



The quest of the Tae'anaryn

A wise king once told me that there was no one of insignificance; only those that choose to be insignificant ... but that always left me wondering what it took to make one's life one of substance? Does destiny choose the able, the blessed or the rich? Or was everything you became merely a reflection of the choices you made, and of the questions you had to ask?

- Anon, cited in 'Recollections of the Tae'anaryl'

Kialessa turned the burning coal in her hands, letting it die from the lack of heat between her fingers. The crowded tavern was silent now, two dozen rough and bawdy patrons brought to silence by the sight of a little girl holding a fire. Kialessa hated these moments, but she held her head up high. She did not let others see her cry.

'Mighty precious daughter you got there,' the man said, his voiced laced with sarcasm. It was he who had insisted on meeting her, the little girl that did not burn, as soon as he'd stopped here at her mother's inn for the night.

'Oh come on, apprentice wizards learn a trick just as impressive,' the woman he was with disagreed.

'Perhaps, but they still have skin that burns,' he argued with a dismissive wave of his hand.

Kialessa had not seen him here before, and he seemed to command a lot of respect. His skin was light, but he had slick black hair and a slender, daring moustache. He was tall and thin. He did not look strong enough to be one of the hunters or trappers that often stopped here. Kialessa often thought that they looked like pirates or thieves. They probably all were, living out in the forest between the docks and the king's castle. She hated the tavern in the evenings; it was always smoky and crowded and, no matter how hard she tried, she could never ignore the faint smell of ale mixed with vomit.

He reached out then, as if to touch the tiny horns that adorned the top of her forehead from just underneath her mess of straight dark hair. She hissed at him, her burgundy forked tongue lashing out from between her pointed teeth. It brought a rapture of laughter from the guests. It always did.

He pulled his hand back as fast as a man could.

'Oh please don't, Jerik!' the woman he was with joked, making light of Kialessa's obvious discomfort, 'Can't you see she's just a little girl?'

'Yeah, but little girls grow up,' he said with a mischievous grin.

'Don't be disgusting!' the woman laughed, giving him a playful slap on the arm.

He sat back in his chair, rudely whacking both his feet up on the table with a thud. 'So, what's she good for?' he asked while all the other patrons listened in silence. 'She got any more tricks?'

But Kialessa did not want to show off any of her other 'tricks'.

'Now good gentles,' her human mother said in her uneducated tone as she held her by the shoulders. 'This me daughter, Kia. She be the jewel of me eye. Never was there a better daughter in all lands, and she's me saviour in the kitchen too. Make 'er hold the roast to sears it I do, nothing like hand cooked meats, eh!'

And the patrons laughed.

But Kialessa cringed. She still hoped to the heavens that her mother would not make her take off her dress and show them **that** trick again. She looked up at her mother in alarm, shaking her head. Kialessa had realised at an early age that her mother was a harsh and unkind woman; one who would usually keep her up past midnight to help out in the kitchen. She worked there with Kiel, a young boy her mother had purchased off a traveller five summers ago and whose job it was to do the dishes. Kialessa spied Kiel then, watching from the kitchen, worry written all over his face.

I'll be all right, I can look after myself, she mouthed to him. He did not look happy. *The meat!* she ordered. They looked out for each other, for few kind words were spoken in this inn. He was the closest thing she had to a brother, her parents having no other children. He slunk back, not a moment too soon. If her mother had seen him away from his chore, for even a moment, he was sure to meet the bad side of her good hand.

Her mother didn't look down at her while Kialessa held her breath.

'But I am sorry, gentle, that's about all there is to her.' Her mother lied in an uncharacteristic show of kindness.

'Mother looking out for her little girl?' the man teased, not caring who heard. He looked around at the tavern as

though looking for an old friend. ‘So, she’s the Tae’anaryn then? Hope you don’t mind me asking, who was the father?’

The mood in the inn became tense. People often asked that question, but never out loud. There were many races in the kingdom, but no one was more feared, or distrusted, than the Tae’anaryl. Everyone just assumed one of her parents was a soulless demon, which meant she was left with only half a soul. It was what the word “Tae’anaryn” meant. Most people never let her close enough to even touch them.

