

That Wild Magic – by MMB

Chapter 1

The dark gates of the Palace loomed ahead, but the guards only nodded as the slim woman passed by them. They were used to seeing Karinna's slight figure hurrying through the gates on a Healer's task to one of the great houses within the walled city of Tharea. The tremendous Talent for Healing had made her loved and respected by nobleman and commoner alike.

Karinna expelled her breath silently and sped away, thanking Thara the One that the guards would most likely not remember that she had come through the gates. She had counted on the easy camaraderie between herself and the guards along with the fact that she was often called away from the Palace at all hours in order for her to leave without arousing attention. One hurdle past, she thought to herself as she threaded her way down the narrow, twisting streets that were as familiar to her as her own living chambers. Silent as a shadow, she made her way from the Palace in the center of the city to the one and only gate leading from the walled capital city to freedom.

The slap of leather on cobblestones and the clank of metal drove her to find shelter in a darkened doorway on the very edge of the city. As she watched, the nightly patrol changed shifts; and the new guard in charge of the gate prepared to stand his shift in his box. Karinna waited until the rest of the patrol was out of hearing. Then she took a few shards of metal and tossed them a short distance down the street and cried out.

Startled because so little ever happened close to his post at such an hour, the guard began to walk in her direction. She tossed more metal into the streets but was very careful not to reveal her position in the act. His curiosity aroused, the bored guard was easily distracted from his appointed duty, and he trotted past Karinna's hiding place and down the street lured by the tinkle of metal striking cobblestones.

Knowing she probably had very little time before the guard turned, Karinna picked up her skirts and ran as fast as she could through the narrow gap between the heavy wooden gates

now unguarded — and into the outer darkness. She didn't stop running until she was far enough away from the gate not to be seen. Then she pressed herself against the wall of a wooden building and forced herself to breathe softly and slowly until her heart stopped racing and it no longer hurt to take a breath.

Around her spread the "commontown," the cluster of hovels that completely surrounded the walled city and were the meager dwellings of the lower strata of Tharu society. Many of the less prosperous merchants, as well as the men who worked the wharf and warehouses in the walled city itself, lived in rickety wooden dwellings. From this point until she reached the end of the commontown, the streets would be of beaten and hardened dirt instead of the cleaner cobblestones.

As Karinna gathered her wits, she began to study with more interest the building she had been leaning against. A pace away, the wooden door hung askew, demonstrating the abandoned nature of the shed. Delighted at having so quickly found a place in which she could conceal herself, Karinna slipped past the crooked door and into what had at one time been a dwelling. There were still a few sticks of broken furniture tossed against one wall, and a shelf near the door still held a fairly large pottery crock that had been forgotten or left behind.

Here in the roughest district of Tharea, a woman alone late at night would be immediately taken as a prostitute and treated as such by the first man to catch her

a fate Karinna had no intention of suffering after all she had been through. Besides, now that she would no longer be living within the warmer walls of the Palace, the woolen trousers and jerkin would be much warmer than her fine gown.

Moving away from the door and farther into the shed, Karinna seated herself on the dirt floor and set about unwrapping the hastily gathered bundle she had brought with her from the Palace. Carefully, she set aside the two loaves of bread and the small skin of cha where she could find them easily and unfolded the drab set of clothes she had found in the back of her husband's closet. Karinna lifted her silken skirts and slipped the woolen trousers on before unhooking the gown and pulling it over her head. Then, moving rapidly in the chilled night air, she bound her breasts so that her real gender would be hidden and pulled on the stained jerkin.

That done, she wadded the fine silken gown up and glanced quickly around the shed, her gaze again falling on the piece of crockery on the shelf near the door. With a satisfied grin, she stuffed the gown into the crock. As she replaced the crock, she couldn't help wondering about the reaction of the next person to look inside. Pulling her waist-length hair together, she braided it and coiled it around her head so she could pull the woolen cap over it all, completing her transformation into a lad. Now, at last, she was ready to venture out and undertake the final phase of her escape.

Karinna was not as familiar with this larger, sprawling part of Tharea as she was with the walled city itself, but she knew enough to look to the skies and see where the moons Ila and Frolua were to get an idea of how to navigate the maze that was the commontown. Compared to the walled city, the commontown had grown up around the walls as needed; and so the streets twisted and turned, sometimes for no reason. As she wound her way through the dirty, narrow paths that would pass for streets, she needed only to keep Ila on her right to know that she was heading more or less directly away from the city walls and toward the plains beyond.

