

C H A P T E R 2



WOMAN OF THE MISTS

“Find him and bring him here,” the Elders had instructed. And so Kiyana Irhan had left the Mists several weeks ago, in search of a man she was now trying to find.

The western area of Keepers’ Garden had emerged from the rainy season damp and muddy but the sun was now shining against the cobalt sky and Kiyana was able to enjoy the first real warmth of the year. She was fortunate the true heat of summer had yet to arrive, though as far as she knew this was summer in Keepers’ Garden.

Long, smoky hair fell haphazardly around her head in thick piles, framing her face and continuing down so the ends skimmed her small waist. In comparison to humans, Mist Elves were generally taller and thinner, giving them a more angular look to which Kiyana was no exception. Her height was considered astounding by human standards, taller than the vast majority of human women and also most men. High cheekbones sloped down the sides of her face, ending at her small nose while the tips of pointed ears barely poked out from her thick mess of hair. Her skin was a creamy and pale gray, smoothly covering the angles of her face. Her features, although sharp, were so pleasantly arranged that they formed a gentler and more eye-pleasing whole, yet she would not have been considered beautiful by human standards. She looked too uniquely Elven for that, but no matter the definition used for beauty she was certainly striking.

Her only item of clothing besides her shoes, belt, and pack was a white cloth tightly wrapped around her body to form a figure-flattering dress that revealed much more skin than the standard fashions of Keepers' Garden. Mist Elves did not change styles nor were they enthralled by the new, the different, or the exotic as easily or as often as their human counterparts. As an ancient society, time had taught them numerous lessons faulting trends and fads. *If your clothes cover you and are in adequate condition, why acquire new garments? It would only be a needless bother.*

Kiyana cautiously watched the farmhouse just over the short rise ahead. The Elders had told her about the Garden's recent troubles and had warned her to be on her guard while within. As they had advised, *"Humans are at their most devious during times of war."*

Her stomach fluttered with nerves, but she chose to gather her bravery along the way and began to walk towards the farmhouse. Each long step reminded her of the water skin hanging limply from her belt, slapping at her hips with a hollow sound. *It could not hurt to ask, she reasoned. It is only water. The Keepers have granted the Garden a river full of the stuff.*

She reached the farmhouse porch—a construction of stone with two beams holding up a small awning. The downpours of the rainy season had undermined the once-fine masonry and rendered it into a state of disrepair. *Poor people, flooded once per year. Yet one would think their buildings would be built for such a surety.* Kiyana carefully stepped her way to the door and took a final breath before knocking. She held little in the way of expectations, other than her knowledge from books and hearsay.

The bolt was unlatched from within and the door creaked ajar. A mustached man of middling age peered through the gap. "What do you want?" he snapped. His eyes widened as he realized the girl standing on his porch was Mist Elven and he frantically searched his brain for a polite yet firm reason to shut the door.

"Kind sir," Kiyana began, "I have been traveling for many days and my supply of water has run dry. Could I trouble you for use of your water source so I may fill my canteen?" Kiyana unhitched the bladder from her belt and held it high so the man could see the empty container for himself. She smiled brightly, showing her white teeth, exactly as the Elders had told her to do when she asked someone to trouble themselves.

"I ... I don't know ... I uh ... well ... what is someone like you doing out here?" he finally asked, scratching his hairy arm.

"I will not be any trouble," Kiyana explained, "and I could pay you as well, if you deem it necessary." The man appeared confused so Kiyana pulled a silver

mark from her purse to prove her intentions were true. The Elders had advised her about the power metal coins had over a human's opinion and, exactly as they had instructed, the man instantly seemed amiable to her request.

"Sure ... sure ..." he said, pushing out a shaky hand. Once Kiyana had placed the mark on his palm he recoiled. "You'll find a long wooden trough next to the stable. You can fill up there." He smiled weakly as he flipped the coin between his fingers. A silver mark was a silver mark, no matter where it came from or how one came about it.

