

That Wild Magic – by MMB

Chapter 40

Fichiku rubbed his eyes as the blindfold was removed and then blinked as the brightness of the sun nearly blinded him in its turn. When his vision had cleared, he stared around him at his surroundings. In front of him stretched the browned and harvested plains of Thaelia. But before he had a chance to turn to see where it was the Halidu had led him to come out of the mountains, he felt the sharp prick of a dagger at his throat.

"Now, Tharu, listen well! You are alive to serve as a living warning to your King never to try such a foolish invasion against the Halidu people again. Tell your stories of how such an elite troop of men was defeated by the rough clansmen of the mountains and their thatz allies and tell your stories well enough to be convincing." The dagger pricked the skin of his throat again. "And do not seek to find your way back into our mountains. You would not come back alive the next time."

Fichiku swallowed and nodded nervously. Gyrl's words were proof that the old man did not consider himself even Tharu any longer. "I will," he promised shakily, fully intending to do exactly that. Surely Chlin wouldn't pursue such a useless goal once he learned that it was impossible to achieve it.

"And by–the–way," Gyrl snarled in afterthought, "Don't look back once you start across those plains. There are several hidden here who are more than capable of putting their daggers in your throat even at a fair distance."

Fichiku gulped again and nodded. He had no reason to doubt the old Lord–General's word, for the old man had yet to lie to him about anything he had seen or heard. "I'll carry your message to Chlin, my Lord, I promise."

"Then good luck to you, Commander. You'll be needing it when Chlin learns of your mistakes." Gyrl's voice was filled with vengeful satisfaction. "I can almost guarantee that you will soon wish that we had left you in Sarans'hyl. Now, Tharu, RUN!"

A vicious shove nearly pushed him off of his feet onto his face, but he recovered his balance and began running. Remembering Gyrl's warning, Fichiku did not turn about to look at where the Halidu would be watching him but kept his eyes on the horizon. Gyrl's last comment would ring in his ears all the way to Tharea, he was sure. The old man had not lied to him yet.

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Gyrl turned and trotted for the underbrush of the foothill forest with his sense of justice finally satisfied. That traitor who had been the cause of Karinna's blindness would soon reap his share of sorrow. He had insisted on accompanying the small band that would free Fichiku, despite Karinna's pleadings to not let the traitor leave the mountains at all.

"You know very well what Chlin will do to him," Karinna had exclaimed, groping wildly for a grip on his shirt. "Sending Commander Fichiku back down to Tharea would be that man's death sentence."

"That bothers me not a bit, Kiki. He is responsible for your blindness, as well as being one of the few Guards I trusted to stand watch at the Palace the night Chlin attacked. As far as I'm concerned, he also is as responsible for Hariki's death as Chlin." Gyrl was adamant.

"Father..."

"I asked him many questions about conditions in Tharea and Thaelia after Hariki and I left, and one thing he told me was how Hanu has helped take care of the country when Chlin gets in his cups," Gyrl explained, hoping to assuage his daughter's fears a bit. "The warning Fichiku carries back with him is as much for her as it is for Chlin."

"Hanu?!" Karinna was incredulous. "I can't imagine Chlin listening to Hanu about something as important to him as this!"

Gyrl was certain that he would still be facing Karinna's anger and disapproval when he returned to Rhyls'hyl, and it was not something he was looking forward to as he rejoined the rest of the band well inside the safety of the brush and thuli trees. From the hidden vantage point, the mountain men were able to see that Fichiku had found a loping gait that would carry him far in little time; moreover, he had followed the warning and not looked back once.

"May the spirits grant that that is the last time we must deal with any of the Tharu army." Larm watched the freed man with relief.

Gyrl did not reply to the comment. "Come on, then. Let's go home," was all he could say.

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The clothes he was wearing were stained and torn, and many were the times that the farmers would pause in their post-harvest chores to watch the tattered soldier trot past their fields. Fichiku forced himself not to notice the stares or listen to the often rudely loud comments, keeping his eye on the horizon and his mind on the words of warning he had been sent to deliver. Even so, if he had thought the plains endless from aburri-back, they were even more so afoot.

Any of the roads in the area all lead away from the mountains, and Fichiku was well aware that the shortest distance between where he imagined he had been freed and Tharea would mean skirting the edge of the foothills until the walls of the city came into view. The Halidu had provided him with a single skin of cha, a chunk of cheese and a loaf of precious bread. The latter item had been only at the insistence of the Lady Karinna, whose unhappiness at having her former captor set free had frankly surprised him and made him even more aware of his King's foolishness at treating such a treasure so harshly.