Karinna walked as quickly as she dared through the streets, keeping her eye on her direction as well as watching for the more odious of obstacles that were the normal state of the commontown streets. Finally the huts and hovels began to thin, and Karinna knew she had reached the true outskirts of the capital city. Much calmer now that she had overcome the really dangerous part of her escape, she looked out into the darkness in an effort to decide where she was going to go next. She had only allowed herself to think about getting away from her husband, Chlin, and Tharea; now that she had achieved that goal, she was faced with trying to decide where to escape TO. Ahead of her stretched the endless grasslands of Dariki and Gameth. Karinna quickly discounted the possibility of finding refuge in either of those provinces because she was simply too well-known to be able to stay hidden for long. However, in discarding those two alternatives, she was allowing herself only one other option: the Halidem Mountains.

Those tall, craggy peaks formed the backbone of the land of Thaelia. In essence, they divided the land extending south from the northernmost coast inland on the eastern side down most of the way to the southern province of Chikae. Tharea, having been built roughly in the center of Thaelia, was situated at the base of the southernmost foothills.

Not two decades ago, the fiercely independent Halidu people had rebelled against the throne in Tharea, and Karinna's father and the King had led a successful campaign into the mountains to subdue them and reunite the land. Karinna was not sure what her reception would be if her relationship to the Lord-General were known, but she was sure that at least there she would not be recognized as quickly as she would be anywhere else.

She started to skirt the commontown, staying far enough into the darkness so as not to be noticed by anyone. It took her nearly an hour to travel the one quarter of the way around the city to the point where she estimated she was the closest to the trees of the great thuli forest that blanketed the nearby foothills. She was quite aware of the distance of clearing that separated the outer reaches of the city from the forest. Karinna again took a deep breath, pulled her dark cloak tighter around her shoulders, clasped the bundle she had carried with her from the Palace, and ran. No calls rang out, and the trees came closer and closer. With almost her last bit of strength, she reached the cover of the tall thuli trees and low-lying shrubs and ducked under the low-hanging branches to make complete her escape. Knowing that the cover of darkness would last several more hours,

and that the more distance she could put between herself and Tharea the better, Karinna set out again in the fastest pace she could manage into the foothills.

While she walked, she finally allowed a small portion of her mind to review the events which had led to her making such a desperate move, mostly brooding over the ill luck with which Thara had cursed her when she had become betrothed to a monster like Chlin. The betrothal had not been of her choosing, and there had been many times even before this that she had wish she had stood up to her father more forcefully.

Lord Gyrl Domagi, the Lord-General of the entire Thaelu army, had been so thoroughly convinced that he was doing his talented daughter a favor by bringing her out of the monastery in Tithede and betrothing her to the Crown Prince of the realm that it had been impossible for Karinna to have talked him out of it. He could have no way of knowing that even in Tithede, in the midst of the rigorous training Karinna was undergoing, rumors of Chlin's wild behavior and cruelty to others had become commonplace.

And so Karinna returned to Tharea and to the Palace, and there she learned how true and understated those rumors in Tithede had really been. In less than a month, she had treated several victims of either Chlin's passion or anger. Chlin had been obvious and rather lewd in demonstrating his amorous interest in his talented and beautiful bride-to-be, and the announcement of the impending marriage to the general populace made it practically impossible for either of the two to gracefully back away from their commitment. When her betrothed showed no signs of either acting more civilized or stopping his carousing as the wedding neared, Karinna took a bold step to insure that she herself would not be yet another of his victims.

Karinna knew, however, that Chlin had recently developed an unusual
for him — interest in his public image with the commonfolk. Previously, the opinions or considerations of the Tharu people had never been of great import to him, although he had always had a soft spot in his heart for any animal and saw himself as just another like them. This new facet of his character could not have come at a more needed time, and Karinna brushed aside shame and tradition to take advantage of that interest.

In one of their few, private conversations, Karinna needed only to plant the seeds of anxiety that she would expose his actions to the commonfolk from her position as Master-Healer of Thaelia to convince Chlin that he should agreed to her demand that they keep their upcoming marriage in name only. The Prince was reluctant, but sullenly agreed to keep the unusual arrangement a secret between the two of them as long as possible. He even went so far as to swear to the arrangement before a priest of Thara, committing his honor to the bargain. The wedding was held as planned, although nobody was the wiser.