"Thank you, kind sir!" Kiyana happily replied into the closing door. She glided through the pen to the trough, wearing a grin from ear to ear. The surface of the water bubbled as she submerged her container. Nearby, the animals watched her with the oddest of expressions as they waited for their turn. A pig snorted impatiently.

Humans are much nicer than I had been informed! Allowing me access to their personal hoard of water with only proper courtesy! Kiyana capped her skin and reattached it to her belt. Taking a deep and satisfied breath she started off again, in search of a town or village to bed in for the night. The days of camping had piled up to the point that another night on the muddy ground was an unbearable thought.

After another hour of traveling Kiyana stumbled upon Durnholm, a farming village in the southern portion of Rockfist's reach. Rockfist and its territory was a simpler part of Keeper's Garden, consisting of a series of small subsistent communities of agriculturalists and traders, save Rockfist itself, which was no more than a glorified marketplace. Durnholm was a snug fit for the local mold.

The town's denizens eyed Kiyana cautiously as she approached. As her stroll continued along the village's main road, the stares grew more wary. Her clothing, her pale smoky skin, even her grace drew attention. She merely smiled at the individuals as she passed, which was usually enough to mend most simple problems. The Elders had forgotten to address the topic of leering humans during her lessons.

The sun was sinking rapidly and Kiyana was growing quite tired. Her feet ached from the days of constant walking. She looked forward to sleeping on a mattress for the first time in as many nights but even after searching Durnholm's main street up, down, and then up again, she had yet to find an inn or room for rent.

Surely this town must offer respite for travelers, she thought.

Kiyana stepped towards an old woman with a kerchief tied around her hair. "Excuse me?" she asked, but the woman took a sideways step and passed her by.

“Pardon?” Kiyana asked a young boy of seven, who looked up with a quivering lip before he ran down the street. Deciding to take a more forward approach, she planted herself directly in the path of a short older man who had been walking the opposite way. He halted, but only because she was blocking his path. “Excuse me, kind sir?” she asked with a pleasant smile. “Do you know where I may find a room to rent?”

The old man’s eyes fell to his feet as if his scuffed leather shoes were on fire. “I—I ... umm ...” he stammered, rubbing the back of his balding head and plucking several hairs out in the process.

How can they possibly know where they are going when they walk with their eyes to the ground? They pay so little attention to their environment.

“Down the end,” he eventually replied. “If you follow that road, you will find a boarding house down the end.” The man pointed a shaky finger towards the nearest side street. Kiyana found it surprising that a business would be where he was gesturing, considering the town did not appear to be much more than its main thoroughfare.

“Thank you, kind sir.” Kiyana renewed her broad and glowing smile and walked down the side street. The building was easy to find even with the man’s vague directions, marked by a rickety old sign hanging on rusty hinges that squealed as the marker blew in the breeze. “Miss Elle’s Boarding House” it read, in blue letters that had begun fading many seasons ago. The building was old but its frame was still in fine shape. A sturdy stone foundation supported two wooden stories laced with blue trim, matching the color and age of the sign.

She knocked. There was no response. *Am I permitted to walk into a place of business without an invitation?* She pressed her ear against the door and heard music and conversation from inside. *Humans are so needlessly complicated. An action is discourteous in one situation and then is considered normal in another.* Knowing she could not remain outside forever, Kiyana set her resolve and opened the door. A bell clanged as the door swung inside, giving Kiyana a start.

The common room was surprisingly lively. An elderly gentleman overplayed the keys of a harpsichord in the corner of the room and most of the customers were engaged in raucous conversation, arranged amongst rows of round tables and mismatched wooden chairs. Kiyana stepped into the main of the room and instantly drew curious glances from several patrons. She was unaccustomed to the attention but she took it in stride with a smile and a short nod of greeting as she walked to the innkeeper’s station.

“Excuse me, mistress. I would like to inquire about a room.”

The innkeeper spun, confused by the courtesy as if it were far from the norm. She quickly regained her bearings and donned a devious grin. "Well, what have we here? Lookin' for a room, eh?" Though the innkeeper was nearly two heads shorter than Kiyana, the brash woman's manner made her seem just as tall, if not taller. A large wart jutted out from her round chin and her thin black hair was in dire need of a cut.

