeated, furious. “You dare insult--”

“I would think I would remember such specific rudeness, after all,” Prim said.

“Rudeness--?”

“Of all the welcomes I have had, this has been the most specifically poor. Giving specific orders to have me gagged all the time. Quite the specific bad taste, if you ask me. Literally and figuratively, by the way.”

“Well, my revenge--” he tried to interject, but Prim interrupted with a laugh.

“Yes, your *'revenge'*,” she emphasized the last word in a tone of derision. “I hope you are content with a *revenge* on someone who has no idea of who you are or what she is supposed to have done.”

“Oh, you did plenty, slave,” he said, gathering himself up. “First, there was--”

“And what kind of kidnapper brings a gorgeous damsel into a dump like this?”

“Well, after what you--”

“You cannot even manage a decent chair? What sort of presentation are you going for?”

“It's all I can afford since you--”

“And half the boards in this floor are ready to snap. I am absolutely amazed He Who Chases Apparitions over there has not fallen through.”

“Repair costs are beyond my resources since you--”

“Oh, now you are going cheap on me,” Prim said, shaking her head. “Another offense on top of all the others. Unimaginable I would remember meeting such a specific cut-rate as you.”

“Cut-rate--”

“And look at the décor!” She shook her head toward a portrait of a surly old lady gnome in a gaudy frame. “Terrible. Absolutely specific rubbish, Lord Tackiness.”

“For the last time, it's Lord Tae--”

“And do you ever say anything that is not exceedingly mundane? Revenge, slavery, rue this or that, blah blah blah. You think I have not heard this dozens of times already? No specific threats or tortures, like whipping me.”

He goggled at her. “Whipping?”

“Or making me ride the wooden horse,” Prim blithely continued.

“What is--”

“Or tying me bent over candles, slowly heating my poor breasts, you cruel fiend!” the bard said.

“Doing what to your--” He lost his voice, struggled to get a few words out, then finally managed to ask, “are you twisted?”

Prim huffed and turned her head away – it was clear she would fold her arms under her breasts if she could. “I simply have my specific standards, Lord Tiresome, when it comes to being taunted. And lame self-owns specifically do *not* satisfy them. Do you always so freely admit being in your bed is something a lady should rue?” She asked with a giggle.

He blushed, confused. “Umm, well, that isn't--”

“Perhaps this manor is your pathetic attempt to compensate for something, then?”

He stammered a few incomprehensible words, then shook his head. “Fine, then. We'll see for ourselves!”

She frowned. “See what, specifically?”

He picked her up. "See how you like sharing my bed, my chatty slave!"

"Now, wait just a moment, buster--" Prim began but was cut short by the front door opening again.

The Shadow Stalker wobbled in, a stream of blood flowing down his forehead.

"A visitor to see you, m'lord," he said. His knees then buckled, and he tumbled forward. As he fell, a green-haired and furious-looking gnome was revealed behind him, her axe and club drawn.

"Hot-Tits!" Prim cried happily. Her smile faltered into a puzzled frown as she caught the state of her friend. Her hair was frazzled. Her chest was heaving, and she was sweating profusely. She had large bags under her eyes. "You look terrible," Prim told her.

Tia nonchalantly stepped onto and over the unconscious Shadow Stalker. "I had to run the whole way to catch up to you riding on a horse, you ninny," she growled. "How I look was not on my list of priorities."

"Well, your timing is quite delightfully specific!" Prim said. She then continued in a terrified tone. "You would not believe the horrors this fiend was discussing with me!"

Taediosum, stunned, dropped Prim on her rear.

"Ow!" she complained. "My exquisite ass! You inconsiderate meanie!"

"Wait, what are--" he began.

"He was talking of whipping me, Hot-Tits!" Prim whined to Tia.

"Huh? That was--"

"And making me ride a wooden horse!"

"Hey, don't go--"

"And you do not even want to know what he discussed doing to my breasts!"

"That was--"

"ENOUGH!" Tia, whose face had somehow gotten increasingly furious with each of Prim's accusations, shouted. And, true to her word, she said nothing else and simply charged Taediosum, dropping her weapons in exchange for the pleasure of physical contact via fist.

For the next few minutes, Prim sat back and enjoyed watching Tia inflict quite the beating on the hapless Taediosum, who had a surprising set of lungs in him, his high-pitched pleadings and screams carrying in the open hall.

"I think the specific 'lord' has had enough, Hot-Tits," Prim finally suggested.

Tia, holding the dazed Taediosum by the front of his shirt, stopped wailing on him and looked at Prim with a raised eyebrow. "So, your friend is a lord," she said before punching him one last time. His eyes crossed as he fainted.

"In his own little way, I suppose," the bard answered with a giggle.

Tia dropped him and walked over to Prim. In moments, she had the bard free. "I see you lost your clothes again," she observed.

"Now, now, Hot-Tits, I am better than that," Prim chided, walking over to the Shadow Stalker. "I knew you would rescue me," she continued as she rummaged in his pack. "Ah-ha!" she exclaimed as she produced her clothes. "See? I convinced him it would be best to keep them, just in case." She began dressing.

Tia rolled her eyes. "Sure you did. And did you convince him to rip your top to show off your tits, or was that his idea?"

Prim crossed her arms in annoyance. "That *was* rather rude of him, indeed," she said, glaring at the unconscious bounty hunter.

"Who are they, anyway?" Tia asked, standing beside Prim.

“Well, this one is Insubstantial Idiot,” Prim said, pointing to the hunter.

Tia snorted. “Right.”

“And this one ...,” the redhead put a finger to her chin in thought. “This one ...,” she trailed off again. Finally, she turned to look at Tia. “I have no idea, Hot-Tits, who this fellow is.”

“Somehow, I doubt that,” Tia said. “Whatever. Nice flower.”

Prim beamed. “Thank you!” she said, fingering it happily. “I thought you might like it.”

Tia merely nodded, then stuck a thumb at the senseless pair. “What should we do with them?”

“Oh, I think a specific punishment fitting a lord is in order,” Prim said.

Half an hour later, the two unconscious males were tied on the hunter's horse, their backsides in the air. Taediosum was starkers, though the Shadow Stalker had his skivvies on. “He *did* water my flower, after all,” Prim had explained, adjusting it in her hair.

Tia slapped the horse's flank, and it took off down the road toward town. The gnomes then hitched their packs – now loaded with food and a few items taken from the hunter's pack and the dilapidated manor, in addition to all the coins the hapless pair had on them – and set off in the opposite direction.

That night, around their little camp fire, Tia sewed Prim's top. The bard had been unusually quiet since they had left the manor. As the warrior worked the needle and thread, Prim finally spoke. “You managed to track us? I thought he was doing such a good job hiding us.”

Tia chuckled. “He was good, but not particularly thorough. I found enough signs to be getting on with.”

“I did not know you could track, Hot-Tits,” Prim admitted.

The warrior raised up the shirt to examine her progress. “Well, now you do,” she said as she resumed working.

“Yes. There is always more to learn about you, Hot-Tits,” Prim said.

A silence fell, interrupted only by the crackling of the fire and the occasional bird singing. “How far behind us were you, anyway?” Prim finally asked.

“Meaning how long before I noticed you were gone and decided to start looking for you?” Tia asked, grinning. She stopped sewing, her gaze drifting toward the fire, a thoughtful look in her eyes. “Back where we camped, I was thinking of you – well, you know what had happened earlier,” she interjected, blushing slightly. “And just all of a sudden I had a feeling something was wrong.

“I hurried out to find you,” she continued. “I discovered where you fought. The foliage was a wreck he could not hide, despite his obvious efforts. I guessed where he would take you and found your trail easily enough. I quickly gathered our gear and chased after. I think I was maybe a half hour behind you to start.” She resumed sewing.

Prim, who had been following Tia's explanation intently, smiled. “And how did this feeling come to you?”

Tia shrugged. “Who knows. Something I ate, probably.”

“Fine, have it your way, I will not press it,” Prim said with a gentle laugh. “Tonight. Meanwhile, you carried all my stuff as well as your own?”

Tia paused again and looked up with a frown. “Clearly,” she said, gesturing to Prim's pack before returning to her work.

“Running the entire time?”

“As I said before, it was the only way to keep up with you on a horse.”

“And you only slept a couple of hours?”

“I wanted to run until I caught--” she broke off, blushing. Prim smiled broader. “Well, you try staying awake so long,” Tia said instead in her typical grumpy tone, changing tact. “And what's with all the questions? Let me work in peace!”

Prim fell silent for a few minutes. “You should get your rest, Hot-Tits. You ran so far...”

Tia grunted. “As soon as I have this done. You may not mind running around with nothing on, but I would rather preserve something of your modesty.”

“Oh, I see – you want to keep me all to yourself!” Prim said excitedly.

Tia sighed and put a hand over her face, eyes closed in frustration. She clearly intended to respond with a snappy comeback, but, to Prim's surprise, the warrior did not speak.

“Hot-Tits?” she said. Still, Tia did not answer. “You there, silly?”

And then the bard quite clearly heard the warrior's snores.

Smiling, Prim took her unfinished shirt and set it aside. She gently helped Tia stretch out and carefully removed her boots. She set her own rolled-up blanket under Tia's head for a pillow, then draped her blanket over her and tucked her in.

Looking down at her friend, Prim kissed her fingertips and touched the sleeping warrior's brow.

“Good night, my dear Hot-Tits,” she said softly. She sat beside the fire, used a stick to stoke it, then plucked a nearby flower.

Tearing off one petal at a time, she spoke in a low voice so as not to wake her companion.

“She loves me. She loves me. She loves me....”

Prim and Tia and Friends in “No Worries Tale”

Tia stopped at the entrance to the DD, stomping her boots and brushing the snow off her shoulders before opening the door and stepping inside. She saw her friends at the usual table as she hung her coat and backpack on a row of pegs secured to the wall. She signaled Bree the barmaid and walked to the group.

“Hey,” she said simply, hopping onto a stool.

“Tia!” Aly said brightly. “Good to see you two! Wait,” she looked around, confused. “Where is Prim?”

Tia shrugged as Bree set a mug in front of her and waited, concerned by Aly's question. “Beats me,” the gnome said as she took the mug. “Probably in the dungeons of Lord Klyschar.” She took a drink. “Whoever the heck he is.”

“Klyschar, eh?” Evie said. “Not that git again.”

“Wait, Prim's in a dungeon?” Millie asked.

Everyone began asking the gnome more questions at once. She finally held up a hand. “Fine, fine, I'll tell ya what I happened.” The others went silent, waiting. “But first, give me a chance at a drink,” Tia said.

Her friends groaned in disappointment as she kicked up her feet on the table. They then looked at one another in confusion at her relaxed attitude, considering the circumstances.

“So, did you get separated and lose each other?” Aya asked.

Tia snorted. “You think I could lose Prim even if I tried?” Shaking her head at the very notion, she took another drink, signaling Bree to get another one.

The others shared more looks as Bree went to get Tia's drink. The gnome, meanwhile, continued to quietly finish her drink as if she had not a care in the world.

Bree finally returned, setting another mug in front of Tia. “So, explain to us how this happened,” Elspeth said.

“And get on with it!” Laressa demanded.

“Well, we were wandering about as we usually do. Actually on our way back here. Prim had jumped on my back, because she does that,” Tia said, rolling her eyes. “About three miles out of town, we noticed half a dozen men hiding in the bushes, ready to jump out at us. Their efforts at hiding were ... poor,” she said, her lip curling in a sneer. She took another drink.

“So, umm,” Millie began. “Did you attack them?”

Tia shrugged. “We let them know we knew they were there. So, they stepped out. Prim did her talking thing. They were not in the mood. So, they came at us.”

She took another drink. “And then?” Evie asked impatiently.

“Well, they were about as useless at fighting as at hiding. I was having fun – ”

“So, you weren't taking them seriously,” Aly said.

“As much as they were worth,” Tia pointed out. “Prim danced around like the ninny she is. You've seen her in a fight – wait, you *have* seen her in a fight, right? Well, anyway, she pranced about dodging and joking and being a nuisance, leaving me to do all the real fighting.” She took another drink. “Ahh, good stuff, Bree. Anyway, Prim's good that way, letting me have my fun like that.”

“Would you get on with it?” Elspeth asked.

“I knocked a couple senseless,” Tia continued. “Just fists, you understand. They were using sacks, as if they could kidnap us. Meanwhile, Prim is being her normal self. One grabs her. She slips out, of course. I never understand how she does that. She doesn't manage it when *I* grab her.” She blushed and quickly added, “in our sparring sessions, I mean.”

The others looked at each other again, this time trying to avoid grinning. Catching them, Tia rolled her eyes.

“Well, I seem to be out of ale again,” she said, looking at her mug. The others groaned and threw up their hands. Bree hustled to get Tia another mug.

“There we go, that really hits the mark,” the gnome said a bit later, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand.

“Tell us what happened to Prim,” Laressa demanded. “Now.”

Tia cocked an eyebrow, then took another drink. “One of the idiots managed to get his hands on my wrist,” Tia said. “Rather annoying, really. Before I could punish him for his cheek, Prim stopped and made one of her usual remarks. Something about me flirting with others right in front of her.” She blushed and quickly took another drink, the others sharing another grin despite the situation and their impatience.

The gnome set the mug down again. “That was all he needed, the one chap. He bagged her from behind while she was distracted.” There was a sudden, loud outburst from the others at the table, drowning out the rest of what Tia said.