Five months passed quietly, with both of them maintaining the image of newly-wedded bliss; but when nearly a year went by without the signs of an heir, Chlin's father, King Hariki, took it upon himself to probe the reasons why. Karinna and Chlin argued away one evening over whether or not to tell the King of the arrangement; but Karinna went ahead the next morning and exposed the arrangement despite her husband's insistence not to. Hariki and Gyrl were both shocked and angry, but the arrangement had been sworn to in front of one of the priests of Thara

the one that later performed the wedding — and was therefore completely binding and irrevocable.

The arrangement no longer a secret, Chlin could see no reason to maintain an false image; and he blithely went back to his dissolute lifestyle of heavy drinking and a string of new mistresses. Karinna continued as Master-Healer as if nothing had happened, but now had to contend with Chlin's boasting about his latest conquests as well as his frequent barbs about "frigid wives." Karinna was well aware that she was the object of a great deal of pity and sympathy in the eyes of many Palace residents, but carried on as if nothing were wrong with her or her marriage.

Perverse and promiscuous as he was, Chlin was also very ambitious and quite aware of the rights and

privileges of being the Crown Prince. Many were the times that he regaled his wife with sweeping orations about how things would be "when I am King." However, despite these lofty intentions, he and other noble first-borns could be found at the root of the small incidents of mischief and vandalism that plagued the Palace inmates; but the King overlooked the problem as being a simple symptom of his son's high spiritedness.

What King Hariki could not know was that the rowdy crowd with which Chlin surrounded himself increasingly fed his inflated ambition and ego by bowing in his presence more than necessary and calling him the regal "Majesty" rather than the "Highness" proper to Chlin's station as Prince. Moreover, rather than tiring of the wildness Hariki viewed as harmless, Chlin and his band began committing even greater offenses until even the patience of the King began to wear thin. However, the plots and schemes unknown to the King that Chlin and his cohorts were planning were by far more damaging to the kingdom.

The final thread of indulgence had snapped only the evening before, when Lord Gyrl had discovered Chlin and his band in the process of attempting to break into the royal treasury. The Lord-General had waited just long enough to hear of their intentions to steal the Royal Seal, one of the few actually treasonous offenses possible. Council Decree had made possession of the Seal the privilege of the King alone; and the decree had been very explicit about the penalty to be paid by any person trying to steal it, regardless of position and family connections.

The aristocratic co-conspirators were summarily dragged off to await the prejudged sentence

by virtue of being caught in the act -- and rapid execution on the charge of high treason. Chlin, too, would face the same treatment eventually; but his position as heir to the throne complicated the issue. Council was hastily convened; and by the middle of the next day, Chlin had found himself declared unfit to inherit the crown. An angry and disappointed Hariki found himself forced to disinherit Chlin and place him under house arrest until the prejudged sentencing and execution could take place. Unknown to Karinna, who was busily tending the day's patients and training new Healers, Chlin had seated himself sullenly in a chair behind the locked doors of the apartment. In the course of the afternoon, he proceeded to drink three large flasks of the potent mimosia, the libation of choice of the aristocracy and one the Prince was accustomed to abusing regularly. Between the liquor and his anger, Chlin stewed and steamed; and the seeds of disaster germinated.

Karinna heard of her husband's treasonous antics from a guard just as she was preparing to go back to their apartment to change gowns for the evening meal. Her father had conscientiously sent the guard to accompany her to where Chlin was being held. Informed that she should gather some clothing and possessions together because she would be moved to another set of rooms until Chlin was disposed of, Karinna assumed that the guard would accompany her into the apartment and watch over her while she packed; but the man seemed content to wait for her outside the door.

Chlin had been stuporous when the doors of the apartment had been unlocked to allow Karinna entrance, and she made as little noise as possible going to her bedchamber to gather what few articles she would need. However, the click of door closing and locking once again had brought Chlin back to consciousness, so he was quite awake and no longer stumbling drunk when Karinna came out into the sitting-room she shared with her husband. Her appearance in his line of sight was all the catalyst Chlin needed to explode in rage.