Kiyana took a careful step backwards to increase her distance and nervously pushed her smoky-silver hair behind her ears. "Yes, mistress. A room. I can pay you in coin." Kiyana pulled a silver mark from her purse.

The innkeeper's eyes traced Kiyana's arm towards the source of the money and her eyes widened as she noticed the additional weight still inside. "I can see that," she said. "A room is four marks." Kiyana reached into her purse to remove four silver marks but the innkeeper continued with her billing. "You will be wanting food, yes? Dinner is another mark. Breakfast, another." Shrugging, Kiyana added two more coins to her grip.

The common room grew quiet as the customers turned their heads towards the transaction. Only the harpsichordist continued contributing to the ambience, playing violently in the background.

The innkeeper gave a false smile as Kiyana exchanged the coins for a room key. "You'll be upstairs, second on the left. And come down for dinner anytime—in fact, you look hungry. I'll start something for you."

"I thank you most heartily, mistress, but you will have to excuse me for the moment. My pack is quite heavy and I would like to stow my belongings."

The innkeeper motioned her away so Kiyana leapt up the rickety stairs towards her room.

Many patrons wore accusatory glares, directed at the innkeeper in varying degrees of disapproval. "What?" the innkeeper shot defiantly to the crowd. "Money doesn't mean the same to them. They toss it around like barley."

With low grunts and incomprehensible words the customers resumed their conversations and their drinks.

The innkeeper patted her purse after adding the six silver marks, elated at earning three days' profits in a single transaction. "Might as well cook her something decent," she muttered as she passed through the swinging doors to the kitchen.

Upstairs, Kiyana opened the door to her room and was not at all surprised by her sparse furnishings—a thin mattress nestled in the room's far corner and two end tables for storing her things. She was only concerned with the mattress how-

ever and threw herself on the under-stuffed bag of goose down. Though it was of low quality, the relaxation it provided was most welcome.

She wrinkled her toes inside her shoes to stretch the muscles in her feet. They felt afire and she winced with a whispered scream as pain shot through her tendons like lightning. Most of the Mists were flat lands, nearly perfectly so, and they made for much easier travel than the hills and valleys of the Garden. Beyond the muscle pains she was also bitterly hungry. It had been too long since her morning bread and a hearty meal was most definitely in order. Ignoring her pain in favor of fulfilling a greater need, Kiyana crept back downstairs and was excited to discover that the innkeeper was almost finished preparing her a hot meal.

"Be done in a moment, sweetie!" the innkeeper called. Her harsh voice carried the sweet words over the kitchen's double doors. Kiyana smiled to no one but herself and selected an empty seat in the back of the room, wanting to save the innkeeper the trouble of hiking through the entire establishment to deliver the meal. More than that however, she wanted to smell the scents of the kitchen as they floated into the common room.

The short woman burst through the swinging doors carrying a steaming plate piled high with vibrantly colored foods. At least, they looked like they were foods. Kiyana had little knowledge of human cuisine so she could only assume.

"Here ya go, honey," the innkeeper said as she slapped down the plate—roasted quail with cooked greens and baby red potatoes on the side. She waited for a response, a thank you perhaps, but Kiyana stared at the food in puzzled silence.

"What is it, honey? You don't eat quail?"

"What are these, mistress?" Kiyana pointed at the leafy vegetables as though they were a threat. The quail was familiar, as were the potatoes (though she was used to a more yellow hue,) but the wet pile of green leaves on the far side of the plate was a completely different matter and Kiyana looked at it with disdain.

"Greens," the innkeeper replied matter-of-factly.

"Greens?"

"Yes, that's what I said. Greens."

"What is a green?" Kiyana asked.

"What's a green?" The innkeeper held back a chuckle. "You've never had greens before?" Kiyana shook her head. "Well," the innkeeper began, stroking her chin between her thumb and forefinger. "Greens is greens. That's what I've always said."

Kiyana furrowed her brow.