“So you're saying she's been kidnapped,” Evie said.

“And now is in this Lord Klyschar's dungeons, I imagine,” Elspeth added.

“I know of this Lord Klyschar,” Aly said. “Rangers have had dealing with him. Maidens went missing in his lands several years back, if I recall.”

“But what happened next?” Millie asked. Everyone turned back to Tia, who was once again calmly enjoying her drink.

“He skedaddled with her, and I pummeled a few for information,” Tia said simply. “Got the name, then decided no sense in me following. Told 'em they'd best find new careers, headed over here.”

She took another drink, ignoring their dropped jaws.

“How ... how *could* you?” Evie asked. “Just leave Prim on her own?”

Tia shrugged. “I was thirsty.”

There was another pause as everyone stared at Tia again.

“We should probably go get her.” Elspeth finally said. “I mean, dungeons and all that, right?”

“I'm sure I know where his manor is at,” Aly said.

“So do I. We can leave immediately,” Evie said.

“Let's go, then!” Aya said. “Coming, Millie?”

“Umm, yes,” Millie answered.

They all dropped coins onto the table for their food and drink, gathered their coats, and hurried out the door.

Save Tia and Bree. The gnome continued to calmly drink. Bree watched the others walk out of sight of the windows.

“Tia,” she finally began. The gnome looked up at her. “You seem so calm.”

“Of course,” Tia said.

“But ... Prim ...”

“Is having fun, no doubt.” She resumed drinking.

“Aren't you going to go help?”

Tia tilted her head. “Why would I? Besides, it's cold out.”

Shaking her head in confusion, Bree began setting the mugs on a tray. Suddenly, she remembered something. “Oh! When Prim was captured...” she trailed off.

“Yes?” Tia prompted.

“Well, it seemed you said something after telling us she was ... umm ... 'bagged'.”

Tia frowned in thought. “Let's see, we fought, he grabbed me, Prim fussed, the one bagged her, she giggled, and – ”

“Wait, she giggled?” Bree asked.

Tia nodded. “Yep.”

“When he put a sack over her head?”

“Yep.”

Bree stood silent, one hand halfway to the tray, holding a mug in the air. Tia took another drink.

“Why would she giggle?” Bree finally asked.

“Oh, you know Prim,” Tia said. She frowned. “You reckon the others didn't hear that part, either? Well, that explains their odd behavior.”

Brow furrowed, Bree considered this. Finally, she put the last mug on the tray. As she lifted it, Tia raised her hand.

“I could use another drink,” she said. “No hurry. Though you should probably bring two.”

“Why two?”

“Oh, just in case.”

Shaking her head, Bree took the tray to the kitchen. She then filled two gnome-sized mugs and returned to the table. She set them down in front of Tia.

The warrior took one and pushed the other in front of an empty seat. Once again shaking her head, Bree turned to leave. She heard the door open and looked over. Her jaw once again dropped open.

“Oh, Hot-Tits! You have a drink ready for me! Such consideration!”

At the door, Prim tossed her own coat onto a peg beside the one holding Tia's, then skipped over to the table in a carefree manner.

“And if it is not the most kidnap-able barmaid!” she said, giving the stunned Bree a hug around the waist before hopping onto the stool in front of the unattended mug.

“One to talk,” Tia said as Prim took a drink. “What took you so long?”

The bard set the mug down with a giggle. “Lord Klyschar is such a delightful fellow, I felt it would be in poor taste to leave early.”

“You mean you escaped?” Bree asked.

“Oh, did Hot-Tits already tell you about our dazzling encounter?”

Bree nodded. “Everyone else went off to rescue you,” she said.

“Is that why they were in such a hurry?” Prim asked, smiling broadly. “Well, that is uncommonly kind of them! They seemed so serious, I thought I would not bother them. They are in for quite the treat if Lord Klyschar is willing to entertain them. I hear he recently turned over a new leaf!”

“What was he like before?” Tia asked.

“Oh, the usual,” Prim said, waving a hand dismissively. “We will teach you obedience. 'You best learn to love your new life overseas.' 'I shall make a fortune selling such an exquisite ass at the slave markets'. That sort of thing.”

“Noticed your exquisite ass, did he?”

“Well, he may not have said anything at the time, but it was clear in his eyes. And his hands.” She giggled. Tia let out a low growl, then blushed and quickly had another drink. Prim winked at Bree.

“What happened at his castle?” the barmaid asked.

“My entrance was less than ideal,” Prim said, frowning in irritation. “I was carried in that sack for a few hours, then dumped unceremoniously on the floor. I expected to be in a dungeon with other damsels all tied up or at least chained. But, nobody was tied up.”

“You mean there were no other captives?” Tia asked, surprised. But Prim shook her head.

“There were several,” she said. “But ... they were not secured in any physical way, beyond wearing very delicate silver collars. In fact, they were going about their business with smiles. Two came over and helped clean me up. They were not at all upset. In fact, they were all eager for their auctions.”

“*Eager* to be sold?” Bree asked. She had sat on another stool and leaned in to hear Prim's tale.

“Quite eager, in fact! They kept talking about it – even getting into arguments over who would sell for the most!”

“They put a collar on me. It was the lightest collar anyone has ever put around my neck. And it had no lock! Whoever made them clearly believed the wearer would make no effort to escape. Then they talked about how lucky I was to be able to join the auction.”

“Lucky?” Tia asked. “What kind of maidens think themselves lucky in a dungeon?”

“Yes, that was more or less my own feeling, Hot-Tits. I mean, I usually find it quite flattering to be captured for an auction, often quite fun – but lucky? That was a new one for me. I must admit, I was rather intrigued.

“So, I got cleaned up and put into a very comfortable and delightful outfit – ”

“You would find it delightful if it showed off your exquisite ass,” Tia said.

“I brought it with me, Hot-Tits,” Prim whispered, leaning into Tia. Bree blushed and looked away. “I can show you later...” the gnome trailed off.

Tia rolled her eyes. “Perhaps you should continue your story,” she said, gently nudging Prim away.

Prim giggled. “Fine,” she said. “But I know you are eager to see it. Or, rather, me wearing it.

“They took me to Lord Klyschar's chambers,” she continued. “I expected I would be in for a warm night, or so at least that he was planning such. They tied me to a chair. Not particularly skillfully, mind, but enough to get the point across. And then Lord Klyschar entered. 'Here we go,' I thought. 'Time for a speech, then into bed we go.' He rather surprised me, however.”

“How so?” Bree asked.

“He was quite polite and charming. And I do mean charming.” She grinned. “It would seem Lord Klyschar is an enchanter. He found a spell which grants him a certain amount of mind control.”

“Mind control?” Tia asked, sitting up and slamming her mug on the table. “What did he – ”

Prim held up a hand. “I am fine, Hot-Tits,” she said calmly, meeting Tia's eyes. The two sat silent, Tia studying Prim intently, for several seconds. Finally, Tia relaxed, but she no longer touched her mug.

“The spell in question,” Prim continued, “allowed him to alter another person's personality, while the silver collars kept the changes permanent. Or so he explained to me. He seemed quite certain of himself. I was impressed, and said so. That seemed to catch him off-guard. But, what else could I say? It seemed a tidy way to go about things. Kidnap maidens and change their personalities so they *wanted* to be sold. As they say: No muss, no fuss.

“And it was clearly working on the others. That much was evident from my treatment. He seemed rather proud when I shared my opinion of his despicable scheme. He mentioned it would almost be a shame to alter me, as I saw things so clearly. Not that he really considered to do otherwise! So, with me sitting freely in the chair – ”

“It had taken you, what, thirty seconds to get yourself loose?” Tia asked.

“Approximately.”

“And you stayed there as he brought over his mind control magic?” Tia asked, anger now in her voice.

“There were people in danger, Hot-Tits,” Prim said. “This seemed the best line of attack.”

The two quietly maintained eye contact again for several seconds. Bree watched, feeling a little out of place and forgotten. Then Tia broke the connection, leaning back and having more ale.

Prim continued her tale. “As I sat there, he cast his spell, put his hands on my cheeks, looked right into my eyes, and ...”

She fell silent and fiddled with her mug, idly sliding it back and forth on the table.

“And?” Bree prompted.

“And he went mad, no doubt,” Tia said with a chuckle.

“Wait, I'm not following,” Bree said.

“Goodness, just think of getting inside *that* mind,” Tia said, shaking her head and letting out a chuckle.

“It is a rather disciplined one,” Prim said, nodding.

“That's one way of putting it. I almost feel sorry for the poor sod,” Tia said, grinning. “So, what did you do to him?”

“I did nothing whatsoever, I shall have you know, Hot-Tits,” Prim said in an offended tone. “He simply had an ... unexpected ... reaction to my thoughts.”

“Did he hang from the chandelier?”

“Pish-posh, Hot-Tits: There was no chandelier in the room. He did jump on the table, however.”

“But – ” Bree began again. The others looked at her. “I mean, ... how?”

“To do what he wanted required him to experience a little of my mind,” Prim explained. “I rather treasure my own mind and found his unwanted intrusion quite rude. So, when he slipped into my mind, I slipped into his. He was not expecting that. The arrogant fool.” She shook her head.

“It was a race, really,” Prim said. “But I had all the advantages. By telling me what he was going to do, he gave me time to prepare a little welcome. Between that and his surprise at my counterattack, he had no chance.”

Bree looked at her with awe. “What did you do?”

“Nothing much. I just slipped in a few little suggestions.”

“Like what?” Tia asked.

“Well, first he was to call his men over one at a time and help me see to them. They were not really much in a fight – ”

“To say the least,” Tia said, scoffing.

“And to be caught off-guard as they were, well, it was not long before they were all nicely secured in his dungeon. I locked him in a private cell – for his own safety, of course.”

Tia guffawed. “Ha! No doubt!”

“I imagine the others would have wanted to hurt him,” Bree agreed.

“Yes, they were rather angry after I removed their collars,” Prim said. “But they quickly appreciated the merits of my idea on just how to punish Lord Klyschar and his minions. A couple of them even had experience in such matters as the crop and whip and such. The others were impressively eager to learn, and their former captors were quite ready to assist. I must say, Lord Klyschar has quite the set of lungs on him.”

They all laughed together. “So, you turned his manor into a ... a bondage dungeon?” Bree asked.

“That is a pretty fair summation, yes,” Prim answered.

“So Aly and the others are hurrying over to save you but, instead, they'll find ...” the barmaid blushed. Tia let out another guffaw.

“Serves them right,” she said.

“He will have fun there, at least.” Seeing the others' questioning looks, she added, “thanks to another of my 'suggestions'.”

Tia laughed again. “He'll remember this night for the rest of his life.”

“But he will be unchanged,” Prim said. “Well, at least from the magic.”

“What do you mean?”

“I told him, when the magic was going, he was to surrender himself to the first Ranger he saw,” Prim explained. “Once that was completed, the magic would then fade. He would be himself again.”

Tia nodded. “So, naturally, you blindfolded him.”

“Naturally.” The gnomes looked at one another and giggled.

Bree frowned. “So, you didn't do anything to his mind?” she asked.

“Goodness, no,” Prim said. “My mind is rather important to me, and I would expect others to feel the same about their own. I detest such methods as 'mind control' and the like.” She shivered.

“Meanwhile, he's likely screaming his head off right now thanks to his former captives,” Tia said. “Probably enjoying it, too.”

“I am kind that way,” Prim said, grinning. “Speaking of the manor: While the others got to work, I dug around and found various documents the Rangers might find interesting.”

She looked around the bar. “Frankly, I had expected to have to send our dear friend Starlet Slut to the manor to find them,” she said. “Fortunately, it would seem she has already decided she simply must be the center of attention and rushed to save a damsel, me in this case, from a sexy fate. As is usual for her. Too bad she will not have a chance for a sexy fate of her own this time.” She winked.

“You're shameless,” Tia said.

“Scary, more like,” Bree said. They all laughed. Finally, Bree could ignore the other customers no longer and hurried off.

“Are you really okay?” Tia asked now that the gnomes were alone.

“Yes, Hot-Tits,” Prim said. “I am still me. Even if his spell did anything, removing the collar would have ended it.”

“True,” Tia agreed. “You did mention the collars.”

“Are *you* okay, Hot-Tits?” Prim asked. “You are behaving rather ... odd.”

Instead of answering, Tia looked Prim up and down, then reached over and took the redhead's hands in her own. Prim blushed, taken aback by Tia's sudden intimacy.

“Hot-Tits?” she said, confused.

“I'm just relieved,” Tia said. “You're okay.”

“Of course I am fine, Hot-Tits. How else would I be? And you knew I would be, did you not? After all, you came here first. That is not exactly the behavior of the nervous, after all.”

“I did, yes,” Tia answered. She stepped off the stool, still holding Prim's hands, and the redhead followed suit. The two stood facing each other a moment, Prim watching as Tia seemed to struggle to find words.

“I reckoned you thought it a game, as you always do,” Tia finally continued in a soft voice, eyes downcast. “And if you were not here in a few more hours, I would have chased after you. It would not be the first time, right? But, mind control? That is something new to me.”

“It is not common,” Prim agreed. “Regardless, I handled it.”

Tia nodded, looking into her eyes again. “Yes, you seem to be yourself.”

“Seem to be”? Are you not yet convinced I am unchanged, Hot-Tits? What further tests would you – oh.” She started as she saw a wicked grin on Tia's face.