Compared to the mountains, the lowlands were still enjoying autumn weather, and so Fichiku was able to trot on day after day without having to seek shelter from the pre-winter rains that would drench and chill the land. But the storms which would descend from their mountain homes were not all that far in the future, for the sound of distant thunder and the sight of boiling and angry clouds over the peaks to his right reminded him of the storms that had struck only hours after reaching that final – what did the Halidu call their halls – hyl.

There he had been treated to a sight he knew he would have to relate to his King: that of watching the former Princess Karinna playing with the very healthy and active son and daughter of King Chlin. Gyrl had made sure that he had the opportunity to watch the little family discreetly, so that he would be able to clearly describe the little Prince and Princess as well as Karinna's new husband being a father to them. That the children loved their new father was evident, for they climbed all over him and tickled him and for all purposes seemed unaware that Chorán was not their real father.

And then there was the nurse. Fichiku had spent several hours on the road trying to decide a way to describe the creature who, according to Gyrl, was the children's nurse and tutor. Never had he seen a costume such as the veiling robes that the woman wore – and he had needed to have someone tell him the creature was female. Her voice lilted with tones that came from a language never heard on the streets of Tharea. His mind had filled with questions the moment he saw her. Where was she from? How did she come to the Halidem, and

how in Thara's Name had she become the "second mother" of the little royal children?

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"Nay, Lady. Thou art not trying hard enough. Focus!"

"I am!" Karinna sat back in her chair wearily. "Malishar, I am trying. I just don't think..."

"Don't think. Thou hast caught the point of the lesson exactly. If thou wouldst use thy vision at all times, it must be something used without thought or effort." Malishar's wrinkled face was folded into an expression of encouragement, even though Karinna could not appreciate it.

"Listen to the human-teacher, Karinna," Shima urged from his safe, comfortable corner. From here he could watch his human-friend learn more of her new talent and still be out of the way enough to keep watch both on his own and Karinna's cubs playing together in the next room.

Karinna turned her head in his direction. "You're no help, Shima," she exclaimed in exasperation.

The great feline yawned widely. "It was not meant to be, Karinna. You are learning a way of seeing that we of the circle take for granted. It is not surprising that you as a human would have trouble with it."

"Listen to thy friend, Lady," Malishar nodded. "He speaks thee the truth."

"You hear the thatz? Did Falina have you touch one to open your mind?"

Malishar giggled, a young sound to come from such an ancient woman. "Nay, Lady. My mind had no need to be opened like thine did. Thy friend and I have had long talks whilst thou wast gone."

Karinna turned suddenly, too tired to concentrate any longer and so blinded again as her visions faded. "Rhy! Rhoma? Malishar, where are they?"

"Look for them." Malishar's tone was uncompromising.

"Shima...?"

"Ah, and there you all are!" Choran's happy voice boomed from the doorway. "Shima, I see you're doing extra work with ours and yours together."

"N'ainya," Karinna sighed contentedly. By his greeting, she had figured out where her children had been hiding.

"If thou must depend on others doing thy looking for thee, thou wilt never retrain thyself," Malishar grumbled as she spun quickly on her heel and drew the scarf on her shoulders over her head in a smooth motion. "Thy children are hungry and tired," she commented as she swooped down on the toddlers and picked one up under each arm.

"I seem to be interrupting something," Choran remarked quietly as the nursery door closed behind the still-muttering nurse.

Karinna stretched out her hand in the direction of his voice. "Nothing very important, beloved. Malishar was helping me with... you know." The subject of her blindness remained one that Choran did not like to be reminded of very often, and discussing her new Mindsight – as she now called her new skill – frequently

drew him down into a depression.

"Oh?" He captured the seeking hand in his own and pulled it and Karinna after it to him. "I thought Malishar was here to help with Rhyl and Rhoma, not give you lessons as well."

"Such a teacher as that is one not to be ignored," Shima commented into both human minds wryly. Then he rumbled at the still-tumbling cubs. "Karinna, Chorán," he said as he ushered his litter from the room.

"Mmmm," Chorán hugged Karinna even tighter. "No children, no thatz. Just the two of us..."

"Mmmm," Karinna responded to her husband's playful mood easily. "It doesn't happen often anymore." Without thinking about what she was doing, she looked into her husband's face and noted, absently at first, that the chiseled features were strangely lit and colored. Then the realization of what she had done struck her, and she jerked physically.

"N'ainya?" was the quick and worried response.

"Mmmm," Karinna eased back into Chorán's embrace, her mind spinning. "I think I owe Malishar an apology."