Karinna would wonder why the guard sent to take care of her never opened the door again to find out why she was taking so long in coming out, for Chlin took one look at her, stood up and grabbed her roughly. "Where do you think you're going?" he demanded, not even waiting for an answer before pulling his hand back and delivering a vicious slap that sent Karinna reeling into a chair. Her clothing and personal grooming articles scattered on the floor as she fell back, and the sight of them seemed to inflame Chlin even more.

"So you're abandoning me too?" was only the beginning of an hour-long tirade that Chlin would spit at his cowering wife, punctuated with obscenities aimed at Karinna herself, Lord-General Gyrl and, most of all,

King Hariki. "How dare he?" Chlin would demand, over and over again; using the question as a springboard into another tangent of his tirade.

Karina's wide-eyed stare of forced calm, unwavering despite anything he said or yelled, unnerved Chlin and galvanized him into further action to make her react to him. There were more slaps, more obscenities; all of which Karinna bore stoically until he locked an iron grip on her wrist and began dragging her into her bedchamber. That was when she began to scream and fight back desperately. But still no guard came. A wife was supposedly under the control of her husband, and no guard would attempt to step into a domestic squabble. Gyrl had forgotten to order Karinna's guard to protect her from her husband, thinking the man would know enough to do it on his own. He was wrong.

Karina stumbled as her mind shied away from what had happened next, although the pain of the beatings and the internal ache from the brutal manner in which Chlin had raped her were ever-present reminders. Now more than ever she understood the pain and confusion of the serving-girls who would be brought to her care after Chlin had used them in a like manner. The disgust and dislike she had for her husband had been transformed in that one hour of torture and the hours following into a deep and smoldering hatred and fear that he would somehow return to her to repeat his act of violence and revenge.

After finishing with his wife, Chlin had burst through the locked doors of the apartment like a madman. The doors flew open with a ferocity that had slammed the waiting guard back against the corridor wall fracturing the man's skull. Chlin was on the stricken man in an instant, wresting the guard's sword from its scabbard and plunging it into the second guard before another moment had passed. And then he vanished in the midst of the hue and cry caused within minutes by the serving-girl who had happened upon the two injured guards.

In the ensuing melee, Karinna found herself totally forgotten. Even her father brushed her aside in impatience with the efforts to discover the whereabouts of the fugitive Prince. Sobbing and with spirits crushed, Karinna retreated into her bedchamber and sank to the floor. Alone, she cried out her depression and violation until it seemed that she had no more tears left within her.

Her mind, which had been numbed in shock and horror, began slowly to function. The calls and stomping of feet that continued in the hallways intruded themselves on her thoughts, and she began to fear that Chlin might be found and brought back to his rooms. It had been then that she had begun planning the escape that had brought her into the forested foothills.

Karina shook herself free from the memories of the last few hours with difficulty, reminding herself that never again would she allow her husband to even see her much less get a chance to touch her. She glanced up through the leaves of the towering thuli trees and was astonished that the darkness was already waning and that in a very short time it would be light. The nervous energy that had carried her through the night was nearly gone, and she knew she would soon have to rest before continuing her journey. She did not count, however, on the fact that she was already far past exhaustion. Her foot caught on an invisible root and wrenched her ankle painfully, and she stumbled down an embankment. With a small moan, she gave in to her exhaustion and crumpled into unconsciousness.

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Vilara rubbed her eyes as the first white shaft of light struck her pallet, and she stretched lazily before climbing out of her nice warm bed. She splashed some water from the basin on her round face and ran her fingers through her wheat-colored hair to tidy it. Her sparkling black eyes suddenly widened as she realized that she had overslept again. She threw on her gown and straightened it as she sped down the narrow flights of stairs to her mistress' chambers. A lame excuse rose to her lips, but Vilara knew her mistress would not chide her harshly for her tardiness. She was devoted to the gentle Princess who had chosen to fetch her from a life of waiting on barroom tables in Tharea to the excitement of life in the Palace itself.

The door to the apartment stood open. Vilara walked slowly into Karinna's bedchamber. It was empty, the only sign of the occupant being a rumpled bedspread that oddly enough showed no signs of having been slept under. Knowing Karinna's position often obliged her to leave the apartment at all times to fulfill her responsibilities, Vilara set about straightening the bedspread and performing other small morning tasks. She had just dumped the water from the bedside basin when a heavy step sounded behind her. She whirled about, eyes wide, and found herself face to face with the Lord-General, Karinna's father. His stern brown eyes took in the deep curtsy of the serving girl and then swept the room. "My daughter is not in?"