“I can think of several tests to prove you are the real Prim. They will take all night, I think,” Tia said. “And we can start with you showing us all that comfortable and delightful outfit you mentioned that shows off your exquisite ass.”

Prim smiled, eyes twinkling. “And what would this particular 'test' prove?”

Tia swatted Prim's backside, eliciting a yelp of surprise. “Now, now, no cheating and trying to get hints,” Tia admonished. “I design the tests, you perform them. And afterwards I grade you.”

“And just how long is it until 'afterwards', Hot-Tits?” Prim asked.

“Until I am satisfied, ya ninny,” Tia answered, smiling. And she leaned in close, her mouth next to Prim's ear. “*Fully* satisfied in *every* way....”

Prim's mind blanked as she suddenly felt overheated. Then the world turned upside-down as Tia swiftly leaned down and lifted the redhead onto her shoulder. “Meep!” Prim cried in surprise.

“Quit fussing,” Tia said, smacking her backside and eliciting another *meep*.

“I'm telling you,” Laressa said, “Tia just *knew* Prim would pull a stunt like that! We've *got* to get her back for it!”

“But, umm, Prim got the job done ... so to say,” Millie said.

The group was returning to the DD, in no good mood. The sky was gray with the oncoming dawn.

“She could have at least *told* us,” Aya complained. “Rather than us waste an entire evening.”

Evie grinned. “I don't think I'd call it a total waste,” she said. “It was at least entertaining to watch. Those girls deserved some revenge.”

“Prim's good about stuff like that,” Elspeth said with an answering grin. “It was quite the show.”

“Yes, it was,” Aly agreed. “And now we're about to get our answers.”

“Right, but will they be *good* answers?” Aya asked.

They arrived at the door, which Laressa promptly threw open and stomped through. The others followed. And they all stopped, stunned at the scene.

The tables and stools were all overturned. The floor was littered with bottles, mugs, and various garments. Men and women were passed out, some sprawled over the tables. On the bar, Bree snoozed in a

skimpy leather outfit that did nothing for her modesty. Her arms and legs were bound, and an unconscious goblin lay stretched out across her, snoring loudly, his pants nowhere to be seen.

“Oh, h-hic-hello, everyone!” Prim called, dropping down from the ceiling. She was hanging upside-down from lengths of what appeared to be gray ropes tied to her ankles. Only they were not tied, nor were they secured to any anchors in the ceiling – they were, in fact, lengths of webbing, stuck to the gnome and the ceiling.

She was also quite naked, the only items she wore being a pair of bunny-shaped nipple clamps, the face of the bunny grinning wickedly. What appeared to be red lipstick was smudged on her face, breasts, and various other parts of her anatomy.

She held a pitcher of ale in one hand, though how she had avoided spilling any of it with her flashy entrance eluded them. Waving at them, she took a drink, then dipped her hand in the pitcher. “Lubricant,” she explained, as she reached up, grasped a web, and tugged. It came loose from the ceiling. Swinging it a moment, she flung it back up, closer to the group. She repeated with the other web, and was soon dangling just in front of them. “Theshe are amashing! I musht shay, Laresh-hic-Laresh-hic-'Essha, I never knew you had such wonders in your shtore!”

“Wait, you were in my shop?” Laressa demanded.

“Yes. And I hic must shay, your shecurity is hic shurprisingly lax. Tut-tut. I can conshul-hic-consh-advise improvements for free, as a hic friend.” She took another drink.

“What happened here?” Aly asked, cutting off the furious Laressa. *As if it isn't obvious. Now I really regret going to Klyshchar's.*

“Hot-Titsh,” Prim said.

“What about her?” Aya asked.

“She happened.” Prim giggled, her eyes losing focus. “Oh, yesh, she did well ...”

“Why did you go to my shop?” Laressa demanded.

“Well, where elsh was Hot-Titsh gonna get a proper outfit? I couldn't be the only one dressed hic for the occ-hic-oc-hic-event. You make the hic besht outf-hic-out-hic-wearin' shtuff in alllllll hic allllll hic of Risth. 'Coursh, we had to get around your locksh.”

“Which of course are nothing for you,” Elspeth said, and Prim nodded. She giggled as the motion caused her to grow dizzy.

“Weeeeee!” she said, laughing. “You lot look sho hic funny upshide-hic-down!”

“You are *so* going to pay,” Laressa growled.

“Why sho serious?”

As the others groaned and facepalmed, the gnome laughed again and took a drink.

“Didja have fun at Lord K's?” Prim asked. “I felt certain Sht-hic-shti-stha-hic-Aly would.” She winked at the Ranger.

“Umm, where is Tia?” Millie asked.

Prim giggled and pointed. “Cantcha shee?”

They looked where she indicated, but their view was blocked by an overturned table. They walked around it, to find Tia sleeping between a woman and a man, their bodies intertwined such that it took the others a moment to sort out whose limbs were whose. She wore fishnets on one leg, the other had a white stocking. Her hair was pulled up in twin ponytails, and it appeared the ends had been dipped in ink. Black makeup over her eyes gave her the appearance of wearing a mask, though the job had been clumsily (or, rather, drunkenly) done. A familiar color of lipstick was smudged on her lips and face. A pair of skimpy panties hung on one of her pony tails.

“She’s a burglar,” Prim said, having followed on the ceiling. “It only hic made shensh for her to wear it. Though she hic sheems to have hic lost most of it.” She giggled again.

“Umm, why would she dress like a burglar *after* you had already broken in?” Millie asked.

“That’sh ... an exshulent question,” Prim said, looking confused. “Well, she did hic shteah my panties. Shee? At least, I *think* those are mine...” She scratched her head.

Laressa reached up and grabbed Prim’s pitcher, which she summarily dumped on Tia’s face.

The warrior sputtered and opened her eyes, groaning as she sat up. “Oh, hey,” she said. “Welcome back.”

“And what have you been doing here while we were on your merry chase?” Aly asked.

“Could you quiet down a little?” Tia asked in a feeble voice.

“NO!” the others all loudly said in unison. Both gnomes flinched.

“Don’t blame me,” Tia finally said. “You lot are the ones who got fussed.”

“If you had listened, you’d be hic as happy as our favorite barmaid,” Prim chimed in. Over on the bar, Bree rolled onto her side, the goblin putting his hand on her hip.

The group looked at each other. “She has a fair point,” Evie said.

“And we did see justice done to Lord Klyschar,” Aly added. *Though mostly we just watched.*

“Shee?” Prim said, smiling broadly. “A happy ending all around!”

“Not quite,” Laressa said. “There is still the matter of breaking into my shop.”

“We locked up after ourselves,” Tia said.

“And everyone here saw your amazing hic craftsmanship,” Prim said. “Great publicity! And at no charge! Because hic what are hic friendsh for?”

Laressa nodded. “Yes, friends.” She grinned wickedly. The gnomes exchanged nervous glances. “And everything worked out nicely in the end, my *friends*...”

“Exactly!” Prim said, trying to ignore the menace in Laressa’s voice. “And now that that is shettled –”

“You have a five-minute head start before I seek revenge, my *friends*,” Laressa said.

Prim laughed. “Good one!” she said, and then laughed again. After a moment, Tia joined in. Soon, they were all laughing.

Suddenly, Laressa stopped. “Four minutes and forty-five seconds,” she said coldly.

“Meep!” Prim said, reaching up to tug at the webs. Tia struggled to get to her feet. The pair crashed into each other as they ran for their coats and packs. In moments, they had dashed out the door into the snow.

Laressa sighed. “That should keep them out of our hair for a few weeks.”

“Aren’t you going to chase them?” Millie asked.

“No need,” Laressa answered. “Just so long as they *think* I will.” She winked.

And they all laughed, while outside, two under-dressed gnomes ran out of town as though their very lives depended on it....

Special thanks to our friends for sharing their guest characters!

Alynyya “Aly” belongs to CallMePlissken – Evie belongs to Katie (whose ideas led to this Tale, by the way!) – Elspeth and Aya belong to We Are All Mad Here

Millie belongs to Jaded Entity - Bree belongs to FP – Laressa belongs to Menchi

Prim and Tia in “Now Ya Done It Tale”

Prim splashed water onto her head, leaning back and running her hands through her hair, eyes closed, while glowflies circled around her. She let out a sigh. The moon was out and at the full, setting the little pool sparkling with silver light. The gentle sounds of a series of small waterfalls pouring into the pool from a creek mingled with the croaking of frogs.

“There we go,” Prim called over her shoulder. “A chance to clean up properly and look our best. Of course, I always look dazzling, but this is just what we needed to relax. Do you not agree, Hot-Tits?”

Behind her, the sounds of a scuffle, which had been going on for several seconds, abruptly stopped. “Oh, this is definitely more fun than I gave you credit for,” Tia said. “Don't you think so?” she asked the fellow beneath her. He was on his belly, Tia straddled over his back and twisting his arm.

“Ow ow ow, sorry, I didn't mean nothin',” he said. “I was over there fishing when you two came over and stripped. What was a fella to do but hide?”

“I don't know, let us know you're there so we *don't* strip in front of you?” Tia asked, pushing his elbow up and causing him to cry out.

“Uncle, uncle already, ya mad gnome!” he said.

“Hot-Tits, perhaps you should take it down just a tad,” Prim suggested. “I see no reason to break the unfortunate, obtrusive pervert. I mean, one can hardly blame him for wanting to see your gorgeous tits –”

“Exactly!” the man interjected.

“– and my exquisite ass,” Prim finished, bending over and scooping at the water.

“Eh,” he said.

Prim froze, eyes wide, hands halfway to her face. The water trickled through her hands, the only sound beyond the waterfalls as Tia, shocked, unintentionally released the man's arm. Even the frogs had gone quiet, while the glowflies ceased their circling and hovered, as if confused.

Prim slowly turned her head toward the man, still leaning forward. “*What* did you say?” Prim asked icily.

“Careful, pal,” Tia whispered as they both stood, the man rubbing his arm.

“Well, it's not a bad one at all,” the man said. “A good one, actually, tho' I've seen better. But, really, don't ya think 'exquisite' is layin' it on just a might thick, little miss vain?”

A moment passed, neither of them speaking. Then Prim calmly turned back and splashed more water onto her hair, resuming washing.

Tia chuckled. “Now ya done it,” she told the man.

“What do ya mean, ya nutter?” he asked, confused. “I didn't do nuthin' but tell it like it –”

“Hot-Tits,” Prim called out. “Would you be so kind as to break that uncouth, unrefined, discourteous, boorish dullard of a pervert for me?”

“With pleasure,” Tia replied, cracking her knuckles and grinning maniacally.

The man looked back and forth between the gnomes, concerned. “Wait, what did I –”

Out in the water, Prim sighed as she ran her hands through her hair again. She looked up at the full moon, ignoring the renewed scuffling mingled with the man's grunts and cries of pain. “Such a lovely night,” she said as the glowflies renewed their circling and the frogs croaked merrily. “Yes, this is exactly what we needed, Hot-Tits.”

Prim & Tia in “Sweets Tale”

“No peeking, Hot-Tits!”

“Oh, that's a funny one, that is.”

“Are you accusing me of not taking the situation seriously?”

“Seeing' as I'm blindfolded and tied to a chair, peeking is not much of an option for me, is it, ya ninny?”

“I saw what you did there! You made a jest! And at a time like this, too!”

“You're rubbing off on me, unfortunately. I know you've already untied yourself. Are you ever going to get me loose?”

“I just know how skilled you are at escapology and thought to let you demonstrate your more refined techniques for me.”

“You're setting me up, aren't you?”

“Not at all. I was just considering the time you insisted on being the one to get us loose.”

“You'll never stop bringing that up, won't you?”

“It was so marvelous an experience, how could I not? You were most insistent. For hours. And hours.”

“Ha-ha.”

“And hours and hours – ”

“I get it! Now, get me loose! I want to find those dratted gnomes that tied us up and teach them a lesson they won't soon forget!”

“Oh, they are not here, Hot-Tits.”

“I can find them!”

“There is no need. They will return in a few hours.”

“Then I will give them a good thrash – wait, how do you know when they'll be back?”

“Ta-da! Behold!”

“A ... cake.”

“I baked it myself for my dear Hot-Tits on her birthday! Make a wish!”

“I ... I don't know whether to be touched or terrified you made it.”

“Of course my Hot-Tits promptly insults my efforts! Maybe I should tell our friends *not* to return later and celebrate the Second Kinda-But-Apparently-Not-Really-Annual Ancient Gnomish Festival to Celebrate the Beauty of the Female Form (and Also Hot-Tits's Birthday)! How would you like that?”

“Does my answer have any bearing on the eventual outcome?”

“As much as it ever does, naturally.”

“Right, so this is happening. In that case – push me forward so I can blow out the candles and ... err ... 'enjoy' this fine-looking cake.”

“Yay! Happy birthday, Hot-Tits!”

“Thank you.”

“What did you wish for?”

“I think I'll keep that a secret for now.”

“Come *on*, Hot-Tits! Do not withhold such a treat!”

“Do you really want to know?”

“I have my suspicions, and I do believe it involves your rather rude and uncouth opinion of my baking.”

“Accurate opinion is more like it.”

“Agree to disagree. Anyway, there is another cake for eating on the table behind you.”

“Wow. Talk about planning ahead. You went through all this trouble for me?”

