

A Fractured Song Bonus Chapter

By Deborah Grace White

Timeline: after the end of the book

Kiarana

Kiarana padded through the undergrowth, her movements silent mainly from force of habit. She had no real need for stealth. It wasn't as though there was anywhere in the elves' domain that she wasn't allowed to be. Or any part of the jungle where she was afraid to be seen.

But she wouldn't be averse to going unnoticed, either. She'd seen Rissin heading down the path moments before, and it would be interesting to see where he went during a lonely wander. Might he be meeting once again with that human, Jade?

It would be bold, but not strictly forbidden. The Emperor had deplored Jade's attack on the other humans within the elves' land, but hadn't actually said she was no longer allowed entry.

Kiarana's thoughts meandered on to Zevadiah and Marieke. She felt an idle curiosity as to whether they'd made it to their destination in time to prevent the catastrophe they seemed to fear. Either way, she hoped they wouldn't do anything rash. She hadn't been making things up when she spoke to Zevadiah of the future. She truly had received a sense from him...some sense of future cooperation in a tomorrow where she had taken over responsibility for the elves, and he...well, what precisely his future with the humans might hold was well beyond her sight.

On a personal level, she was inclined to think that his obvious infatuation with the Oleandan singer was a mistake. It would inevitably be a distraction. Worse, he seemed like the type to take the human obsession with altruism and nobility to extremes such as sacrificing his life for hers if it came to that. It would be a waste, because from what Kiarana could tell, he was important and irreplaceable. The girl, on the other hand, was only one of many singers. It was probable that the remarkable effect of her songcraft combined with his lineage could be replicated by some other singer.

But if the lore she'd been fastidiously taught about humans was true, Zevadiah wouldn't think that way. He'd probably be satisfied with no one else but the Oleandan. So unnecessary, to complicate his life by looking outside his own country for romantic love, another of humans' obsessions. The traveling pair were painfully affected, judging by the girl's reaction to Kiarana's attempts to get under her skin by admiring Zevadiah's strength.

It had been entertaining, Kiarana acknowledged to herself. The chance to test what she'd been told about the emotional volatility of humans was so rare it had been irresistible. They'd responded just as she'd imagined. She'd felt like a child playing with her pet armadillo again.

But amusing as the pastime had been, Kiarana couldn't even imagine letting her decisions and the course of her life be genuinely affected by such superfluties. She would take a mate eventually, someone who would sire children for her, one of whom would bear the eldest grandchild who would one day take the role of Emperor once Kiarana's life was absorbed back into the magic of the land.

But that was a long way ahead. Life was as long as the canopy was high, and Kiarana had many years to think of such matters. Her grandmother had been twice Kiarana's age when she'd married Kiarana's grandfather.

She slowed as she caught the sound of movement from ahead. Any childish hope she'd had of eavesdropping was destined for disappointment. She heard no voices—it seemed Rissin was alone.

Abandoning any thought of remaining undetected, Kiarana rounded the trunk of a large tree, casting her gaze dispassionately over Rissin's work.

"Kiarana." The older elf straightened, his pickaxe stilling as he raised an eyebrow. "What brings you out here?"

"Just walking," she said evenly. "And you?"

"As you see." Rissin gestured to the telltale signs that he'd just begun mining for magic.

"It's unusual to mine at this time of day, and all alone," Kiarana commented. "I infer that your personal store of talismans is due for replenishing."

"You are, as you know, at liberty to infer whatever you choose."

Rissin's tone didn't quite hide his annoyance. He was one of those who clearly resented the necessity of showing Kiarana respect for the sake of her position when she was substantially younger than them. She'd never felt the slightest bit troubled by the opinions of such elves.

"Perhaps you've been selling them to Jade to pass on to her songless conspirators," Kiarana said. Watching Rissin restrain his irritation was a similar type of entertainment to baiting the human girl with comments about her companion's attractiveness.

Rissin gave no response but for the slightest wobble of his ear tips.

"It doesn't do you credit to associate yourself with a creature who murders her own kind, you know," Kiarana said conversationally.

Rissin raised an eyebrow. "Is the survival or otherwise of random humans a matter of concern for elves now?"

Kiarana shrugged. "Who's to say? We can't predict what actions will have consequences that concern us. Not with any certainty."

Rissin made a noise of impatience. "With respect, Kiarana, we have kept ourselves separate from the world of humans for lifecycles."

Kiarana settled herself on a mossy log. "The past is not an indicator of the future. Just because our paths have been separate doesn't mean they won't converge."

"What exactly is it that you're asking or instructing?" Rissin asked, irked.

"Nothing whatsoever," said Kiarana. "I'm merely curious as to what level of future involvement you anticipate having in the plans of this Jade."

"We're elves," Rissin reminded her. "It's not our way to indulge idle curiosity."

Kiarana's lips stretched into a smile—one Rissin recognized as a warning, if she read his wary gaze correctly.

"You would be mistaken, Rissin, to imagine me idle, in curiosity or anything else. Do not think yourself the only elf able and willing to involve himself in the affairs of humans for perceived benefit. I sense that our role with these humans and their world is not finished. Which means that your conduct in relation to human affairs may come to have elven consequences."

She didn't stay to see how Rissin responded to the warning. Frankly, she didn't care. Evoking a certain response was not her aim. She had simply spoken the truth as best she saw it.

Because whatever had been the approach of the elves in generations past, Kiarana had a feeling that idleness would not be her contribution to the storm undoubtedly brewing in the human lands. The future she saw for the elves was very different from their current reality. And she was not at all averse to being the architect of that future.