‘I am, gentle-sir!’ A cheerful voice cut into Kialessa’s bitter thoughts and filled the silence. It was her father, another full blooded human, filling the mugs with amber ale at the counter. He had a large red nose that often seemed to itch and stomach too big for his belt, yet she couldn’t help but smile at him. He was always looking out for her ... at least, when he was sober.

‘Yeah, right,’ the man disagreed to the air.

“Tis true!’ her father almost roared, talking him down with the sociable manner of an experienced barkeeper, keeping the whole tavern silent enough to listen. ‘We’re both human, I assure you. Seems she takes after her mother’s ancestors, fought demons in the second demon war. And the gods know none can return unscarred from those kinds of horrors.’ Many patrons nodded. ‘But this gem, my Kialessa, she’s about all a father could ask for.’ And he smiled at her.

She smiled back. He was the kindest thing she knew in her world though he was too busy with the inn, or too frightened of her mother, to have much time for her nowadays.

Her mother then carried on the conversation, chatting

about the weather and local events, and after a further minute of being ignored she sent Kialessa back to her chores in the kitchen. Kialessa had just begun to relax, to think she'd escaped being treated like a circus curiosity once more, but she wasn't half way across the room when the man yelled out again.

'Hey, what's **that**?' the man shouted, pointing at her.

She looked around in alarm in case there was something wrong, and forever wished she hadn't.

'There, look there!' he said as he pointed at the floor in front of her feet. 'She ... she has a tail!'

He dashed up to her and she couldn't have dodged him if she'd tried. In a moment the cruel man swept her up from her feet and turned her upside down in full view of the tavern. She squealed, and her dress gathered around her shoulders. Then her tail – a dusk red tail the same colour as her skin, a tail that swept all the way down to her feet – was put on broad display to the gawking, hideous crowd. They erupted in laughter and pointed.

Kialessa tried to struggle in the man's hands, but he was strong. She tried to bite him, but he dodged her sharp pointed teeth, and only laughed harder. She squealed at him to put her down, but it only made the patrons laugh even more.

In her frustration and pain her eyes began to glow red, and he stopped laughing. But the inn kept laughing and teasing. They could not see how her eyes glowed red when she was angry.

Suddenly there was a loud crack of someone striking a whip. The tavern fell silent.

It was her father.

He held the whip, and it didn't come out often. Her father was a small, sociable man in general, but whenever

patrons got too violent or full of ale, her father would get out the whip.

She'd felt that whip too, once or twice.

'Put her down,' he ordered in a quiet, yet dangerous way. 'She's ... missing her chores in the kitchen.'

The tavern was silent.

'Easy, gentle,' the other man whispered, a soft threat in his voice as well. 'Just having a little ... fun.'

She was lowered to the ground where the man could see right into her still glowing eyes. He straightened her hair and spread out her dress, acting calm and unfazed by what he'd just seen of her.

'There you go, little one. Just a bit of fun. You didn't mind,' he seemed to almost order.

Her father answered for her, his voice quiet, almost like an apology. 'I hope you'll forgive me if I ... disagree.'

The cruel man smiled in a forgiving, friendly manner. 'Gods know everyone has a right to disagree!' He then turned back to the silent tavern, 'Back to the drinking everybody! Who knows a good song?!' And in a moment everything in the tavern was back the way it should be, crowded and noisy once more.

Kialessa bashed through the kitchen doors with such force they almost fell off their hinges. She saw Kiel, turning the meat with great care using the iron tongs. He looked grateful to see her. 'You all right?' he muttered, looking over at her. He always worried about her.

'Yes,' she lied, shoving him aside in her anger and shame, and then turned to adjust the coals in the bottom of the oven with her bare hands.

It was humiliating, yet for all the humiliation the cruel man's words seemed to sting at her even more. What **was**

she good for? She had a tail, she had horns, and skin which didn't burn. She **looked** different. She looked like a demon, and that was how everyone treated her. They didn't seem to care how she felt, or what she thought. They always laughed or stared or ignored her.

Is this all I'll ever be? she wondered. A circus curiosity used to entertain guests at my mother's inn? Isn't life, anybody's life, meant to mean something more?

She turned the coals.

Is there more to life, and how will I ever find it?

She did not let other people see her cry, but silent tears of salt water cooled the coals in the bottom of the kitchen.