“Of course I did! My Hot-Tits is most definitely worth it! Millistripes made the, hmmm, how best to describe the second cake?”

“Edible?”

“You wound me, Hot-Tits. With that attitude, I do believe birthday spankings are most definitely on the schedule now.”

“I would feel remorse for my words ... except they were *totally* worth it.”

“One would think you seek my vengeance, the way you behave while tied up.”

“Well ...”

“Yes? Regretting your attitude now, are we?”

“No.”

“Spankings it is, then!”

“It's just –”

“Just what?”

“You're more fun after I've gotten my verbal jabs in on ya.”

“...”

“And your smile is always brighter.”

“Flirting with your captor will get you more attention, you know.”

“Then my actual birthday wish is coming true, my ninny.”

Prim and Tia in "Never Dull Tale"

"There's only six. We can take 'em."

"Of course we could, but what if they have more?"

"Then we knock their heads together, too."

Prim put a hand to her forehead and let the branches of the bush they were hiding behind fall back into place. "Hot-Tits, must you always go through our foes? Can we never go around?"

Tia gave Prim a side-eye look. "Can you ever hold your tongue and not stir up trouble?" she asked.

"I never stir up trouble, Hot-Tits. I simply give people a gentle nudge in a more entertaining direction."

The warrior let out a snort of derision. "Then I will simply non-gently move in a more entertaining direction. Right through those goblins."

"Hot-Tits – "

"Oh, sure, you get to have your fun, but when I want to have a little sparring session – " she nodded toward the goblins below, " – suddenly it's Prim Lecture time."

Prim frowned. "Do I really lecture so much?"

"Are your cute little feet incredibly tender and sensitive?"

The redhead folded her arms and stuck her tongue out. "Fine. We shall go ahead with your plan for fun. Just never say it is dull when I am around."

Tia drew her weapons and grinned. "No, that's the last thing I'd ever say about being your friend." She gave a wink, then turned and dashed at the goblins, yelling wildly.

Prim shook her head, smiling, as she watched her companion manhandle the unsuspecting goblins. "You have the oddest methods of unwinding, Hot-Tits," she said to herself as the warrior pummeled and kicked and generally injured her foes. "But you must certainly have non-violent means of relaxing. I do so intend to find out, even if you stubbornly refuse to confide in your Prim." She grinned wickedly. "Besides, I owe you for revealing certain ... foot-related secrets of mine."

After a few minutes, the six goblins were sprawled about on the ground. Tia stood alone, idly putting her weapons away. Prim stepped out of the bushes, clapping lazily.

"Well done, Hot-Tits," she said. "Are you feeling better, now?"

Tia grinned. "Yes, as a matter of fact." She turned down the path they had been following. "And now, we continue on– "

She was interrupted by a net springing up and dragging her into the air, where she hung several feet above the ground.

"I know you have just had a most relaxing bout with your friends," Prim said, walking over and looking up with a grin. "But is it really the time for a nap in a hammock?"

"Oh, ha-ha," Tia snarled. "Get me down, would you?"

"If we had just gone around, you would not be up there, you know."

"Annnnd here comes the lecture," Tia said, rolling her eyes. "Just get me down already."

Prim stopped and put her hands on her hips. "You know, between your attitude here and your telling questionable claims to our friends about what may or may not be true regarding my feet – "

"You're just not going to let that go, are you?"

"I am merely pointing out you being up there is, perhaps, your just desserts."

“Perhaps', right,” Tia said, rolling her eyes again. “Why do you bother saying that when you obviously have your mind already made up on that. You're not fooling anyone, you know.”

Prim giggled. “Someone is on to my secret techniques! I will need to find a way to keep her silent!”

“How about you let me down, and we'll call it even?” the warrior said, grinning.

“Fair exchange,” Prim said. “Now, how best to – oh!” She felt a small stabbing pain on her leg. Looking down, she saw a primitive dart stuck into her thigh. She instinctively plucked it out. “My goodness, that was quite the lucky throw, that wassh ...” she slurred. Her eyes rolled up.

“Prim?” Tia called down, but the bard did not hear as she fell onto the turf.

Prim heard noises. She could not place them, but they were her first indication she was waking up. For some reason, her eyelids felt heavy. She had a strong urge to simply go back to sleep.

“If you don't let us go now, I'm going to rip your arms off and pummel you with them!” Prim heard Tia shouting, though it sounded as if she was at the end of a tunnel far from the bard.

Goblin laughter rang out, quite derisive. Prim's fogged mind began putting two and two together. She felt ropes around her wrists and chest, though her legs felt free. She realized not only was she tied up lying on her side, but she was also naked.

“Get your filthy paws off me, you bastard, or I'll tear them off!”

Memories finally clicked in Prim's mind. “Oh, right,” she said with just a hint of a slur. “Goblins.”

She blearily opened her eyes. Sure enough, Tia was sitting naked and bound similar to Prim nearby. They appeared to be in the goblins' camp, with a few tents barely staying upright nearby. A goblin was behind Tia, reaching around and squeezing her breasts.

“Glad to see you've decided to join the party, Prim,” Tia said. Her eyes betrayed the relief absent in her tone.

Prim smiled and sat up. “I am always ready for a party, Hot-Tits. You know that.”

“Of course I do,” Tia said, managing to roll her eyes despite the goblin's attention to her chest. “And I suppose this is where we have your demented idea of fun?”

“You should ask the goblins,” Prim said, grinning. “I have a feeling we are about to experience their own idea of play. Oh, but we have an eager boy here, do we not?” she said as a goblin, satisfied she had recovered, lifted her to her feet and began groping and pawing her from behind.

“They don't respond to threats,” Tia said, irritation plain in her voice. She kicked out at a goblin that came too near, hitting him where he certainly would not have preferred. The other goblins laughed as he crumpled over.

“On the contrary, Hot-Tits, I think they do rather enjoy your threats.”

A pair of goblins jumped Tia at once, grabbing her legs and holding them bent. Despite her threats and curses and struggles, they managed to tie each leg ankle-to-thigh, in a frog tie, with only one of them getting a black eye for their efforts.

“There you go, getting yourself into tighter and tighter bondage,” Prim said. “I sometimes wonder if that is not what you desire most.”

“Stuff it, Prim!” Tia snarled.

“Well, this is what you get for charging straight ahead, I suppose,” Prim continued.

“Seriously?” Tia bellowed. “A lecture *now*? And don't you even *think* about putting that mmmph ...” A goblin interrupted her via cramming a rag into her mouth.

“It looks like the goblins decided to take your advice to stuff it,” Prim said, grinning. Tia glared at her as the goblin secured a primitive panel gag secured over her mouth.

Prim cocked an eyebrow. “A panel gag? I must say, I am quite impressed at their kinky ingenuity. They must truly like you, Hot-Tits.”

Tia's glare did not lessen. She grumbled something into her gag.

“You really should not feign surprise to be gagged,” Prim said. “You know you essentially asked for it. Repeatedly. Loudly.”

The goblin with the black eye moved to Tia's legs. He and the fellow holding her eased her onto her back, despite her struggles. Then the first pulled her knees apart with a wicked grin before lowering his head down between them.

Tia squealed into her gag, bucking helplessly and shaking her head desperately. Prim tilted her head, intrigued by Tia's reaction. She knew the warrior was not particularly happy to be in this situation, but the two of them had been in similar predicaments before. Tia had always held up rather well at the play, often joining Prim in leading their captors on rather than being helpless damsels.

The goblin started licking Tia, and the warrior squealed into her gag again, her eyes closed. She squirmed and strained at the ropes, but Prim's experienced eye noted a change in Tia's struggles. Before, she had been attempting to defeat the ropes with brute force. Now, however, she moved with the ropes, not against – letting the ropes guide her movements, feeling out where they allowed her to move and where they denied her. As the goblin kept working Tia over, the warrior's face flushed and she squealed again, now in a higher pitch.

Prim stood and watched her companion's reaction, fascinated. The goblin playing with her slapped her backside to get her attention, to no avail. He spun her around to face him, but she promptly turned away, watching the show intently. Finally, he reached for a rag and raised it toward Prim's eyes.

This action got her attention at last. Seeing the blindfold incoming, she pulled away from the goblin. “If you so much as *think* about covering my eyes, I'll choke you on a tea steeped in your own privates,” she growled.

The goblin froze, trembling with terror. Not least from the verbal threat she issued, but he could swear her pitiless, furious eyes had glowed with an intense blue flame in which he could see the certainty of own painful death

Prim turned back to Tia's performance. The warrior was now bucking and thrashing, though Prim was convinced Tia was still not fighting the ropes but embracing them from the inside. Her bound thighs tried mightily to embrace and even pull the goblin into her. She squealed into her gag once again, in a higher register than Prim had ever thought her capable of reaching.

Her playmate was certainly responding to Tia's reactions. He worked harder and deeper into her, his face buried, his hands busy stroking her or lightly smacking her backside just for good measure. His companion – not wishing to be left out of the fun – squeezed and pinched and kneaded her tits.

Prim wobbled on her feet. The goblin grabbed her from behind, holding her upright with arms around her. She leaned against him gratefully, sensually, but still kept her eyes on the show at their feet.

And then Tia's last ounce of resistance finally gave out. Her muscles tensed all over, and she let out the highest squeal yet into her gag. The goblins continued to furiously play with her, keeping her over the edge. She thrashed about helplessly, still squealing, the goblins delighted at their find.

But they had nothing on the greedy, intense gaze of Prim. She smiled triumphantly as her friend climaxed as she had never before witnessed.

As Tia finally returned to earth after quite some time, Prim licked her lips and turned to the goblin holding her.

"I think it is time we put on a show of our own," she told him. She swept his leg, causing him to land on his backside with a grunt of surprise and pain. Before he could react, she dropped down on top of him, her legs on either side, and locked lips with him...

"Admit it."

"I've no idea what you're talking about," Tia said in a tone she hoped conveyed dignity while she pulled her boot onto her foot. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Prim grinning wickedly as she finished donning her top.

"You know, Hot-Tits. Do not try to pretend otherwise."

"I most certainly don't." She picked up her weapons belt and secured it in place.

Prim chuckled and picked up her pack. "Are you really going down this road?"

Instead of answering, Tia simply checked everything was in place. "All clear here," she said. "Ready to go?"

"I am not so sure," Prim said with another grin. "I think I may actually miss this place."

"Well, you can stay here, then." Tia began walking out of the goblins' camp. The owners of said camp were strewn about, unconscious and thoroughly spent, and would have been relieved to see the gnomes vacate if they had been capable of rational thought at the moment.

"I would rather not if you are leaving," Prim said, following behind Tia. "What fun is it here without my Hot-Tits making a show?"

Tia momentarily staggered and paused, then resumed walking, blushing furiously.

"I never imagined you would be so responsive – "

Tia let out a laugh. "Ha! Somehow, I doubt that."

"No, truly!" Prim insisted. "I did not expect my Hot-Tits to have such a remarkable, amazing, *exploitable* secret desire like that."

"We were headed that way, were we not?" Tia asked, pointing.

"Yes. Now, stop trying to change the subject."

"I learned from the master at that."

"Always with the flattery when you want to avoid the truth."

Tia frowned. "How are your tender feet feeling?" she asked.

"Another attempt at deflection? They are much better now I know my Hot-Tits enjoys a good – "

"Excellent!" Tia said, increasing her stride. "Then we should hurry along to make up for lost time."

Prim hurried alongside her. "Oh, I would not say that was a loss, Hot-Tits." She smiled at her companion. "Not a loss at all."

"Oh, you're insufferable."

"Perhaps. But at least – despite claims regarding boring, annoying so-called lectures – it was not dull with me around."

"True," Tia agreed. "It definitely was anything but that."

"And it was all due to my lessons which you have absorbed so well and faithfully, Hot-Tits."

Tia stopped in her tracks and turned toward Prim, hands on her hips. “Are you seriously claiming the victory here because I started a response which led to their defeat using tricks you insist you have taught me?”

“That I am.” Prim said, stopping as well. She raised an eyebrow. “Unless you are telling me you actually enjoyed yourself back there? That you were helpless to respond in any other way? Is this what you are admitting to?”

Tia chewed at her tongue and looked at the sky, clearly struggling not to respond. Finally, after a minute, she shook her head and laughed. “Curse you,” she said, “but you are the most shameless person I have ever met.”

“While that may be true, you have not answered my question,” Prim said, smiling back.

“I think we can simply accept how things played out as our answer,” Tia said.

They looked back at the goblins' camp, then at each other. They broke into grins, blushes, and finally laughter.

Prim and Tia and Aly in “A Merry Kinkmas Tale”

“Once again, we find ourselves headed toward unknown adventures, with danger lurking – ”

“Why does danger always lurk?” Tia asked. “Why can't it skulk?”

Prim giggled and shrugged. “I suppose that is simply how it behaves,” she said as she fidgeted with the ribbon on a wrapped package she carried. “Cats prowl, horses canter, and so on. Danger lurks.”

“Are you saying danger has a personality?”

“I am saying we are on a new adventure!” Prim said, trying to regain the mood of wonder from before.

“Prim, it's a new pub. How exciting can that be?”

“New means unknown, Hot-Tits!” Prim said excitedly. “Think of the possibilities! The magic! The beauty!”

“Beauty?” Tia asked skeptically, pointing as the pub came into view. “Hardly. This looks one step above a dive.”