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Fichiku squatted along the side of the road and drained the last of the warm cha from the skin before tossing it aside as useless. The morning had seen the outline of Tharea's walls grow in size and decrease in distance rather rapidly, and now he was only a few minute's walk from the very gates. Even as he rested, he ignored the offers of rides into the city from merchants and peasants that now clogged the road, preferring to remain alone with his own thoughts as long as possible.

Only an hour or more remained before he would most likely be facing Chlin – a furious and frustrated and most probably drunken Chlin – and trying to explain the resounding defeat he and his men had endured. That he would probably not have his freedom after that interview had become his certain opinion. He would have to try to enter the Palace quietly and seek out Hanu or one of the other lieutenants first.

Fichiku sighed deeply, rose to stand upright and dusted his hands on his filthy and tattered uniform tunic. He was sure he was an odd sight, for he had not shaven since the Halidu had stormed the hall and captured him, nor had he washed since leaving Gyrl where the foothills joined the plains. Still, he refastened his collar and tried to pull the tunic straight once more, finishing by slapping as much of the road dust from his pant legs.

As if marching in parade for the King and his court, Fichiku bore himself stiffly at attention and marched quickly and resolutely through the gates, past a rather startled Guard and into the maze of cobblestone streets. Several off-duty Guards from the Palace recognized him and gave him casual and friendly salutes which he returned smartly, but Fichiku spoke to no one as he threaded his way toward the Palace. Even there at the Palace gates, the Guards were so startled and bemused to see him march through in his state of attire that none tried to halt him or inquire his business within.

Fichiku headed straight for the barracks and his old quarters and was pleased that he was able to get to his chambers and close himself inside without having anyone question him. A remnant of the days just after the rebellion, Fichiku's barrack quarters were now a mere formality in which to keep spare uniforms and his arms. Of course, the sword, dagger and pike had accompanied him into the Halidem Mountains and had been lost; but there still hung an older yet clean uniform.

The water in the pitcher was warm and stagnant, but it was wet and washed a great deal of the road grime

from his face. Cleaner and dressed more presentably, Fichiku could feel his spirits rise slightly too. With a final adjustment to the uniform, he again ventured into the hallways of the Palace – this time looking for Hanu and his fellow lieutenants.

No longer looking so much out of place, Fichiku did not draw much attention to himself until he was passed by a corporal as he tried the latch on the door to Hanu's office. Strange, he had thought to himself. She never keeps this locked...

"What are you doing trying to get in there?" a brash young corporal demanded. "Name and rank!"

Fichiku stared at the young man from top to bottom. "You seem to be misinformed as to who is the superior and who is not," he barked back in his best drill-sergeant tones. "Where is the Lady Hanu?"

The corporal, who had started back and been reconsidering his rash inquiry, lost his apprehension as quickly as he had found it. "You had better come with me, sir. Anyone wandering the halls of the Palace asking after a dead woman has got to be either mad or very misinformed."

"DEAD??" Fichiku's mouth dropped wide. "When?!"

"I think you had better come now, sir," the corporal said, drawing his sword nervously. "You can tell your story to the watch Commander."

"What about Kor?" Fichiku demanded, receiving no response. "Mylu? In the Name of the One..."

"Now, sir." The corporal's voice was soft, but it punctuated a poke in the stomach with the sword. Fichiku looked down in surprise at the sharp pain and reached where his own sword would have hung. The sword swung up until it was pushing against the side of his neck. "SERGEANT!!! I need help here!"

"Now, wait," Fichiku tried to reason, but the sword merely pressed into the side of his neck harder. As the slap of sandalled feet against flagstones neared, he wondered what else could possibly have gone topside down in the weeks he had been gone.

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Karina tucked the edges of the warm blanket around Rhoma's shoulders and gave her daughter a final good-night kiss. In the next bed, Rhyl lifted his arms for his own good-night ritual. Tenderly she hugged and kissed her son and then walked to where she could Mindsee Chorán standing in the doorway waiting for her. He slipped his arm around her waist and pulled the door closed.

"There, all down for the night." He looked at the happy look on Karinna's face. "What?"

Malishar harrumphed from her own chamber door. "Sleep well," she mumbled and reached for her latch.

"I feel as if they are safe for the first time in their lives," Karinna explained contentedly to Chorán, answering his question. "Chlin will know they are untouchable and leave us in peace."

Malishar turned. "Nay, Lady. If he leaves thee and thine for now, it is only for now. Thy son and daughter will grow and one day be rulers of their own destinies. They will need training that neither thee nor I can give them."

"But they are safe for now," Karinna insisted.

"For now," Malishar agreed, relinquishing the fight.

"We all are," Chorán added to Karinna's insistence.

"Aye," Malishar agreed without turning. "For now."

