

## Introduction: The question

*What is evil?*

*– Piex, the Wizard's apprentice.*

Kialessa narrowly ducked the rusty scimitars, the goblins shrieking their blood-lusting battle cry as they leapt at her. She tried to trip one with her whip, but it was too quick. She felt the air tingle as Allastassia began to use her sleep enchantment, but one of the little green monsters charged her, breaking her concentration, and was only just kept back by Posk's wild thrusts with his gauntlets. Kialessa cracked her whip to keep the crafty and nimble foe at bay, while Darrix traded blows with the second monster. They were moving in quickly, separating her from her companions with impressive tactical skill. It looked like they might get her this time.

Suddenly the air filled with vivid starlight as Piex unleashed his favourite spell all over the goblins. They swayed and fell over.

Kialessa's heart was pounding in her chest at the unwelcomed fright. She *knew* they were only illusions, that they couldn't do any *real* harm, that she wasn't in any *real* danger. She knew that she and her four best friends were really in the training ground here at the college. But the goblins still seemed so *real*.

'Great work, Piex,' she breathed, resting a grateful hand on his arm.

'Elementary,' Piex explained, smiling at her with his dragon shaped eyes. He was small for his age, but more than made up for it with his genius at wizardry. 'Goblins might be known for their cunning, but they are still just as susceptible as any knowing creature to Nethrid's vivid starclash spell -'

Suddenly Piex stopped short. He was looking down, brow furrowed, as though something bothered him. His clawed hands fiddled with the little tassels at the end of his wizard hat, the way they always did when he was thinking deeply.

'What is it?' she asked.

He paused, tilting his head like he was listening. 'Did you ... never mind,' came his cryptic reply.

'Whatever,' Allastassia muttered, probably a little flustered at losing her cool. She was all about being 'cool'; always looking fabulous with her luscious auburn locks and always dressed in the latest fashions. But Allastassia liked to win, and that meant working with only the 'best', at least as she saw it. That was why she always worked with Kialessa and Piex when it came to training at the college. 'Let's move on.'

Kialessa smiled; all the usual arguing. King Dunnkan's college, the largest in all the Great Kingdom, held the best training ground for young heroes. Every week brought new challenges, and Kialessa loved these 'real life' experiences of plundering far off dungeons or defending themselves from pretended assassins. Having magic about made it all appear so real. It was like living in a fantasy world where you never actually died and got to keep trying until you got it right. Much more fun than real life ... at least sometimes.

Next they came to a door and Posk patted it, clenching his gauntlets.

'No, Posk,' she said. 'I'm sure they'd like to keep as many of their doors intact as possible.'

He slunk away from the door with a discontented grumble. Posk was both the youngest, and arguably the strongest student at the college. He was a half troll; green, with a tusk, insanely strong. Yet he was also seriously mentally handicapped. He had been given the magical door busting gauntlets by the king after he had helped Kialessa save his life last season.

'Besides,' Allastassia reminded him, 'we're claiming this dungeon in the name of the king. No point damaging his property unless we need to.' He probably didn't know what she was saying, but he always knew when she disapproved.

After a careful check, Kialessa opened the door. The next area was set out like a goblin storage room, deep in mountain caves.

'So what do we have here?' Darrix asked. He was, in some ways, the unofficial leader of the group. He was the most popular boy in their year; tall, handsome, the son of a rich merchant. He seemed to know everyone in the castle, and everyone seemed to know him too. But what most people didn't know was that he was one of the most devout and religious people Kialessa knew. He always seemed to enjoy spending the first and last hour of the day praying, and the high priestess trusted him like no other.

'Look at this,' Piex said, ignoring the crates and piles of rubbish. He went to the far end of the room where there were two bowls set on stands against a blank stone wall. One was filled with water, the other, an olive liquid that burnt constantly, lighting the room.

'What is it?' Kialessa asked.

'Looks like a test,' Allastassia said.

'I bet it's a test,' Piex agreed.

'Do you suppose that there is a door within the wall?' Darrix said.

'Probably,' Piex said. 'I wonder what will happen if we put the fire out?'

'I'll do it,' Kialessa said. She scooped up the large water bowl in two hands and flung its contents at the other bowl.

'No, don't!' Piex tried to warn her, but it was too late. The water splashed onto the oil and burst into steam. A column of fire roared up and scorched the ceiling, and large globs of flaming oil leaping out of the bowl, covering her. The four others screamed in surprise and leapt back.

'Ooh, pretty,' Kialessa muttered from among the flames.

'Not like that, Kia!' Piex said. 'The fuel floats on the water. You cannot extinguish an oil fire with water.'

'Oh,' she said, unimpressed, though having grown up in a kitchen she kind of already knew. She watched as the little tufts of flame burnt themselves out on her magical armour, without leaving a mark. She, on the other hand, was fire proof anyway. With red skin, horns, and a tail she was never human, but a Tae'anaryn.

Being immune to fire was one of the very few benefits to being one of the most feared and hated races on earth.

'Totally worth it.' She grinned. She placed the oil bowl back down, and it was already full again with burning oil.

'Then how do we put out this fire, Piex? I don't have much mastery of fire, and I suspect that's how we pass the test.' Allastassia said.

'I agree, but Allastassia, enchantments aren't needed here. Fires need live air, stale air extinguishes them. We just need to block off the normal air.'

Allastassia looked around to see what might do that.

Kialessa tried her hands, but the fire kept sneaking out of the edges and spaces between her fingers. 'Nope,' she declared.

Darrix spoke up, 'how about we empty out the water bowl and put it on top of the fire bowl; let it smother the flames.'

'Oh, good idea, Darrix,' Piex said.