A man staggered out, crashed into a column, and collapsed in a heap with a loud belch.

“Half a step,” Tia amended.

“I think it is delightful!” Prim said.

“You would. D'ya reckon Aly's inside already?”

They heard a loud crash from the pub, followed by cheers and laughter. The gnomes looked at one another and grinned. They went inside, Tia holding the door for Prim.

As they expected, Aly was already sitting at a table. Nearby, two men were hauling a third onto his feet and helping sort out exactly which way his limbs were supposed to be pointing. The Ranger spotted the gnomes and waved, smiling.

Prim bounded over and hugged the blonde. “Hiya, Starlet! I see you got into the spirit of the evening already.”

“The patrons of this establishment behave much like those in the DD,” Aly said with a laugh, hugging Tia in turn.

“Which explains why you so readily fit in,” the warrior said.

Prim hopped onto a stool and set the package on the table. “I already ordered drinks,” Aly said as a barmaid brought over three mugs of ale. The trio each grasped one and raised it.

“Cheers,” they all said together before taking deep gulps.

“Ah, that hit the spot,” Prim said. “Though I must confess, I have brought everyone hither for a purpose, for I have gathered a bit of important information regarding our current location.”

“Here it comes,” Tia said. Aly grinned.

“You see, I have been informed they serve the rarest of drinks here,” Prim continued, “the drink I have been unable to find in this entire city despite my best efforts.”

“What, a special tea?”

“No, Hot-Tits. The special tea would be that which I make,” Prim said with a wink. “No, I mean the much-feared, world-renowned Ogreish Cranium Crushin' Concoction!”

The others blinked for a moment. “Ogreish Cranium ... Crusher?” Tia tried.

“Crushin',” Prim corrected.

“Concoction?” Aly asked.

“Yes. I think that word makes it sound much more menacing and fascinating!”

“Rather a mouthful, if you ask me,” Tia muttered.

“Well, it is also known as the OCCC or O-Triple-C, if that helps,” Prim offered. She waved her hand. “Barkeep! One and two O-Triple-C's!” she called out, referring to human and gnome sizes.

The pub went silent. Everyone looked over to watch them. Tia and Aly looked at each other with a mixture of curiosity and dread. “Prim, are you sure – ” Tia began.

“Of course!” the bard answered. “Oh, and this is for you, Starlet Slut,” she added, pushing the wrapped package toward the blonde. “Tis the season, as they say.”

“Thank you,” Aly said, taking it. “Umm, I didn't get you anything.”

“Just open it. She'll fuss if you don't,” Tia said, grinning.

Laughing, the Ranger worked the wrapping off the package, revealing a box. Opening the lid, she lifted a pewter goblet.

“How nice!” she said, examining it. “There are scenes carved into it. In fact – ” She stopped, blushing.

“I made it myself,” Prim said. “Hot-Tits helped pick out which stories to use.”

“That I did,” Tia said, nodding. “You'll find the time we played in front of a blindfolded Prim after she cheated at cards.”

Aly nodded, locating the scene in question. “Prim really does wear blindfolds well.”

“I wear many things well,” Prim said as she primped her hair.

“True, true,” Aly said with a laugh. She raised an eyebrow as she looked at the scene again. “Err, was I really smiling so much around my gag?” she asked.

The gnomes laughed. “Of course you were, silly! You always do!” Prim said, winking. Aly's blush deepened.

“And there's the first time I met you,” Tia said.

“You were really good with the crop, Hot-Tits,” Prim said with a nod.

“Yes, I do agree that is a talent of yours,” Aly admitted, grinning and biting her lip.

“It was the bunny outfit,” Prim said. “The fishnets really draw out Hot-Tits's sterner side.” The trio laughed.

Prim pointed to another scene. “And here you were playing upstairs in the DD – ” she began.

“Wait, where are you?”

“The window, of course.”

“Why, you sneaky little peeping – ”

“Oh! Our drinks have arrived!” Prim said, rubbing her hands together in excitement as the barmaid set three goblets on the table. Smoke issued from them, spilling over and flowing onto the table. Tia was not certain, but she thought she caught flashes of green light within the smoke.

Prim raised her goblet. “Oh, is this not the most magnificent presentation?”

Tia warily lifted her own. “I'm not quite sure 'magnificent' is the word I'd use.”

“Worrying' is more like it,” Aly said, examining her own drink.

“Pish-posh, you two,” Prim said, waving a hand at them. “Have a sense of adventure! As they say: Nothing ventured, nothing gained! Cheers!”

She raised her drink and began drinking. The others watched a moment, then – with a glance at each other – followed her lead.

Several of the crowd began clapping appreciatively. “Bravo!” someone called out. “Them gals got nerve!” another cried.

“Ugh, that tasted about as bad as I expected,” Aly said after they finished.

“You must have more experience with terrible drinks than me,” Tia said.

“I do get around,” Aly said. The pair laughed.

“I think that was quite ... interesting,” Prim said delicately. “Though I expect we should give it a few minutes before reaching final conclusions.”

“You mean wait to see how hard it hits,” Tia said.

“Precisely.”

Aly examined her gift again. “Wait, what is this scene?”

“Which one?” Tia asked.

Aly held it up, finger pointing toward an image. “The three of us – ”

“Hrm, I don't recognize ... woa,” Tia said. She shook her head, trying to clear it. Beside her, Aly wobbled on her stool.

“Oh, that one,” Prim said, her eyes struggling to track the goblet's motions as Aly became unable to remain steady. “That wash the time we all drank Ogrish Caramel Crunchy Crunchy ... wait, that'sh not it ...”

“Ogreesh Creasey Cheeseey ...” Aly suggested, giggling.

“Wait, you carved ... tonight ... onto goblet?” Tia asked, focusing with difficulty on Prim.

“Of coursh,” Prim said. “It wash a fun advenshure together. We'll love it ...”

And the trio fell forward onto the table.

Prim & Tia in "Lessons Tale"

"Oh, look, Hot-Tits! Is that not the most interesting clump of grass – Ow ow ow!"

"Focus, Prim," Tia said, holding her friend by a pointed ear. "What are you supposed to be doing?"

"Umm, looking exquisite?" The bard shook her hips despite the warrior's grip on her ear. When Tia did nothing more than glare at her, unimpressed, Prim sighed. "I am supposed to be tracking an elk we saw pass by earlier."

Tia let her go. "That's correct," she said as the bard ruefully rubbed her ear. "And there are a solid half-dozen traces of its passage right here in plain sight. How many have you found?"

"Do you want precise counts, or would an approximation suffice?" Prim asked with a grin. Tia raised an eyebrow, crossed her arms, and said nothing.

Disturbed by her companion's silence, Prim turned back to the path the elk had taken, having seen it walk through the grass earlier. But Tia had been the one to bring them to it, so Prim felt it unfair to count it. Which left the total the same, regardless of how one measured it.

Zero. Which Prim was certain Tia knew.

The redhead looked up at the sky in annoyance. A Ranger friend of hers every now and again taught her a few tricks to tracking, but those were usually discussions brought up in bars or beds. In plain fact, Prim had never had anyone show her how to track rather than tell. And the differences were proving to be quite consequential.

"I'll give you a hint," Tia said. "It didn't fly."

Prim looked over to give Tia an irritated look, sighed, and turned back to the ground. She dropped to her knee for a better look. Scratching the back of her head, she tried to remember everything the Ranger had told her.

"This is so boring," she complained. "I am staring at dirt, which has very little appeal by its nature. Would you not rather find something else to do?"

"We can do something else after you track the beast," Tia said.

Prim rolled her eyes. "That was not my point."

"I know. And quit stalling."

The bard looked around again. "I am feeling rather lost, which reminds me of the time you got yourself captured by goblins," she said.

"Yes," the warrior said. "I recall it was a band of them, a few dozen. So many, even you could follow their trail with little skill."

Prim blew a strand of her out of her face, getting thoroughly annoyed. Tia was clearly ahead of her excuses and counter-examples. "This is all so silly!" she said.

"Do you remember when you had me practice escape training?" Tia asked. She uncrossed her arms and walked over, kneeling beside Prim. "You wanted me to at least have a slim chance of using a skill which – to put it plainly – we've both needed plenty of times. And also to try and get in my bed, but that's neither here nor there."

Prim smiled and said, "it is rather a shame that is not here. A warm, comfortable bed with wonderful, smooshable pillows would be an absolute delight right now."

Shaking her head with a grin of her own, Tia continued. "My point, my irrepressible friend –"

"Oh, did you memorize another fancy word to try on me?"

"– is you actually had a good point."

“Of course I did! Getting into your bed is always good.”

“And I'm doing the same for you – ”

“Getting into my bed? That would ow ow ow not the ear again!”

“Focus, Prim!” Tia reprimanded before letting go of her. “You may be good at following folks in a city, but when we get you out in the wild, you're nigh-useless.”

“Hey, I do have *some* knowledge of tracking,” Prim pointed out as she rubbed her ear.

Tia nodded in agreement as she took a moment to find the words she was looking for. “I know when it comes to skills not involving song and dance – or causing mischief – you're more interested in dabbling than mastery. But some day, there may come a time when you need to track someone and I'm not around to do it for you. When that happens, I don't want you relying purely on the basics when I know I could have taught you more. So, pay attention and learn what I can teach while I'm here!”

Prim was taken aback by Tia's lecture. She looked into the warrior's eyes and found not anger but earnestness. Prim saw a burning intensity there she had seen only a handful of times.

Her mind blanked. She felt her legs go wobbly and her face flush as her heart raced. She could not look away from those eyes.

Tia smiled and relaxed. Prim blinked, the spell broken, and found she had been holding her breath only when she suddenly exhaled. The thought struck her whoever had once instructed Tia in her youth had imparted quite the ability to hold a student's attention. *Or was it the other way around?* she wondered. *Were you always the strong-willed one, and did you teach the teacher? I would wager you did, my dear Hot-Tits. What an experience he must have had with you.*

Tia took Prim by her shoulders and turned her toward where the elk had disappeared. “Just focus,” she told the bard, “and tell me what you see, ya ninny.”

Smiling at Tia's pet-name for her, regardless of the insulting nature of it, Prim looked where directed.

Tia's speech had worked. Despite her lack of interest, Prim found herself focused on the task rather than idle curiosities like that lovely butterfly – she shook her head as if shaking the thought out of her mind. *Focus, Prim, she told herself. Your Hot-Tits clearly wants you to learn this, so learn it you shall!*

“There are prints there,” she said, pointing. They were so clear, she had to wonder how she had missed them. And now that she actually looked for the path the animal had taken, she found she could not unsee it. “That looks like a bit of fur caught on that tree.”

“Good,” Tia said, sounding pleased. “Let's follow, shall we?”

“After you, O Mighty Tracker,” Prim said, bowing and gesturing her forward.

“Oh, no, the lesson's not over,” Tia said, giving Prim a shove down the path. “Ninnies first.”

“Aw, phooey,” the bard pouted. Suddenly, she brightened up. “You know, after I have practiced your skill, we can work on one of mine this evening!”

Tia laughed. “I have a feeling I know what you're talking about. But fair's fair. You keep at this, and if we catch up to our friend over yonder,” she nodded her head toward where the elk had disappeared, “you can have your evening practice session.”

“Yay!” Prim cried, throwing her arms around Tia's shoulders. “Just you wait, Hot-Tits! We will have such fun! But first, onward to the task at hand! Why are you dawdling, silly?”

She set off down the trail, keenly watching for signs of the elk's passage. Behind her, Tia followed at a slower pace, shaking her head and smiling. “And with a promise of a treat, we suddenly have your full commitment,” she softly mused aloud. “So predictable.”

An hour later, the pair quietly crept along in dense foliage. Tia put a hand on Prim's shoulders, stepped forward, and carefully pushed a branch aside. Below them, beside a creek, they saw the elk.

“Well done,” she whispered. Prim found herself smiling, and not just at the beauty of the creature she had successfully followed.

That evening, Prim was unusually efficient with her chores. She all but dashed about their little camp as she worked. She would have even done some of Tia's tasks if she had not also picked up the pace, quite aware Prim was in a hurry this evening. Clearly, the warrior's pride refused to allow someone else to shoulder her responsibilities.

“Right!” Prim said, clapping her hands together. “That is taken care of. You know what that means!”

“We settle in for a quiet evening under the stars?” Tia asked hopefully.

Prim blew raspberries at her. “You wish!”

“Yes, how silly of me to ever expect peace and quiet when you are around,” Tia said, standing beside the tree she had been laying back against and rolling her eyes

“Time for my training!” Prim said with undisguised glee. “Where is the rope? I am certain I set some aside – ah, there it is!” She gathered the coils up, then walked over to Tia. “Are you ready to learn, Hot-Tits?”

Tia smiled and reached out to pull a surprised Prim close. “Yes, it seems it is my turn to be the student,” she said. She looked into Prim's eyes.

The warrior's gaze was filled with warmth and companionship, and the residual feelings from earlier blossomed again inside Prim. “Umm, yes, student,” she stammered.

Tia held up the rope Prim had been holding. “Now, then, what tie will you teach me to use on you?”

Prim started. “Wait, what?” she asked, looking down at her now-empty hands....

“This is so unfair!” she said ten minutes later as Tia wrapped another coil of the rope around the bard's waist. Her hands were tied in front her and secured to a rope around her waist. Her legs were cinched together in two places.