“There’s no other way to explain, honey. All I can tell you is to make sure to try ’em. We make the best greens in Rockfist.” The innkeeper returned to the kitchen and muttered something inaudible once inside.

A green. Most curious. Kiyana wielded her fork like a weapon and used it to shovel a pile of the leafy vegetables into her mouth. After a few struggled chews her face turned deeply sour. *It tastes like eating the leaves off a tree! And a diseased one, at that!* Kiyana quietly spat the food onto the edge of her plate. *So much for human food. The Elders warned me about the nasty cuisines eaten outside the Mists.* Finished with new adventures, she turned her attention to the quail. She was used to quail.

Her plate was clean in a short few minutes, except for the greens, which remained as they had been delivered save the dent made by her attempt at exploration. Kiyana pushed away from the table and turned her head to survey the room. Her mastery of the human tongue had done well for her, she thought. She had negotiated for water, a room, and a meal, and now she was blending in with a crowd as if she truly belonged. The inn’s patrons were not paying her the extra attention one would pay to an oddity and for that she smiled, inside and out.

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A few days later Kiyana was paying for her room at an inn in Hesthir, a small settlement that was nothing but another village on her way to Yas Amin. She and the innkeeper had enjoyed a bottle of aged brandy the evening prior and spoke well into the hours of candlelight.

“It was all mean-spirited?” Kiyana asked with a dangling tinge of hope in her voice. “You are sure that none of it was accidental?” She pulled her change from the top of the bar. Of course she did not want to believe what the innkeeper had told her, but the Elders had taught that the most important lessons in life were learned against your will and she knew in her heart that a wise individual took new knowledge in stride. Still, her sleep had been troubled. With her new perspective Keepers’ Garden appeared as nothing but a nest of rats.

The elderly innkeeper massaged his short gray beard. “Aye. But don’t go getting yourself worked up again. Folk are not all that way. It was a rotten town, if you ask me.”

Kiyana frowned.

“You make sure to watch yourself, though, ’cause not everyone will have the best of intentions. You’re smart enough to take care of yourself just fine, I think.”

Kiyana nodded. "Thank you. I appreciate your advice, but you will have to forgive my frown. I am not feeling especially ... optimistic this morning." Kiyana attempted a chuckle but with the lack of force it came out as a gurgle.

The innkeeper frowned. "Be careful now. Don't let them treat you any different, and don't let them think you're weak. Otherwise, you'll be drinking with the animals again. Or paying more than a fair value."

"I know. Thank you." Kiyana returned a disappointed grin and exited the inn.

She began the trek out of Hesthir, aghast at her own naiveté. *As if those humans in Durnholm had truly been pleasant people! To think, that one fool woman charged me enough to rent the whole inn for the night! I should return and demand justice!* Kiyana kicked a loose pebble across the cobblestone street. *Fool lot of good that would do. It would only earn human laughter at the expense of my dignity.*

Kiyana's usual smile was now a fierce scowl and it grew more severe with every leaden step she took. Anger and frustration had shifted the color of her eyes from cool, ocean blue to a sharp-as-steel gray. *That stupid town and those stupid people ... so rude and uncivilized! How could they treat me like an animal? Like I was below them, just for being how the Keepers made me!* Kiyana grumbled. Hate and discrimination were foreign to her, much like the lands and peoples capable of such atrocities.

She turned to the sky in frustration. "Not just that town, Keepers—the whole bloody race! They take your gifts for granted!"

Normally Kiyana was a very pious woman who gave utmost respect in communication with the Keepers, but her recent revelations had shaved away her mind's ability to censor her mouth. Her task was proving more difficult than she had originally envisioned, but she refused to let a rough road send her back. Instead she decided to adapt, to deal with the humans in a forward manner no matter how vile they proved to be. *If an open, honest person does not deserve their respect, then I will have to present something that will. From now on I will be firm.*

Kiyana's purse was much lighter than it had been upon first setting foot inside the Garden, her body neared complete exhaustion, and her positive temperament was a dim memory.

Curse you, Keepers' Garden. I cannot see why the Keepers bother protecting you at all.