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Chlin was not drunk, a fact frustrating to him and a complete surprise to Fichiku. "So," he drew out, slouching in the throne, "you come crawling back to us whimpering defeat, do you?" He reached up absentmindedly and scratched the neck of the morynch draped sleepily about his own.

"We didn't stand a chance against them," Fichiku stood tall against his King's accusations. "Your Majesty, how were we to react when the Halidu were protected and aided by thatz?" He shook his head. "Besides, the northern hall we occupied was poorly provisioned and cut off from the only supply route early in the occupation. We would not have survived the winter."

"You failed. The most important duty we have given you since we won the throne, and you failed." Chlin looked around the empty throneroom with eyes that were tired as well as crazed. "Tell me, did your men die bravely in the face of such demonic forces."

Fichiku shifted from one foot to the other nervously. "They... did not die, Your Majesty."

"What?!"

"They... we were all captured."

"You mean," Chlin refocused on his former aide, "that there is an entire troop of my elite soldiers still up in those snarking mountains?!" Fichiku swallowed hard and nodded. Chlin's eyes burned. "Then what in the name of every enemy Chan has ever ground beneath his z'fthoniku heel are you doing here in Tharea?"

Fichiku straightened into an even stiffer attitude of attention. "I am sent by the Halidu people as a messenger."

"A what?!!" Chlin rose to his feet at that. "GUARDS!!"

"Lord Gyrl and Lords Byrol and Harryhl composed a message that I should deliver to you," Fichiku said firmly and steadily, ignoring the bristling swords on the Guards who burst into the room. "I was told to tell you that you should never again try to conquer the Halidu people. The thatz are a powerful ally, Majesty; and one that dwells in those places an attacker would wish to hide himself. Thara be my witness that there is no way our forces could overcome such odds. The Halidu may be rough and untrained in the ways of formal warfare, but Lord Gyrl is training them in the use of their new arms."

"Gyrl... told you to say these things?"

"He dresses, acts and thinks like a Halidu, Your Majesty. He calls the Halidem "our mountains.""

"The traitor!" Chlin rudely tossed a surprised Mishik from his shoulders in a fit of anger and then descended from the dais to begin pacing, waving the Guards out of the way. "He swore his allegiance to the D'Ganech line of Kings, or has he forgotten."

"No, Majesty," Fichiku swallowed hard. "Lord Gyrl has not forgotten. I was shown..."

Chlin whirled and stalked over to Fichiku until they were nearly nose to nose. "Shown what?! Shown what?!"

"Your children, Your Majesty."

"Ah," Chlin rubbed his hands together and reascended the dais to seat himself on the throne once more. "Crying that their mother was dead, no doubt."

So his first hunch about Karinna had been correct; Chlin did indeed want her dead. And she wasn't. There was no way to sidestep the truth. "No, Sire. The Lady Karinna was playing with them and..."

"PLAYING with them?" Chlin's face had gone nearly the color of his red cloak. "What else on top of that, eh?!"

"Sire..."

"You said "and," so tell the rest of it." The King slouched again, hands folded across his chest. From the safety of the cushions, a wary Mishik hissed at the stranger who smelled of travel and tiredness.

"It was the family, Sire. It was Karinna, the boy Rhyl, the girl Rhoma and Karinna's husband, Chorán."

The color faded from Chlin's face until only two over-bright spots remained on his cheeks, and he straightened slowly. "You lie," he whispered, shaking his head.

"On my life, Sire, I tell the truth," Fichiku insisted in a pleading voice.

"Oh, no," Chlin shook his head against the words, and then snarled at Fichiku, "you LIE!" He flew up from the throne, down the dais steps and over to rip a sword from one of the Guard's grasp. In a fluid motion that belied the months of heavy drinking, Chlin whirled and buried the sword so deeply into Fichiku's back that the point protruded through his chest.

A look of astonishment spread over Fichiku's face as he stared down at the fountain of blood that was pouring down his chest, and he fell heavily forward. As if striking down Fichiku had drained him of all his energy, Chlin slumped to his knees near his former aide, muttering to himself, "It's a lie. My children! Got to get them back! No, it can't be! Another husband?! Gyrl, the traitor! Kill him, kill them all!"

The bemused and shocked Guards looked at each other, not knowing how to handle the King in such a state. "Perhaps, the Queen?" whispered one, who whirled and ran from the room the moment his companion nodded agreement.

Fichiku could hear the King's rantings as if from a very great distance. The flagstones of the throneroom floor were cold, and the cold was creeping into every corner of his being. Strange, he had not noticed it was so dark in the throneroom. Even as the sound of Chlin's mad mutterings died away, Fichiku mused wryly that, once again, Gyrl had not lied to him.

[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](#)