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## Kalessia's Dance

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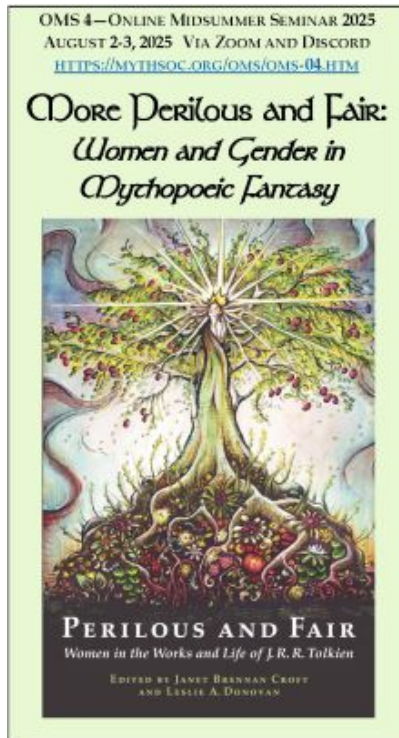
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## Kalessia's Dance

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# Kalæssia's Dance

By Geoffrey Reiter

Before Ladeera wove the tapestry that fended off the Surrukh; before Amhorn the Avenger's green eyes espied the twisted turrets of Xendral Tier; before *Saffion's Echo* berthed at Orwun City on its way into the night sky; in the ancient days when history and song were one, on a cliff in Zikarh, there stood an inn.

This inn perched on a rocky promontory overlooking the Lesser Southeastern Sea, and it bore a small hand-painted sign swinging on well-oiled hinges that read, "The Little World." The inn was not large, and the central hall comprised most of it. Here, the folk from the village and the occasional outsider traveling to or from Ylsind would drop coins in the palm of its owner as they asked for a room. The inn stood on the outskirts of town—a town so small that its name was long ago drowned out by the refrains of this night. For this was the night of Kalessia's Dance.

On this night, if you were to stand outside the inn, you could see the bright spinning light of a well-fueled mantel-place fire and a dozen lanterns, a light careening recklessly, if not drunkenly, out the windows. You would see the shadows of men and women as they gathered together in the inn's great hall, and you would hear their laughter, the ebullient chorus of guffaws that can only arise from the congregating of a village population, from a population that knows no strangers. You might well smell the bitter barley-fresh beer brought by the brewer and the sour-sweet grape-squeezed wine from the vintner's vine. You would sneeze most likely, as the men and women inside did, from the sawdust kicked up in the air by scores of lively boots on a firm and faded plank floor.

Inside The Little World, the innkeeper called for the attention of the celebrants. Though his manner was unassuming, his voice caught attention by the scruff of the neck and held it firmly over the ground. That voice rumbled, sometimes like the sharp, sudden lash of the thunder, more often like the muffled, prolonged crash of the waves on the shoals at the foot of the inn's eroded cliffside. Tonight, his voice was thunder and waves both, but with a note of gentle spring rains and restful currents tucked behind those sonorous syllables. However one might describe the undertow and the undertone of his words, when he spoke, the boisterous folk in the hall turned to listen.

"Fair journeys to you all," he smiled. "Welcome to my house on this joyous evening. This is a night of celebration, for my daughter has come of age. Tonight is Kalessia's dance."

Now this had been the custom in Zikarh since first the biremes of Karh's descendants happened upon its shores. When a man's daughter reached her seventeenth season, she could at any time ask her father to call the village together for her dance. At a young woman's dance, each of the suitors who sought her hand would be afforded the night to woo her and to win her and to take her for his wife. The tradition continues to this day in Zikarh, as the woman will choose her companion from among the men who dance with her. But in the early generations, it was the father's decision who the lady would wed, and though a woman might have her say, her parent held the final word.

Yet even in the custom's infancy, a daughter's dance was a joy to all. So it was perhaps unusual on this evening that Kalessia, only daughter of the innkeeper, looked skittish and worried. Her eyes, green like life and growing things, could not sparkle in the lantern-light, for they were scanning the room too quickly. They paused only twice, once to gaze on the weather-worn escarpment of Ardan's face, and then to cast a wayward glance upon the pallid rolling features of Kedaz.

"You do not celebrate, daughter," the innkeeper mused quietly. "Is not this dance in honor of you? Take pleasure in this evening!"

"I am celebrating, father," Kalessia murmured. She turned to look at him, but Kedaz was drawing near, and his presence cast a shadow that obscured her father's face.