"No, my Lord," Vilara replied. "She was already gone when I came in. Perhaps she was called in the night?"

"Perhaps," Gyrl stated flatly. He studied the girl's expression with care as he asked, "Did you hear anything last night?"

Vilara's innocent look did not change. "No, my Lord. I sleep very soundly. Is something wrong?"

"No, continue your work, girl." Gyrl did not feel it his place to tell of the distressing events of the prior evening. The girl would hear of it eventually from the Palace gossips. His eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "Have you seen the Prince this morning?"

The girl shook her head.

Gyrl strode out of the room, leaving Vilara with a confused look on her face. He crossed the apartment drawing room, pausing for a moment to gaze at the dim bloodstains from the guard on the hall floorboards. His spine stiffened as he continued across the room to the door of the Prince's chamber. He crashed through the door and watched with smug satisfaction as the bent old woman dropped a water basin. "Where's Chlin?" he asked softly, his deep voice dripping with venom.

Kari Hanu straightened as much as she could and turned to face the intruder. She was one of the few people to be genuinely unafraid of the imposing Lord-General, undaunted by his height or the arrogance that could make him seem taller than he really was. Gyrl wore his greyed hair in the close-dropped manner of the Palace Guard, although he had long had the right to assume a more privileged look. She glowered into his brown eyes and demanded, "Since when do you come barging into royal quarters?"

Gyrl stared down at the small old woman until she dropped her gaze to the floor. She may have been King Hariki's half-sister, but he could not reconcile himself to treating her as anything but an evil-tempered, only-to-be-tolerated bother. "I asked you, where is Chlin?"

She snickered. "You mean, oh high and mighty General, that you haven't found him yet? Fie!" She cowered at the raised fist, but Gyrl mastered his rising temper and lowered it still clenched to his side.

"I suppose you haven't seen the Princess Karinna either, Hanu."

Hanu bridled at his familiar use of her given name, and then her green eyes glittered. "My goodness, you do seem to have lost a great many people this morning, haven't you? I avoid the Princess with almost the same fervor as she avoids me. Of course I haven't seen her!" she snapped.

"After last night, I hope you are telling the truth, for your sake. I'm sure the King would relish the opportunity to find a good reason to be rid of you." Gyrl watched with pleasure as his barb hit home. "Good day," he said ominously and strode out of the bedchamber and the apartment.

As Gyrl's heavy footsteps faded away, the closet door opened and Chlin's red head emerged from around the corner, and then he stepped out into the room with a chuckle. "At least we know my wife didn't go running to

her father."

"You fool!" Hanu hissed as she sped to close the chamber door. "You took too great a risk coming back here. Don't you know they are combing the Palace for you? That guard died, you know. How do you think you are going to be able to keep from ending up in the dungeon with your friends?"

"Calm yourself aunt, before you give yourself fits! Who would dream of looking for me here, where I belong in the first place? Besides," and his green eyes glittered craftily, "the secret tunnels in the Palace have been long forgotten. Where better to hide than under the noses of the hunters?" The thought tickled his sense of humor, and his laughter was touched with gloating. His fine cloak was covered with dust and jism's webs, and even the living morynch he wore like a collar looked ratty. When clean and presentable, Chlin struck a handsome and well-dressed figure in the court; now he looked the part of an escapee. As if reading Hanu's assessment of his looks, he reached a hand up to Mishik, his morynch, and stroked the soft black and white fur to brush some of the filth away.

"But what now? All our plans were ruined when you got caught. And now that you're disinherited, you have no hope of ever ruling."

Chlin repositioned Mishik on his shoulder, stepped to the tall, narrow window and tweaked aside the corner of the window curtain. "You seem to forget that some of my father's loyal guard have been living out of my purse for a long time. I have yet to run out of plans."

Hanu placed her hand on Chlin's arm anxiously. "I'm glad you are not out of options, Chlin, and of course you can count on me to give you any aid you might need. You had better remember, though, that if your wife has also disappeared, they are going to be tearing this place apart stone by stone." Her brows wrinkled in warning.