“You've mentioned that a time or two,” Tia said.

“My plan was so perfect! *I* was supposed to tie *you* up! And make sure to slip two fingers under there. You do not want to cut off any circulation.”

The warrior grinned and did as directed. Despite her frustration at being tricked, Prim still felt obligated to instruct Tia on proper technique.

“If I was not supposed to practice restraining, why did you hand me the ropes?” Tia playfully asked as she finished tying the last knot.

“I did no such thing!” Prim said, pouting. “You distracted me and took advantage of my confusion, that is all.”

“I learned from the master,” Tia said, sitting down beside Prim, her back against the tree.

Prim laughed lightly, smiling despite herself. “If I was not so irritated, I would be proud of you,” she admitted in a soft voice.

“You're still irritated?” Tia asked, smiling. “Well, we can't be having that. I think we can find a way to help you relax.”

“I daresay you owe it to me,” Prim said, sticking her tongue out playfully.

“I daresay I do,” Tia agreed. She gently helped Prim lie back at a right-angle to the warrior, resting her head in Tia's lap.

“Well, I must say this is much more comfortable,” Prim said.

“That is good to hear,” Tia said. “And from this vantage, I have an excellent view of your ... practice.” She looked along the helpless Prim down to her bare feet and slowly back up her bound legs, her hips with her hands secured to her waist, up to the low cut showing off her cleavage, and at last to her smiling face.

Their eyes met again. Neither said anything, each now lost in the other's gaze. Almost unconsciously, Tia began idly twirling Prim's hair flame.

After several minutes – despite feeling she could remain there quietly forever – Prim broke the silence. “You are getting quite good, Hot-Tits,” she said.

“I have an excellent teacher,” Tia replied.

“I truly am helpless this time. I might be stuck here for quite a while.”

“Mm-hmm. Well, I will be here with you however long it takes, my ninny.”

Prim reached up and gently stroked Tia's cheek.

Tia laughed and took Prim's hand in her own. “How quickly did you get yourself untied?”

“I did not track the time.”

“So much for being helpless,” Tia said, cocking an eyebrow.

“On the contrary, I still am,” Prim said. “For it is not the ropes keeping me so.”

They silently smiled at each other. Tia again began twirling Prim's hair flame. The pair shared one another's company and chatted about pleasant things, and they found it was enough.

Overhead, the stars slowly traveled across the sky.

Prim and Tia in Insufferable Tale

The two men spun the gnomes around, lifted them onto the log, and yanked their slender hands behind their backs.

“Ow! Why are you lot always so rough?” Tia complained.

“Hot-Tits, have you not learned?” Prim gently chided her as their captors began winding ropes around their wrists.

“Stuff it, Prim! I'm definitely not in the mood for your attitude!” the warrior snarled, tugging at her ropes.

The redhead calmly allowed herself to be tied. “And what do you hope to accomplish other than wear yourself out?”

“I said shut it, Prim,” Tia said again.

“Oh, sure, struggle and give yourself rope burns and earn tighter bindings for yourself, as ever,” the bard continued in a near-bored tone. “And then you will, naturally, blame me for all your woes. Typical.”

“Well, you really are the source of most of my 'woes',” Tia snapped.

“My dear Hot-Tits,” Prim said as her captor started fitting a collar around her neck. “You know as well as I do you have a natural inclination for digging yourself into deeper and deeper holes. I may, on rare occasions –” (“Ha!” Tia scoffed) “– initiate events which lead us into mild yet interesting trouble. However, you must admit you are the one who causes things to get, well, more exciting than need be,” she finished delicately.

Tia guffawed. “What a load of tosh!”

“Now, now, scoff if you must, but--”

“Dammit, Prim, I'm not in the mood for a lecture!” Tia shouted up at the sky in exasperation.

“Aye,” the man tying her up agreed. “Nuffin' worse than an insufferable know-it-all.”

“Wait, what?” Prim asked as her captor locked her collar.

“You heard him,” Tia said. “You're lecturing again. At a time like this, even!”

“Too right,” her captor agreed again as he started securing a collar on Tia. “Reckon you should gag her quick. I don't think I can take any more of it.”

“On it,” the other captor said, grabbing a cloth and wadding it up.

“Hold on, what are—mmmph,” Prim began but was interrupted by her captor stuffing the cloth into her mouth. She continued to mumble confused protests as he tied another cloth over her mouth, finishing her gag.

“Finally,” the first captor said as he locked Tia's collar. “Really getting' on me nerves, she was.”

Tia laughed at Prim. “Not so clever now, are you?” Prim frowned at her friend, unimpressed.

The men picked the captives up and set them on the ground. They pushed the gnomes ahead. “Move along, now,” the first said.

A few hours later, the gnomes found themselves stripped and tied in a cellar. The men left, closing and locking the door on top of the stairs behind them.

From the pole she was tied standing to, Tia gave her companion a gleeful grin. “Hey, Prim,” she said.

The bard, hanging from a rope tied from her ankles to a beam, responded by rolling her eyes at the floor.

“Aren't you always saying resisting captors just earns you more restrictive bindings?” Tia taunted. “How does your marvelous theory look now?”

Prim gave a long-suffering, gagged sigh and continued rolling her eyes like an unimpressed teenager. Tia had been needling her the entire journey over, their captors not bothering to gag her. On the contrary, they had seemed to enjoy seeing what they appeared to consider Prim's comeuppance.

“For all your trickery and deviousness, all your crazy schemes and do or die shenanigans, you're upside-down and gagged. Meanwhile,” Tia raised an unbound foot, looking at it and wiggling her bare toes, “here I am, loosely tied to a pole, legs not even tied up. I think that makes me the victor here, wouldn't you agr – oh, *for crying out loud!*”

This last was in response to looking back at Prim to see the bard now smiling and holding her arms crossed. Her gag was pulled over her chin.

“Whatever is the matter, Hot-Tits?” Prim casually asked.

Tia irritably banged her head back against the pole. “I thought for sure it would take you at *least* half an hour longer to get free,” she complained.

Prim giggled. “Sorry to spoil your fun.”

“How did you get loose so easily, anyway?”

“My trickery and deviousness is not limited to merely being meek nor 'do or die', my dear Hot-Tits,” Prim said, wagging a finger at her friend and winking. “Sometimes, you win through sheer annoyance. Like, for example, irritating someone into hurrying up with the tying to get to the gagging.”

Now it was Tia's turn to be unimpressed. “Are you now trying to claim you planned to aggravate everyone so much that the man tying you up would do a shoddy job because he was so eager to just shut you up?”

“Absolutely!” Prim said with a grin.

“You really are shameless,” Tia said, and the two laughed together.

Prim and Tia and Friends in “The Ribboning Tale”

“Umm...”

This rather verbose wisdom was spoken by one Millie, a lady in the service of a wizard whose peculiar perverted predilections are not the topic of this Tale but who would, doubtless, find himself entertained at his young servant's current, and naked, predicament.

“Millie's right!” said Tia. “We could have done this ourselves!”

“Aye, the lubber's right, there no be needin' magic, Primiphi!” Lilly added.

“You must admit,” Prim replied with her voice muffled due to her face being pressed forcefully into Millie's cleavage, “this result is not an entirely bad thing.”

“Of course you would think that,” Tia sighed.

“And we no be getting' closer to gettin' Millie prepared for the birthday celebrations, do we?”

The ribbon tightly wrapping the quartet together squeaked as they struggled helplessly within its grasp. Millie found herself with Prim in front of her, with Tia and Lilly pressed against her from behind. She could feel the warrior's and pirate's breasts against her back as they squirmed.

“Umm,” Millie said.

“Why is everyone picking on me?” Prim asked. “All I ever do I is try to help people, especially my friends.”

“Because ye do be getting' us into another mess!” Lilly answered.

“But it is a *fun* mess!”

“You *would* think that,” Tia said. “And how did we end up naked, too, anyway?”

“Umm,” Millie said, and Prim giggled.

“Ye do be deservin' that one, lubber,” Lilly laughed.

“Right, right, stupid question when Prim's involved,” Tia said.

“Primiphi, just do be endin' the blasted spell,” Lilly said.

“I already have, Dandelion,” Prim said. “It ended when it finished tying us up.”

“Well, then do your escape trick thing already,” Tia suggested.

“I have been trying, but the ropework (or is that ribbonwork?) is much too skilled. It may take me quite a while to get free of it.” Millie could feel the redhead's delight radiating between her breasts.

“I'm not sure which is worse – you bragging about your tying skills, or you suddenly being ineffective at escaping,” Tia said.

“Umm,” Millie said.

“Yar, too right,” Lilly agreed.

“Fine, fine,” Prim said with a dramatic sigh. “Since everyone seems to be in a fuss, I will get us loose. Now, let us see: If magic got us into this, then magic should get us out. That makes sense, right?”

“NO!” Tia and Lilly roared together

Ignoring them, the bard spoke a few words in another language and snapped her fingers.

Several sparks shot out from her fingers, lingering in the air around the group. “What is this?” Tia asked.

“Hrm, that is not what I intended to happen,” Prim said. “At least, I think it was not. It is difficult for me to see much right now on account of Millistripes' breasts in my face. Not that I am complaining.”

The sparks suddenly grew into vertical disks.

“I no be likin' what I do be seein',” Lilly said.

“Perhaps my spell is a bit off,” Prim considered.

Tia scoffed. “Are you trying to admit – for the first time in your life – you've botched it up? *Now* of all times?”

“Nonsense. If things went wrong, it is because I am having difficulty enunciating clearly with my face meeting Millistripes's breasts. A pleasant way to be wrong, but I defy anyone to –”

“Umm,” Millie interrupted.

“Portals? Portals to where?”

Suddenly, tentacles shot out from the portals, wrapping themselves around the trio.

“Meep! No no no! Wrong spell, wrong spemmph!” Prim said, her statement abruptly interrupted by a tentacle wrapping itself over her mouth.

“You gotta be kidding me,” Tia sighed. “Then again, what did I exp—mmph” Another tentacle silenced the warrior.

“I do be swearin' she do be this way on purp – mmph,” Lilly managed before she, too, was gagged.

“Oh, this should be quite interesting,” Millie said, grinning as more tentacles came for her. She thought she would have to thank her friends properly later. Or perhaps the opportunity would arise sooner

Prim & Tia in "A Tale of Vengeance"

"Well, this is another fine – "

"Oh, Hot-Tits, are you trying to blame me again?"

"Well, who else should I blame?"

"You act is if there is something to blame someone for."

"You mean besides being tied up?"

"Yes."

"Naked?"

"As usual, yes.."

"And blindfolded?"

"Atypical for us, but yes."

"And hanging upside-down ... again?"

"We do seem to have a talent for that, do we not?"

"Which one?"

"You are so cute when you are exasperated, Hot-Tits. If only I could see you now."

"And whose fault is it you can't?"

"I think we know. Anyway, it is rather strange we are not gagged."

"Oh, it is not strange at all. This is extra punishment for me. She knows how annoying you get when you've gotten us into messes."

"Annoying? I most certainly am – "

"Quite infuriating, yes."

"You wound me, Hot-Tits."

"The truth hurts."

"Not as much as I expect our upcoming attentions "

"Yeesh, you're right. The last time, I couldn't sit for days."

"I know. You were so cute to watch as you walked so gingerly."

"Ha-ha. As if you were any different."

"You were watching my exquisite ass, Hot-Tits? Oh, how joyous that makes me."

"And there it is. You're hopeless, you know."

"On the contrary, I have high hopes we shall be enjoying our experience here."

"You would."

"Come now, Hot-Tits. She may be angry at us, but she is quite skilled and would never do anything permanent. At least, not physically."

"Are you sure? I mean, has she ever punished anyone for breaking into her shop and making a mess?"

"Well, no, I cannot say I have ever heard tell of such circumstances. But she must eventually calm down, after all. No one can stay mad forever."

"So that's why you had the bright idea of coming back to town so early."

"It has been over a month, Hot-Tits. I would hardly classify that as 'early!'"

"I suggested two years, remember?"

"Do be serious. Regardless, I thought, surely any imagined wrongs we may or may not have done –"

"Imagined? You ruddy well told her, ya ninny! Or have you forgotten that part?"

"I knew I should not have mentioned that conversation to you. Pity I was in such a talkative mood afterwards."

"An honest mood, you mean."

"I am always honest, Hot-Tits. Okay, you can stop laughing now. It is rather unbecoming."

"Sorry, sorry, no idea what came over me."

"Regardless of her strangely vengeful attitude, I am certain she will eventually let us be on our way. No doubt it will be after we all have a simply marvelous time together. Oh, if only I had my tea set with me, we could have such a party together and discuss the memorable occasion."

"How can you be thinking of tea at a time like this?"

"I always think of tea, Hot-Tits."

"How about thinking of a way out of this?"

"I have thought of several, naturally."

"And how many of them are actually possible?"

"I would say ... two."

"That's it? What's the first?"

"Enjoy our visit and hug her afterwards as we go on our way, while we likely walk in an odd manner for a week."

"In other words, get our backsides whipped and goodness knows what else. I don't like this plan. What about the other one?"

"I could get us loose, of course. The question I face, however, is should I?"

"You mean, should we try to skulk off before paying our debts to our friend?"

"Precisely."

"I do admit we kinda deserve this."

"Indeed, we do."

"Well, that is good to hear, because you two are most certainly going to get what you deserve."