'All right then,' Kialessa said, and put the dripping water bowl over the fire bowl. 'Goodbye, little fire.'

As the two bowls pressed together they clicked in place, setting off the opening mechanism on the secret door that was, indeed, hidden in the wall.

'Impressive; I highly doubt goblins could have developed such wizardry. These caves must have once held other occupants. May I suggest -' Piex began to explain to no one in particular.

'Oh, look at that!' Kialessa cut him off. A section of the wall had slid across to reveal a small cavern, and inside, an open chest. It was ornate and well made, and contained a shining sword on top of a small pile of treasure.

'Wait!' Piex called.

They waited in silence.

'What is it, Piex?' Allastassia said in an impatient voice.

'Did you ... I'm sorry, did you hear someone?'

'I heard you tell us to wait,' Allastassia complained.

'What is it, Piex?' Kialessa asked, resting her hand on his arm in an attempt to encourage him to speak.

The Tae'anaryn and the Wizard's Apprentice.

'I heard someone say something. Like "impressive".'

'Oh please, that's probably just the sagemaster checking on our progress. You must just be picking up on his scrying sensor.' Allastassia huffed, and went with the others to examine the cavern carefully before touching any treasure.

Piex laughed a false and hollow laugh. 'Yeah, probably.'

Then he turned to Kialessa and whispered so that only she would hear, 'but my wizarding master doesn't *have* a scrying sensor, not to my knowledge.'

He looked at her, concern written all over his face.

'Don't worry about it,' she said, since there didn't seem to be anything they could do about it anyway. 'The tutors are always checking up on us. If your master created this dungeon, he'll be able to see into it, right?'

'Hmm, you're probably right.'

They went into the little room, Piex standing by the door so that he could leap in or out in an emergency.

'I cannot sense any danger,' Darrix said, 'Kialessa?'

'Looks clean to me -' she began.

Suddenly another illusionary creature leapt at them, not from the chest, but from the shadows at the edge of the room. It was bloated and muscular; a toad the size of a large dog. It sprang towards them. Darrix dodged it at the last second.

'Gross!' Allastassia screamed.

Darrix struck at the toad, but his sword had barely pierced the creature's thick skin before it jumped up into a corner of the room near the roof where it clung to a small ledge. An instant later, its tongue shot out and lifted him up off the floor by his throat - it was surprisingly strong for its size. Posk leapt up at the toad, but he could not jump high enough, and sparks flew as his gauntlets scraped along the wall.

'Help me!' Darrix choked. His sword and shield clattered to the floor and he grabbed the toad's powerful jaws and rammed them shut, battling to keep them closed while it struggled to swallow him.

Kialessa shot an arrow at the toad but it dodged, still clinging to the roof. It dragged the struggling young warrior to the corner where it could better avoid their attacks.

The Tae'anaryn and the Wizard's Apprentice.

Allastassia spoke some kind of magic, but it did not seem to affect the toad. 'This creature does not hear me!' she wailed.

Posk grabbed Darrix's sword but could not get a clear attack as the toad swung the young man around. The toad was using Darrix like a shield while trying to position him just right for swallowing him whole.

Kialessa squealed in frustration, not sure what to do, when suddenly a magical ray of freezing ice raced past her and shot the toad right on its head.

It let out a croak of surprise and fright, but didn't drop the warrior. Instead, it hid further in the corner. Piex shot it again, and it finally dropped Darrix to the ground. He landed in a crooked sprawl on top of Posk.

The bloated toad took one leap over their heads and began to retreat rapidly from the room, down the way they'd come.

'Quick, Kia, shoot it!' Piex said, working on another spell.

But she did not. Instead, she helped Darrix to his feet and let the toad flee.

'Leave it be,' Darrix said as he stood, breathing in new air from being almost crushed by toad jaws. The illusions didn't really hurt, but they could still be uncomfortably realistic.

'What?' Piex said. 'No, it's getting away!'

'Leave it,' Darrix repeated.

'What? Why?' Piex demanded.

'Because it's defeated, why destroy it? Further violence has no use,' Darrix said.

Piex was not satisfied. 'But what if it returns with friends? Or what if it breeds? All giant toads are evil.'

'Evil?' Kialessa said in disbelief. 'Just because they're giant toads doesn't automatically make them *evil*, does it?'

'Maybe not for you, you're a tae'anaryn,' Piex protested, 'but toads can't think. They just consume. If not Darrix today, it'd be some other wretched soul. Don't you think it would be better to destroy them all when we have the chance?'

'Actually, I think *that* would be evil,' the enchantress disagreed with him as well. 'Just hunting it down because of what it is? That sounds evil to me.'

Piex was alone in his opinion.

The Tae'anaryn and the Wizard's Apprentice.

'But ... what about using its body for spell components?' He argued forlornly.

'Oh! Now that *is* evil.' Kia laughed with a kind smile.

The others weren't interested in the argument anymore. They were already gathering up the treasure, Posk running it through his fingers while Allastassia tried to stop him so she could organise it better.

'But then what *is* evil?' Piex pondered out loud.

No one seemed to pay him any attention, until suddenly he gasped out loud, and clutching his temples fell to one knee.

'Piex, are you all right?' Kialessa rushed to his side.

'Yeah, yeah. I'm fine,' he lied. Then he whispered again, a genuine tremor in his voice, 'you didn't hear someone?'

Kialessa shrugged.

'Whatever. I just must be imagining things.' He smiled, and looked at her, his face a thin mask that hid an expression of pity and fear.

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In a tower far away, a powerful archmage was watching.

'Such talent!' The archmage said. 'Far in excess of what that so-called college can ever teach him. Something *must* be done ...'