"All the better to prove that I am not here." Chlin looked at his aunt with fondness. "You worry too much, and that could be dangerous for both of us right now if others see that worry."

"I can control myself quite well when I need to. But I want you to think about something: if you were able to discover those old tunnels, what is to say that Gyrl couldn't do the same? Where would that leave you?"

"Better you worry about what your position will be here in the Palace now that I have disappeared. Have a little faith in me. I know exactly what I'm doing. Some things just went a little ahead of plan, that's all. As a matter of fact, some evidence of my next move should come to light in not too long a time."

Chlin chuckled wickedly. "Things should begin to get very difficult for my dear Father and his loyal Lord-General."

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Gyrl glanced out a window as he walked down the hall and noted the sun's position. He quickened his pace, aware that he had an appointment with his brother Daru this morning. And if he didn't hurry, he would be late. The recent rash of piracies of grain barges on the Thea River was of grave concern to both the provincial governments of Dariki and Tharea, and the guards could continue to comb the Palace for the missing Prince quite effectively without his needing to look over their shoulders constantly.

Daru, Lord of Dariki, blind mind-seeing ex-priest of Thara, was standing by the narrow window overlooking an interior courtyard as Gyrl entered his office chamber. Gyrl knew that, now that he was in the room, Daru could begin to use his mind-seeing Talent and see what was happening through his, Gyrl's, eyes. As proof, the blind man put his hand into a pool of sunlight he could now see through the mind of his younger brother. With the strange perspective he had cultured and conditioned in himself of seeing himself and his

surroundings through the eyes of others, Daru saw himself stretch out his hand to grasp that of his brother. He seated himself in a low chair on the other side of Gyrl's desk.

"I hear the Palace was turned upside-down last night. What news this morning?"

"Still no sign of Chlin," Gyrl said dryly. "We are starting to run out of places to search. The guard he attacked died, and now there is an added problem. Karinna is gone now too." The pitch of Gyrl's voice betrayed his new worry.

"Karinna gone too?"

Gyrl threw his hands up in the air. "It's as if they both have vanished into thin air!" Restraining himself, he looked over at his brother and gave a wry smile that held no trace of humor. "It seems like the rain of troubles is turning into a flood. And speaking of water," he turned and pulled a large map from a cubbyhole and spread it on his desk, "what news from the river?"

Personal worries would have to wait for the moment until the more public ones were taken care of. Daru's visit was not a social one.

"The most recent theft occurred here, forty miles upriver of Dabai City," Daru said pointing to the spot. "A trading barge was intercepted just south of Chailo, two of the sailors killed outright with no provocation, and the mimosia and grain from the tribute taken." Daru sighed. "That makes three barges from Dariki to Tharea taken, not counting the two caravans from Gameth and the one from Karem."

"It cannot be coincidence, Daru. This seems to be a united effort

most of the cargo stolen has been food and grain. If the countryside were suffering a famine, these thefts would seem understandable; but there is nobody starving that we know of, at least none that have sent word of their need."

"They also stole the pouch of glymmettes from that new mine west of Myrh," Daru announced dismally. "There was enough wealth in that one pouch to fund a small army, if that's what they are intending. In my mind, that is even worse than the loss of food!"

Gyrl stared at his brother in surprise. "I wasn't aware the mine was producing anything besides lightstones. Does the King know of this?"

"He was aware of the possibilities of the mine, but this was just the first sample of the recent discovery."

"What of the current crops left unharvested; will they yield enough to offset the thefts in the tribute?"

Daru shook his head. "Perhaps, if the King had not levied such heavy tribute obligations on the agricultural provinces during the good years, there might have been enough in storage to keep both the King happy and feed the populace. But Gameth and Dariki have been just breaking even lately, and the outlook in Karem at this point seems to be only somewhat better. It's not a bright future for any of us if this continues."

Gyrl sat down heavily in his chair and stared at the map. "Whoever is behind these thefts, if it is a united campaign of some kind, must know when each shipment is made and exactly what is in each one."

"I agree." Daru watched himself finger the knotted belt at his waist, a reminder of his previous religious training and commitment.

Gyrl rubbed his beard in frustration. "How many more barges will you be able to send upriver?" He read

Daru's expression and rephrased the question. "Will" there be more barges of food for Tharea before the winter sets in?"