"Meep... Oh, hello, dear Laressa, most wonderful friend to gnomes and – might I add – creator of the most *exotic* of fine feminine wear! I did not hear you over there."

"Probably because you were babbling so much."

"You are the one who started assigning blame, Hot-Tits."

"With good reason! Have you taken a look at our current situation?"

"Cute question, seeing as we are blindfolded. Quite an impressive verbal jab."

"Thank you. I'm rather proud of it."

"Now, if you are finished patting yourself on the back, perhaps you could be more productive with your energies?"

"You're the one who's always mmp!"

“Ha, sounds like someone got what she need-mmph mmm mrrr!”

“You two really don't ever quiet down, do you? But don't worry: You'll have plenty of reasons to be noisy soon enough. Though I think it will involve less 'talking' and more ... 'squealing!'”

“Mmmf!”

Prim and Tia in "Down to Rith Tale"

Of all the warrior arts, forms, and techniques her Teacher had drilled into her over years and years of training, Tia found her current task the absolute worst of the bunch, the one practice she struggled to master more than any other: meditation.

She sat in a small clearing, her hands on her knees, as she furiously endeavored to get her mind to focus. As ever, there was much inside her head refusing to allow such a thing as mere focus. Thoughts and feelings kept forcing their way forward, despite her repeated efforts to push them aside. Naturally, they nearly all related to a certain red-haired gnome with a knack for causing the warrior undue stress.

Frowning with frustration, Tia shook her head and tried once more to bring back her focus. *Though "back" would imply I ever managed it in the first place*, she thought wryly. *How can one ninny be so infuriating?* Which thought, of course, brought forward more images and thoughts of Prim.

She opened her eyes, shaking her head. "Great. Now I can't even keep her out of my own head."

"Her whom, Hot-Tits?" a familiar voice asked from behind her.

Tia turned around and glared at Prim in irritation. "I told you I wanted to be alone for this," she told the grinning bard.

"For an hour," Prim said. "It has been three." She pointed at the sun.

Tia looked up at it, finding it had indeed been three hours since she began her meditations. "Okay, fair point," she conceded. How had she lost such track of time?

"I brought you some food," Prim said as she held up one of their bags. "I expect you found today's session as interesting and refreshing as you ever do." She tossed the food over.

The warrior deftly caught the package, realizing as she did so she was, indeed, quite hungry. "Yes, it was about as satisfying as ever," she said as she opened the bag up and rummaged around to see what Prim had brought her.

While Tia ate, Prim silently walked about the clearing, looking at the various plants as they swayed in a gentle breeze. When the warrior was halfway through the meal, she set the food down and sighed.

"What do you want, Prim?"

The bard put on her best puzzled expression. "Whatever do you mean, Hot-Tits?" she asked. "I simply brought you a meal and am patiently waiting as you enjoy it."

"And there's the rub," Tia said, glaring. "Patient? *You?*" She took another bite.

"My word, but you act as if I can never remain still for more than a moment."

"You can," Tia said.

"It is good you finally talk sense."

"When you have something you want," Tia continued, reaching for her own water skin to take a drink.

Prim frowned and crossed her arms. "I see how it is going to be, then. Accusations and general aspersions on my character."

"Pretty much."

"A day like any other, in other words," the bard said and blew raspberries at Tia.

"Am I wrong?"

"Frequently," Prim said, grinning again.

Tia laughed, unable to help it. "Fine. I'll be more specific," she said. "Am I wrong to think you want something of me, Prim?"

“Of course not,” Prim said, “but why would you ask a question you already know the answer to?” She dashed over and threw her arms around Tia's neck. “You already know I want my prize.”

Tia let out a chuckle. “I meant other than *that* ...”

“Goodness, but you are so imprecise today! One might even say *unfocused*,” she winked meaningfully. Tia rolled her eyes, though the corner of her mouth turned up in a grin at the bad joke. “Whatever is on your mind?”

“A ninny who refuses to just say what she wants,” Tia said. “And *not* the part about the prize,” she hastily added, seeing the twinkle in Prim's eyes as the latter opened her mouth to reply.

Prim giggled and hugged the warrior tight again. “Always wanting to get straight to the point, my Hot-Tits is,” she said. “Very well. I was hoping you would help me with a minor project.”

“And just what would this project be?” Tia asked, eyebrow raised with suspicion.

The bard smiled broadly.

Tia shivered. She knew that smile too well. And things never turned out well for her when Prim flashed that particular smile.

“Okay, it's done,” Tia said, wiping a bit of sweat off her brow. “Although there is simply no way this is a good idea. None whatsoever.”

“Nonsense, Hot-Tits,” Prim said, walking over to hand Tia a water skin and examine the results of her efforts. “This is perhaps my most perfect idea I have had to date!”

“That's not saying a whole lot,” Tia said, shaking her head before taking a swig of water.

“You wound me, Hot-Tits,” Prim said, dramatically putting her hands over her chest. “When have my plans ever gone awry?”

“That depends,” Tia said thoughtfully. “Do you mean from a sane person's perspective or a ninny's?”

“Always ready with a discouraging word,” Prim grinned. “Come on, let us start the next phase of my mostly-perfect plan!”

“Oh, no,” Tia said, shaking her head. “The last thing I want is to be associated with this madness.”

“But you already made the – ” Prim began, confused.

“You would have tried it yourself, and probably broken your ninny neck in the process,” Tia explained. “At least now I can be comfortable knowing that part of your hardly-perfect plan will not harm you.”

Prim dashed over and threw her arms around Tia. “Oh, my Hot-Tits!” she cried.

“Woa!” the warrior said, blushing furiously. “Hey, now! No need for – ”

“Always worried about my safety! So protective and caring!”

“Okay, okay, that's enough,” Tia said, carefully patting Prim on the back and blushing even deeper. “You need to get on with your plan, remember? I should leave.”

Prim released her and stepped back, smiling brightly. “Yes, perhaps it *would* be best if you observed from out of sight, Hot-Tits! Excellent idea!”

“Wait, I didn't mean – ”

“You can hide in those bushes over there,” Prim continued. “You can then watch the show without participating.”

“Without participating?” Tia asked, eyeing her work. “I’m thinking that won’t last long – not if you have anything to say about it.”

“And here we go with the baseless accusations again.”

Tia let out a snort of a laugh. “Baseless. Right.” She sighed and looked up at the sky. “Why do I ever fight it? Very well, I’ll go hide.”

“Excellent!” Prim said, slapping Tia’s back. “Trust me, you will most certainly want to see this!”

“Somehow, I doubt it,” Tia said as she stepped behind the bushes.

When she had turned around, Prim had summoned her fiddle case and was kneeling, getting the instrument ready. Tia already knew Prim could summon the fiddle, both with and without the case, even though she had never actually witnessed the moment itself. She frowned as she realized she had missed it again. She realized she would rather like to see it.

Meanwhile, Prim took the fiddle and bow out of the case, which she closed and set aside. She stood in a clearing in the woods, a small boulder in front of her. She hopped onto it, facing the direction of where Tia’s handiwork lay. Placing one foot on the very top of the stone (in a pose Tia considered melodramatic), she raised the fiddle to her shoulder. Bringing the bow to the strings, she began playing a tune.

Tia had expected a soft, gentle tune to match the tranquility of the glade. Instead, Prim had opted for an upbeat, energetic song which had the warrior fighting the urge to tap her foot to the rhythm. After the tune ended, Prim began another tune of the same style. And after that, another, and another.

The warrior was beginning to wonder if Prim had any idea what she was doing, after all – when suddenly, a cloud of smoke appeared right in front of the bushes she was hiding behind. Prim, seemingly caught up in her music, did not react as the cloud quickly dissipated, revealing a distinctly feminine figure.

The newcomer was red-skinned and had long, white hair. Twin horns poked out through her hair, and Tia saw she had a long black tail ending on what appeared to be an arrowhead shape. Her hips and legs were quite shapely, and her chest well-endowed. The skirt and blouse she wore seemed more appropriate for city hall than the woods. Her hose and heels definitely were out of place in the wild.

A devil-girl? the warrior wondered, surprised, and grateful for the training in stealth her Teacher had forced her through.

“Hello, my musical friend!” the devil-girl called out to Prim. The bard continued playing. “I said, hello!” the devil-girl said in a louder voice. Again, the redhead did not cease her performance.

The devil-girl’s fists clenched at her side. Finally, she shouted, “Oi! Gnome! Will you – ”

“When one meets another person who is focused on a project, it is quite rude to approach from the side,” Prim said, neither looking at the newcomer nor stopping her playing. “A common enough error in manners in these trying times, sadly, but one which I am certain you will quickly correct.”

The devil-girl angrily tapped her foot a few times, letting out an angry huff. “Fine!” she declared after a few moments, moving to stand a mere foot in front of Prim. Tia noticed she had no trouble walking in those heels, despite the uneven terrain, and supposed there was a magic involved. “Better?”

“Again, you are supposed to *approach* from the center,” Prim said. “Not walk over from the side.”

“What difference does it make?” the devil-girl demanded. “I’m here now, right?”

Prim made no reply. The notes of her fiddle filled the glade.

The devil-girl threw her hands in the air. “Whatever! We’ll do it your way!” she cried. She started walking backwards from the gnome. “Just let me know when I’m far enough away, you irritating little – HEY!”

She cried out in surprise as the snare trap Tia had set up earlier now wrapped around her ankles and pulled her into the air. She soon dangled upside-down, held aloft by a length of rope, her hair flowing under her.

Prim finally stopped her music. “Goodness, but why are you hanging around like that?” she asked, tilting her head as if to get a proper perspective on the visitor.

“What is the meaning of this?” the devil-girl asked. “And let me down!”

“I am mildly curious why you do not just poof in a cloud, much like you entered,” Prim mused, tapping her chin with her bow. “I take it your type cannot do so when bound in any way?”

The devil-girl said nothing, though her cheeks did puff out with her fury.

“I had heard rumors,” Prim said. “I must admit to being pleased to discover they were true.” She calmly set the bow to the strings, playing a tranquil song more in line with what Tia had earlier expected.

The seconds ticked by. Butterflies fluttered around Prim, as if drawn to her music. Tia realized she had seen this behavior by the local wildlife before, though her mind had not really registered it. Perhaps, the warrior reckoned, it was simply inevitable Prim would attract such creatures in her desire for beauty.

She looked over at the devil-girl, who now had her arms crossed, the fingers of one hand tapping with apparent irritation. Tia realized she appeared to be trying to wait out the bard. *Good luck with that*, the warrior thought, thinking back to her earlier conversation with Prim. *She wants something from you. We could be here a week, and all Prim would do is change songs.*

The minutes ticked by, neither the devil-girl nor Prim saying anything. After half an hour, Tia yawned. Finally, the devil-girl let out an inarticulate cry of frustration. “Would you just name it already?”

Prim paused her playing and looked at her with a confused expression. “Name it? What it?”

“What you want from me, you brat!”

“Me, want something from you? I am confused. Were you not the one who arrived unannounced and in a manner quite rude?”

“And how did you even know I would arrive?” the devil-girl demanded.

“I knew no such thing,” Prim said with a slight grin.

“Oh, really? And yet you just happened to have this snare set up?”

“I did expect a visitor,” Prim said. “Just not you, specifically.”

To Tia's surprise, the devil-girl smiled. It was not a friendly expression, and she realized it was a sign of respect from one foe to another. *She actually appreciates Prim's annoying barrister-speak*, she thought with a shudder. This visitor could mean nothing good for either gnome.

“I see you have an understanding of what my people do,” the devil-girl said. “Let me down, and we can discuss terms.”

“Perhaps it would be best to do so in the reverse order,” Prim countered. “For we should not presume the terms end with you being let down, after all.”

The devil-girl laughed. “I think we can both agree I'll be loose soon enough.”

“That depends on one's definition of 'soon', I suppose.”

“I can wait,” the devil-girl said.

Prim did not reply but merely resumed playing.

After another half hour, Tia had had enough with passive observation. She crept back and around the bushes, out of sight, and then approached the glade in a casual manner. “Hey, Prim,” she called out, earning a nod from the still-performing redhead. “Nice music. Oh, I see you have a visitor. Hello, over there.”

The devil-girl glared at Tia. “Oh, great, another one of you irritating little vermin. My day is getting better and better.”

“Pay her no mind, Hot-Tits,” Prim said, still playing. “She is still coming to terms with her situation.”

“Seems pretty clear to me,” Tia said. “Hanging upside-down and all is usually not a sign of victory. But, hey, you do you,” she added to the devil-girl.

“You simpletons presume I'm the only one you have to worry about,” the devil-girl said. “Do you think I cannot summon friends? Or even my boss?” She laughed. “Oh, I'm going to so enjoy seeing him whipping both you little rats.”

“Her boss?” Tia asked Prim.

“No one to be worried about,” Prim said without a trace of concern in her voice.

The devil-girl laughed. “Oh, you're just so cute!” she said. “You're good at pretending. My Lord has armies at his command. And he loves nothing more than to mete out just punishments! He'll not be satisfied with simply tormenting you both – you'll regret ever having been born!”

“Torment and regret,” Tia repeated. “As a result of meeting this devil person.” She turned to Prim, eyebrow cocked. “Do you *ever* consider the ramifications of your mad schemes?” she asked the bard.