"I eagerly await our dance," Kedaz announced, smiling.

"It is, of course, your right to dance with me on this evening," Kalessia acknowledged, her voice subdued.

“There is much I might offer you,” Kedaz added, turning a grey glance toward the innkeeper as he spoke.

The innkeeper chuckled. “Indeed, Kedaz. You are a wealthy landowner, and considered by many to be the handsomest man in all Zikarh. Kalessia, many women would earnestly desire Kedaz’s presence at their own dances. Many would want no other man but him.”

“I trust, father, that all my suitors are to be permitted tonight,” Kalessia replied coldly.

“All who seek your hand are welcome on the dance floor,” the innkeeper assured her. “If the men of Zikarh were wise, there would be a league-long line outside the inn door. As it is, though, the night is young, and I am younger, and dancing and feasting await us. It is good that we begin the ceremony.” He scanned the crowd, and while many celebrants were still conversing in twinkling, merry voices, all were keeping an eye on the father and his daughter. Knowing he had their attention, the innkeeper proclaimed, “Let the dancing begin! Who seeks to court Kalessia, my beloved child?”

The innkeeper had not even finished speaking when the young lad Ardan stepped forward. He was a shepherd who toiled among the flocks that grazed on Kedaz’s brown fields. The winds from the two seas that clenched the isthmus of Zikarh had burrowed into his face, which was brown like yew wood from the unshaded sun. His swarthy countenance, beneath the beard that swathed it like a thunder-threaded cloud, was as angled and chiseled as the landscape. There was nothing of this face that would draw one to him, save for the dawn-dewed smile that shone like breaking day through the billowing beard.

“I will dance with Kalessia,” stated Ardan, drawing near.

“Such is your right,” the innkeeper conceded. His expression was as layered and unreadable as the rocky cliff face.

Within the inn, the voices subsided and the music surged. In the corner of the room, Yxla the pixie played his lute and sang in his native tongue. He alone in the room was not of Zikarh, but the celebrants welcomed his presence and the sound of his music, for he was renowned across the two continents for his skill. And though he sang in Pixic, the folk of the village found his voice familiar in their hearts, as though they had heard it before, and the notes that rolled from his lutestrings swirled through their souls, kicking up all the sediment of their deepest dreams.

And so it was for Ardan and Kalessia. They turned neither head nor eye toward Yxla, nor did they ponder on the import of his song. Yet its melodies sifted through their starlit spirits, until they were conscious of only each other, and they were worlds into themselves, spinning through The Little World. Ardan saw the lady whom he loved, saw the tiny freckles on her radiant pearlescent skin dance to the tempo of her smile. She smelled of fresh breeze and honeysuckle, having bathed that morning and washed her dress until it was spotless. If there was fault or blemish in her countenance, Ardan did not see it, for he saw her as she truly was, and as she would be, and for all this he loved her.

And Kalessia loved Ardan and danced with him, and in that moment Yxla’s music carried her far beyond the leaden thoughts of Kedaz and his delicately handsome face. She saw behind Ardan’s jagged, rocky features, beheld his being like a vein of silver glinting in cloudless light. The calluses that seamed his hands dovetailed into her own palms as he spun her about the dance floor. All other sights—the singing faces of her friends, the benches where she had played hide-and-seek with her father, the mugs into which were poured the village’s best ale—blurred into a tapestry of abstract color, while her lover’s countenance cut sharp as a gem into her mind. As the world whirled vaguely about her, only Ardan was ardently real, Ardan and the music of Yxla, which scrambled through every chamber of her heart and opened every door, even those with the rustiest of hinges.

When the music ended and the dance concluded, Kalessia reeled backward, gasping. She felt suddenly lost and lonely, and all around her that might once have been joy now seemed distorted and foreign. The voices of her friends mouthing platitudes chirped in a cacophony so unlike the perfect commingling of rhythm and reason that wended from Yxla’s corner. She sought out her father’s face, but though she could tell he was watching her, his features were smothered in the tatterdemalion shadows of The Little World. So she searched instead for the face of her lover, and indeed she once again saw Ardan. He was smiling, a smile that was somehow passionate but not bestial, a smile of desire without degradation. She saw his fingers clenching the hem of his garment, and she knew he longed to run them across the arcing curvature of her

waist, but the time had not yet come for such a consummation. *Will such a time ever come?* She thought forlornly.

“Kedaz, it is now your turn to dance with Kalessia,” the innkeeper announced, his mouth still occulted by the inconstant flame of The Little World’s lanterns.