The blind man spread his hands and shrugged. "With luck and no further complications, perhaps four more; if not, who knows. After all, I must see to it that the Dariku survive to the next planting season, no matter what the King thinks."

"Chan's bones!" Gyrl's heavy fist struck the desk as his frustration demanded some release. "These raids could not have come at a worse time!" He looked at his brother sharply. "I want any further barges heavily armed and guarded. Try to keep the dates of departures as much a secret as possible."

"I hate to find flaws in you strategy . . ."

"If you do, tell me by all means!"

Daru steeped his fingers under his nose thoughtfully and considered for a moment. "Agreed that the barges should be well-guarded. However, I don't think that keeping the times of departure a secret will work. The number of men needed to guard one barge alone would require advance notice to their commander. I'm afraid that it is in Dabai that someone is getting the information and passing it on someone involved in loading or transporting the cargo. It's the only logical explanation."

"You are a mind-seer, Daru. You could find out who the informant is."

"Very true. But I would have to be in Dabai City to have it do us any good." Gyrl rose from his seat and paced the floor behind his brother. "If only there had been signs of some unrest before this, we would know where to start. But since the end of the Conflict, the land has been prospering and at peace."

"There are always those who are unhappy with their lot even in the best of times — and so it will be until the sun burns out." Daru reached out and rolled up the map. "You know the old adage: "The sun shines warmer in the next valley."

"You're very philosophical, brother," Gyrl turned from his pacing to gaze at his older brother. Daru's grey hair was abundant and hung to his shoulders in Dariku fashion. By tradition, the eldest son of a Lord became Lord in his turn upon proof that the Talent of the family had been passed on. However, Daru's blindness had made an excuse for Daruka, their father, to send Daru to the temples of Thara in Tithede instead to study. Gyrl, despite the fact he did not control the Domagi family's Talent for weather magic, quickly learned the art of ruling men. Daru was happy in Tithede.

Fate in the forms of King Hariki and the Tharu-Halidu Conflict stepped in. Gyrl became the King's Lord-General in command not only of the armies of Tharea, but eventually of all Thaelia. His duties kept him from Dariki in constant attendance to the King, so Daru had returned from his temple in Tithede to take over the duties as Lord. Extensive training in mindseeing made him adept at taking the reins of the huge province and handling his people wisely and well.

"I am" a philosopher, Gyrl," Daru's deep voice reminded his brother. "What do you suppose I spent all those years becoming while in service to Thara?"

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Karina floated back to consciousness on a sea of pain. She blinked a few times at the bright sunlight that stabbed her eyes from between the leaves of the trees above her. Aching in every part of her body, she attempted to sit up, managing only to slide down the embankment even further and hit her throbbing ankle on

a rock in the process. Her involuntary moan of pain brought an echo from the darkness of a hollow in the ground in front of her. Karinna strove to see into the depths of the hollow, pulling back in alarm as two yellow-green spots of luminescence blinked back at her. Suddenly she realized her fall had brought her to the mouth of a den of thatz, the dread mountain cat of the Halidem and foothills. Immediately, she recalled all the horror stories her father had brought back from the campaign into the mountains of animals being torn to pieces by the fierce and powerful predators.

Too terrified to cry out, Karinna could only watch helplessly as the glowing eyes grew closer until the great black face of the thatz emerged from the den. The beast opened its jaws; but instead of an angry roar at the intrusion, a strange, purring rumble came out with a raise in tone at the end as if the thatz were asking a question. Karinna held her breath as the cold nose snuffled at her hair and eyes curiously without really touching her at all. Slowly the thatz pulled the rest of its body from the den. As the thatz came totally into view, Karinna found reason to pity the beast through her paralyzing fear. The hindquarters of the thatz looked as if a huge hand had struck, breaking the spine, causing the hind legs to drag uselessly in the dirt. The outline of ribs was evident through the dull, black fur, making it obvious that the thatz had not had anything to eat for a very long time.

As if the action of leaving the den had used up the last vestiges of its energy, the great beast crouched down by the girl with a sigh. Karinna put out a trembling hand and, after letting it be sniffed, placed it on the great head. The thatz again made the purring rumble and allowed the gentle and tentative caress. Watching its reaction, Karinna slowly withdrew her hand and used it to push herself up into a sitting position. She could hardly stifle another cry as the injured ankle grated across the rocky ground. Feeling her whole body aching and sore, she leaned forward to pull the trouser leg up and check her ankle, which had puffed up angrily and was warm to the touch. Karinna's eyes filled with tears as a feeling of utter helplessness washed over her. She had fallen too far down the embankment to be able to climb out again with one foot so badly injured.