“Pish-posh, Hot-Tits,” Prim said, stopping her performance and dismissively waving the bow about. “I think we both know the answer to that one.”

“I think we do,” Tia agreed, noticing Prim did not dispute the warrior's characterization of her plans.

The devil-girl laughed. “You two are going to be in such trouble when I call my boss! Oh, to hear your screams – ”

“I do not think he would appreciate being summoned here,” Prim interrupted with a dangerously-pleasant smile. “I expect he would be most displeased to be called over only to lose a golden fiddle, unmusical though it may be. He would most certainly take out his wrath on the subordinate that drew him to his own humiliation.”

The devil-girl glared a moment, then looked away. “Fine. Let's get on with it, then,” she sullenly said. “I *was* going to offer you a fiddle of gold if you could best me in a contest of musical skill. But now I will offer it in exchange for letting me go and never speaking of this incident to anyone – especially my boss.”

She snapped her fingers, and a golden fiddle and bow appeared in her hand in a puff of smoke. Tia gasped, for she could tell the instrument was of magnificent craftsmanship. It appeared to glow in the soft light of the glade, a golden treasure ripe for the taking. A longing to possess it rose within her.

Atop the boulder, Prim frowned. “And why would I desire such a thing?”

The devil-girl froze, blinking stupidly. “What?” She asked.

“That fiddle of gold,” Prim said. “Why should I want it?” Tia looked over at Prim with disbelief, unable to say anything.

Still blinking with confusion, the devil-girl said, “umm, because it's gold?”

“That is the issue, for would it not produce the harshest of tones?” Prim asked. She held up her fiddle. “The music demands the warmth of the wood, not the uncaring cold of metal. Further, I am but a gnome. A fiddle of gold would be much too unwieldy for me. Could you imagine me trying to hold that properly? Such weight!” She shook her head and put her fiddle back on her shoulder. “No, I do think I would prefer to keep my own, thank you.” She resumed playing.

Beside her, Tia was no less stunned than the devil-girl at Prim's refusal of the treasure. Though the warrior knew Prim well, the ease with which her friend had turned down the offer still came as a surprise. Even now, Tia felt a tug of desire and a mad urge to offer a deal for it.

But Prim is right, she thought. *It is unwieldy*. As a warrior, she held a great respect for a proper tool, and the golden fiddle seemed more showy than functional. The desire to possess it faded away in seconds as she watched her friend play, as though Prim had broken a spell over her. *What would we do with it, anyway?* She considered, grinning wryly. *Probably lose it to a random patrol of horny goblins in ten minutes, that's what.*

“You think you're so perfect, do you?” the devil-girl demanded, clearly irritated her temptation had failed.

“Perfectly so,” Prim said with a curtsy and a flourish. Tia rolled her eyes but remained silent.

“I think you're a fraud,” the devil-girl said. “A load of hooey and flash. All talk, no walk. And with a silly hairstyle –” she put her hands on her hips – “and a woefully flat ass.” She ran her hand along her curves, a smug smile on her face, as if she had proven her point.

Tia sighed, shaking her head. “Of all the things you could have said...” she muttered, trailing off as she caught Prim's expression. The warrior took an unconscious step back from the pure ice in Prim's smile.

“I sense you are, strangely and rather unbelievably, unconvinced of my skills,” Prim said, her voice somehow colder than her smile. Tia took another step back. “Perhaps a demonstration is in order, then.”

Prim set down her fiddle. She then reached forward and withdrew, seemingly from the air, a second fiddle and bow. She brought the fiddle to her shoulder and began playing a highly technical tune. After a moment, she stepped back – and the instrument remained in the air, continuing to play. She took up her original fiddle, hopped onto and placed a foot on the boulder as she had before, and began playing a one-gnome duet.

Tia felt anger in the music. She frowned and looked closer at her friend. The bard's entire countenance had shifted. Her cheer was gone, of course – replaced with a focus the likes of which Tia had never witnessed. She played with a ferocity that was matched only by the power of the music. As she played, the notes felt as if they were physically pushing the warrior back, and Tia soon found she had to brace herself against the force of it or be pushed back. A multicolored aura emanated from Prim and the hovering fiddle, flashing and sparkling.

Looking away from the light, Tia saw the branches of the trees and shrubs and even the blades of grass were shaking from the power Prim sent out. Glancing at the devil-girl, she saw her holding her arms over her face, as if to protect herself against the music.

“Is that all you've got?” the devil-girl managed to say as she fought against Prim's music.

And then the tune reached a crescendo, and the devil-girl let out a cry as the power of the performance increased. Tia felt herself slide a few inches despite her efforts, shoved by the force of the tune.

She's more offended than I'd realized, Tia thought as the wind whipped about her. The devil-girl really hit a nerve. She gazed at Prim in awe – and fear. She had heard of such power in music, but had only half-believed it before. She fully did, now. A dread filled her heart. Is she still in there? Is my ninny still with me, or is she losing herself in her anger and power?

“Prim!” she cried out. “That's quite enough, don't you think?”

Prim brought the music to another crescendo, then held the note, bringing the bow across and back on the fiddle. The hovering fiddle mirrored the action.

The bard turned her head and looked at Tia, a gentle smile on her lips. Tia sighed with relief and returned the smile. Prim's eyes sparkled in response. She winked, and then she turned back and continued her performance. With a quick transition, she changed to a merry, playful tune.

The reaction from the devil-girl was immediate.

“H-Hey!” she cried, and then – to Tia's shock, the devil-girl giggled. “None of that – hee – now!”

And then Tia felt it – a ticklish sensation all about her. She let out a surprised giggle and squirmed. “P-Prim!” she protested, her body involuntary shivering. “How about you focus on yon devil-girl over there and not me?”

The sensation faded from the warrior. Prim's grin grew with mischievousness as she looked sidelong at Tia, who got the distinct impression she had only been granted a temporary reprieve. She shuddered again, only this time not from any playful tickles.

Meanwhile, the devil-girl continued her futile objections at her treatment, giggling and laughing helplessly. Prim's lively tune became ever faster and wilder, the devil-girl squealing with laughter, squirming in

the air. Her movements set her spinning and swaying at the end of the rope. Her tail flicked about wildly and might very well have caused injury had anyone been within range, Tia thought.

“I almost regret bringing this up, as it gives you the opportunity to end this entertaining endeavor,” Prim said to the helpless devil-girl. Despite the music of two fiddles, her voice carried clearly in the magic of her performance. “However, in the interest of fair play, I suppose I should. How about we agree to a deal?”

“Hahaha heehee hahaha!” the devil-girl continued to laugh.

Prim did not let up on her tune. “I was thinking there should be a reward for my triumph over one of your abilities and profession. And, no, I am uninterested in fiddles of precious metal which I cannot lift.” She waited for a response other than laughter, though Tia suspected she knew she would not get one. “However, I am also a generous soul,” the bard continued. “Why should I keep all the entertainment to myself?”

The hair on the back of Tia's neck stood up. What was Prim going on about?

“If I am correct, you have the ability to wander around and create fun wherever you go,” she said to the demon-girl. After a few seconds of nothing but laughter, Prim grinned again. She stopped playing, then plucked the hovering fiddle from the air, ending its tune. “I do suppose you might be better able to answer when you are not in such a jovial mood.”

The devil-girl immediately collapsed when the music ceased. She hung there for several seconds, gathering her breath, still giggling.

Tia moved to stand beside Prim. “Just what demented thoughts are going through your ninny mind now?” the warrior softly asked. “And don't pretend to not know what I mean.”

“Why, Hot-Tits, you know I always understand you perfectly,” Prim answered brightly. “Even when you are confused about your own self,” she added slyly.

Shaking her head, Tia decided silence was the only response to this. Besides, it appeared the devil-girl had recovered herself and was now glaring at the redhead again.

“Here are my terms for your release,” Prim began. “Firstly, you will leave here with Hot-Tits and myself unmolested.”

“Wait, are you actually arguing to *not* get us into your usual kinky trouble?” Tia asked.

“Secondly,” Prim continued, though she did grin sidelong at Tia. “I have a list of friends I will speak to you. Since you have such a delightful capability for spreading cheer, you will immediately upon our agreement go to visit each of them – alone or together does not matter – and 'play' with them.”

“Play?” Tia and the devil-girl asked at the same time.

Prim grinned. “I think we all know what I mean.”

Tia face-palmed. The devil-girl grinned and licked her lips.

“Oh, I'm thinking I'm going to like this deal,” she said.

“Third,” Prim continued, “while our friends may have ideas, you will still adhere to our first term.”

“A pity. I would imagine they'd want to repay you for your friendship.”

“Undoubtedly,” Prim agreed. “But I have no desire to rudely keep you busy forever in some sort of friendship loop, going back and forth between us.”

The devil-girl laughed. “Such considerate vermin.”

“Fourth, Hot-Tits and myself will not intentionally reveal to your boss the events related to the current meeting of ours.”

“Excellent. And when you do 'unintentionally' let it slip, I'll be sure to make you squeal. Repeatedly.”

“I have no doubt,” Prim said with her mischievous grin. “Do we have a deal?”

“Fifth, leave me out of it!” Tia added.

“We have a deal,” the devil-girl said, “to the first four terms.”

“Hey!” Tia complained.

“Agreed, then,” Prim said. “Hot-Tits, would you be so kind?” She gestured to the rope from which the devil-girl dangled.

With a frustrated growl, Tia walked over to the tree she had tied the rope to and began working at the knot. Meanwhile, Prim rattled off a list of their friends' names.

After a few moments, Tia had the rope untied, and the devil-girl fell to the ground with a grunt. Tia returned to stand beside Prim, coiling up the rope as she walked. The devil-girl stood and dusted herself off. She looked at the gnomes with a wicked grin.

“I look forward to seeing you vermin again,” she said. She snapped her fingers and disappeared in another cloud.

“Nothing – and I mean nothing – good can come of this,” Tia said.

“Nonsense, Hot-Tits,” Prim said. “Without doubt, our friends will be delighted!”

“Right. And not at all annoyed or in the mood for vengeance.”

“I know! Is it not exciting to imagine what amazing wonders are in store for us both?”

Tia shook her head. “Why did I let you get me involved in this madness? At least she won't be back to punish us herself.”

Prim chuckled.

“Wait,” Tia said, turning toward her. “She *won't* be back, right?”

“Who is to say?” Prim asked innocently.

“But she agreed!” Tia protested.

“Somewhat,” Prim said.

Tia's jaw dropped. “Somewhat? Explain!”

“I imagine she will visit our friends,” Prim said. “And then return to visit us.”

“But you said she couldn't!”

“Not on their behalf,” Prim said. “However, the terms left wide open her ability to visit with us on her own will.”

“You said to leave us unmolested!”

Prim grinned, wagging a finger at Tia. “Yes, but I made no mention of it being permanent. On the contrary, I rather intentionally left room for her to visit with us again. An invitation, if you will.”

“Why would you – No, no, don't bother answering. It's you. Of course you'd invite her to torment us.”

“I think you know what she truly meant by 'torment',” Prim said with a grin.

“Rope burns and gags and ...” Tia rolled her eyes. “And she seemed to be into whippings. Great. Well, we've got something to look forward to, I suppose.”

“And that is why I adore my Hot-Tits!” Prim said, eyes shining. “Always pragmatic and brave when confronted with the prospect of certain pleasure!”

Tia shook her head, chuckling despite herself. “You're hopeless. Anyway, you reckon she'll visit all the others and get ideas from them?”

“Most certainly. They doubtless have various opinions, accurate or not, about our own preferences and desires.”

“Yes, and she did say she'd make us squeal.”

“Which you have been known to do when – ”

“Hey, now!” Tia interrupted. “If you want to get into a contest of who squeals the loudest, how about when you – ”

“It is less about volume than cuteness,” Prim argued. “For example, when someone takes you and – ”

“As if you aren't cute when – ”

“And when you – ”

“That's it,” Tia said, grabbing Prim's wrist. “I think a demonstration's in order!” She gently but forcefully turned Prim around and began binding her wrists behind her back with the rope she still held.

“Wait – what – ” Prim began, then giggled. “Oh, poor me! Just wait my turn, Hot-Tits,” she said.

“Yes, I expect your vengeance will be sweet,” Tia said, smiling. “Now, open up,” she ordered, holding out a kerchief the pair had used before for such purposes. “You've no idea how just how cute you are when you squeal into a gag.”

“Oh, but I expect you think to show me,” Prim said, sticking out her tongue.

Tia smacked the redhead on her backside, eliciting a playful yelp.

“You simply cannot avoid my exquisite ass, can you you?” Prim asked, shaking her hips and earning herself another spanking.

“Behave,” Tia said as Prim yelped again. “And why do I get the feeling this is a fight you won't mind losing?”

Prim giggled. “Some battles are meant to be fought, not won,” she said, earning herself yet another smack to her backside. “Okay, okay! My Hot-Tits is in such a dominant – meep!” (For she had received another spanking.) “Goodness, you are so *focused* right now. Is it my exqui – meep!” (And another.)

She finally opened her mouth to accept the gag. As Tia pushed the rag in with one hand, she gently whispered into Prim's ear, her other hand reaching around to cup Prim's breast.

“You have no idea just how focused I can be, but you are about to find out. For I battle to win.”

Prim moaned into her gag, her eyes unfocused.

The glade knew no more peace and tranquility that day or night as the pair continued to debate and demonstrate to one another regarding the topic of ... squealing.