Kedaz took her hand, and his skin was smooth and cool, so unlike the broken flesh of her Ardan. His eyes, pale and sheened like an amphibian’s skin, looked kindly upon her, though she could barely see them, for his whole rounded face seemed slippery to her sight. She could not tell if his lips were smiling or sneering or scowling, only that they were anything but indifferent.

“Choose me, Kalessia,” he whispered in sibilant tones, “and you will lack for nothing. Choose me and choose wisely, a man who will attend to your wishes and who will never hide his face from you.”

It was an odd thing, but Kalessia seemed to lose sight of Ardan’s face amidst the knolls of Kedaz. His features were a most puzzling maze, seemingly with no center; lips, eyes, nostrils, all were indirect and indistinct. He was handsome in a way that Ardan was not, but it was an abstract handsomeness, and even looking directly at him, Kalessia could not find the words to describe him.

Then Yxla began again to play his lute. It was a song that varied wildly in pitch and cadence, and Kalessia thought that its sharp, angled intonations were ill-suited to the vague, contoured suitor who stood before her. Indeed, his movements seemed at odds with the music, not graceful perhaps, but fluid and sinuous. Kalessia found herself taking pleasure in dancing with Kedaz; but she was only able to do so by ignoring the jagged tempo of Yxla’s song.

But soon, the song became impossible to ignore, for Kalessia and for Kedaz. His movements grew increasingly abrupt and strenuous, as though he were tearing away at a barrier. Sweat began to bead upon his already glossy face, but it was not clear like watery sweat. Rather, the beads were dark and murky, as though gathering dirt from the pores of his face and carrying them down his shaven cheekbones. His hair, pale as dust, soaked up the grimy perspiration, so that as he moved, his spinning locks splashed sweat into Kalessia’s eyes. She shut her eyes as tightly as she could, longing to rub them clean, but the dance did not cease, and suddenly she was blindly trapped by the frenzied, perpendicular movements of Kedaz as he fell into step with Yxla’s angular music.

But as she gingerly opened her eyes, she could see that Kedaz was not merely dancing to the rhythm—the rhythm was *revealing* him, even as it had done with her and her Ardan minutes ago. The translucent mask of decency he had worn was raggedly stripped away by the fretting of the lute, until all that remained was pure Kedaz, raw and beast-like. His eyes were wide as wounds, and red from strain and firelight. His teeth were clenched, as those of a dog holding fast to its bone. The grace of his dancing had sloughed away, and his every motion was brutal and ferocious.

And then he fell. At the same moment that Yxla ceased his guttural, animal music, Kedaz collapsed to the floor of The Little World. Kalessia expected to see him panting from exertion, but instead he lay still as the statue on a tomb. His once pale face was now blotchy from burst blood vessels, and a coat of soily sweat filmed his features, like smoke clinging to a lake of red flame. The bolder folk in the hall crowded around his body, looking for indications of life, while others hung back and murmured amongst themselves. Kedaz was obscured from Kalessia’s view, and she turned back to look at Ardan, desperately drinking in every earthy angle of his beautiful, ordinary face.

When the physician announced that Kedaz had died, the body was carried out of the inn with all the solemnity proper for a man of Zikarh. Yet Kedaz was little loved by the people of the land, save for the mercenaries under his employ, none of whom would think to attend a betrothal. He had no family to grieve him, and Zikarhians are a hardy people well acquainted with death. And so, after some whispering and a pause of silence, Yxla began a new melody that washed through the inn like dewy sunlight. All who were invited began to dance, celebrating the coupling of Kalessia and Ardan. They clapped and swayed and drank toasts to the future, thanking the innkeeper for his generosity.

But amidst the revelry, Kalessia approached her father, who stood by the bar in good spirits.

“Father,” she said, her tremulous voice audible only to him, “you knew what sort of a man Kedaz was. So why did you have me dance with him?”

The innkeeper held her shoulders gently and looked into her wide, questing eyes. "In no other way could you have truly chosen Ardan."

"But what of the dangers?" she entreated. "What if Kedaz had deceived me, and I had chosen him instead? If it were not for Yxla's music, I might never have known his inmost heart."

The innkeeper smiled as he looked at Kalessia, and if you could have looked into his eyes as she did, you would have seen his swirling irises glinting like galaxies, an eternity of childlike glee sparkling around the bright night of his pupils. "My dearest daughter," he replied tenderly, "was it not I who hired the musician?"



*Heart*, by Meg Moseman