After indulging herself in a good cry, which oddly made her feel somewhat better, Karinna looked over at the crouching thatz and smiled ruefully. "Here we are, two cripples; you too hurt to chase me and me too hurt to run away." The ears of the thatz snapped upright at the sound of the soft voice. Karinna stretched out her hand and gently caressed the great head more bravely this time. "If I knew where my bundle had fallen, I could feed us both at least this once. I'm starving too!"

The glowing eyes of the thatz narrowed, and it turned its head and gave a low, growling call. From the depths of the den came a squalling answer, and a rustle. Out of the den bounded a cub that, at the sight of the woman so close to its mother, let out a mewling yelp and sidled up to its mother on the opposite side.

The large thatz rumbled again at its young, and the cub carefully stuck its head out to sniff at Karinna's leg. It flinched back a few times as if expecting something dreadful to reach out and bite it, finally looking back at its mother. The adult thatz rumbled at it again, and the cub scampered up the embankment. Karinna's mouth dropped wide open as the cub sniffed around a pile of leaves close to the location of where she had tripped and slid down the hillside. It reached into an inconspicuous pile of leaves to pull out the article in question, carried the bundle back down the embankment and dropped it in Karinna's lap before returning nervously to its mother's opposite side.

Karinna stared at the cub in shock. "Why . . . I don't believe it!" With trembling fingers she untied the cloak and unwrapped the food. She tore a bite out of one of the loaves and then tore a piece off and put it down in front of the mother thatz, who sniffed at it with little interest. The cub, which also had ribs showing plainly through its fur, had no scruples at all about the nature of the food; and it sprang on the morsel itself when its mother had not done so and gobbled it up greedily in a single mouthful.

Karinna opened the stopper on the skin of cha, poured a little into her cupped hand and offered it to the mother. The injured beast licked a small amount of the liquid from her fingers with a rough tongue before

laying its head down between its front paws. The cub, growing less and less fearful of the strange visitor, pushed its nose into Karinna's hand and licked the remaining moisture gratefully. Karinna chuckled as the cub came even closer to her, sniffing at the loaf in her lap both in hunger and curiosity.

"Alright, you greedy thing," she said as she tore another piece of bread from the loaf and handed it to the cub, barely managing to avoid the sharp little teeth that snapped at the morsel. Karinna found herself having to keep a bite ahead of the cub as it grew steadily bolder after each bite, finally ending up in her lap. One loaf managed to slake both her own hunger and that of the cub's. No sooner had the cub finished when it curled itself into a black ball of fur and purred contentedly, refusing even more cha. Karinna turned to again offer the mother more of the nourishing liquid.

During the time Karinna had been occupied in feeding the ravenous cub, its mother had quietly died. The glow was gone from the yellow eyes, which stared vacantly and dully at a point somewhere other than reality. Karinna slowly withdrew her cupped hand and then wiped the moisture on her cloak and used the same hand to brush aside the tears that started coursing down her cheeks. She cried softly, pitying the bundle of fur that now slept contentedly on her lap. Injured as she was, she would be little better capable of providing for the cub than the dead mother thatz after all her meager bundle of provisions was gone. The world in general and her life in particular seemed grey and hopeless to her, so she cried not only for herself but for the dead thatz and its sleeping cub.

Behind her in the bushes and unseen, several pairs of glowing eyes watched with interest.

Previous <> [Original Fiction](#) <> [Next](#) <> [Feedback](#)

Chapter Index: [1](#) | [2](#) | [3](#) | [4](#) | [5](#) | [6](#) | [7](#) | [8](#) | [9](#) | [10](#) | [11](#) | [12](#) | [13](#) | [14](#) | [15](#) | [16](#) | [17](#) | [18](#) | [19](#) | [20](#) | [21](#) | [22](#) | [23](#) | [24](#) | [25](#) | [26](#) | [27](#) | [28](#) | [29](#) | [30](#) | [31](#) | [32](#) | [33](#) | [34](#) | [35](#) | [36](#) | [37](#) | [38](#) | [39](#) | [40](#) | [Epilogue](#)