

HEN & CHICK SUBSCRIBER EXTRA

Nana's Tale

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Hen & Chick Subscriber Extra
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Chapter 1

Hen & Chick - Nana's Tale

Enza twisted her club in her hands, ignoring the sweat dripping down her skin. She couldn't tell if she perspired from the humidity of the day or her own nervousness. The chatter of the others gathered to audition buzzed in her ears, their words simply annoying sounds that grated against her sweaty skin.

She checked her fingers on the grip again, the thick wooden peg perpendicular to the shaft familiar in her hand. Her knuckles were yellow. "Relax," Enza told herself, her voice breathier than she meant it to be. "You're not even fighting any Marauders this time." Her hand went to her belt pouch, feeling the few items in there. Trophies from times she had defended her village from the attacks that came from the sea. The points of blades, snapped off and tied together with sisal chord. Eight metal shards, all from Marauders she had defeated. Papa said he would make her a necklace when she had

twelve, just like he made for the other fighters in the village.

"I am a fighter," Enza said to herself, ignoring the strange look the young man next to her shot her way. Her parents and fellow villagers had seen her skill. She had traveled a day to show the three champions of Miz she could hold her own against the Marauders. Enza couldn't help but stare at the curtain that had been set up, cutting the town square from her view. The Triumvirate were back there, judging the fighting skills of some other person who had traveled from their village for the chance to fight for them. In the street waited others wishing to test their skill, swords at their sides. One man flourished a spear in a wide circle, laughing as he whipped it around. Blades. Knives. Sharp things.

Enza uncorked her water skin and took a gulp, trying to swallow her anxiety. She had her own weapons, she thought to herself. They were carved from black ironwood by her mother, sung over as her rough hands fashioned the two clubs to protect her daughter, to make her daughter as hard as the wood. And Enza had skill. Her father, Big Ashe, the biggest thing in her life but so light on his feet, fought with her. He taught her to move sideways, like the crab, to look for the opening. He told her someone bigger than her was a bigger target, to drive her power to those small points that caused the most pain. She tapped the head of the club against her palm. With the right strike, she knew the wide surface could shatter bone. It had in the past.

A hand on her shoulder made her jump, startling her. "They called your number," the young man said.

"I know they did!" Enza lied, brushing the man's hand away. She forced herself to take a deep breath before she

gripped her clubs too tightly, walking past those waiting their turn towards the now parted curtains.

The deep blue curtains billowed slightly in the breeze, held down by a trail of smooth, pink beach stones. The beach of the Fair and the Innate's home village was made of pink cobbles, churned up by the turquoise water of the Sapphire Sea. Enza's village lay just beyond the reaches of a green sand beach, peppered with the crushed shells of the bivalves that lay beyond the waters surface. Enza had never seen pink sand before and wondered if the sisters brought them from their home beach out of sentimentality. The stones were large, several of them larger than her fist. Enza pulled her eyes away from the stones as she gripped her clubs, her heart beating in her ears as she walked through the makeshift doorway..

Two servants in off-white kilts swept the sandy ground of the town square, the palm frond brooms scenting the air as they slapped at the dust. A golden circle was set into the brown dust, gleaming yellow bright in the afternoon sun. Enza's dark eyes were fixed beyond the circle at the three figures seated before her.

It was them. The Triumvirate. The three who had vowed to unite the Five Isles of Miz under them and drive the Marauders from their shores. Enza inhaled as slowly as she could, trying to mask her excitement at meeting them. Travelers from other villages always had news of them: where they were headed, who they had defeated, the newest song they had written in celebration or mourning. She remembered when the runner had brought the flier to her village and posted it in the village square, the illustration of the three people done in full color, metallic ink shimmering on their clothes. Enza bowed low to them, the image of the three of them burned into her mind.

Kish the Wise. He sat between the two sisters. Enza had never seen a king, but she imagined they all sat as the Wise did, his kilt bleached to an impossible white, fine leather sandals on his wide, well manicured feet. His hair was cut short, a fashion he himself had set and his facial hair was trimmed and spread from below his ears to across his chin, his upper lip bare. He wore a sleeveless vest, his skin devoid of battle scars, save the one he had not allowed a mage to heal away: a dark, raised mark above his heart. He had saved his mother from a Marauders' spear with his own body. The song said he plucked the spear from his own breast and driven back every adversary who came against him. Seeing him here, Enza didn't doubt he did.

Iyzani the Innate sat to the left. It had to be her. Only a mage could look that bored. She sat sideways across the seat, one leg draped over the arm of the chair, her big mouth drooping at the corners. She wore a simple white dress and off white shorts, the garments stained golden orange at the hems. Her dark hair was loose, cascading in tight brown waves, unadorned with shells or feathers. She wiped her nose with the back of her hand as she looked at Enza, her metal bracelets jingling as she did.

And Zaya the Fair. Enza pressed her lips together. The woman was more beautiful than Enza had imagined. She sat so poised and straight in her seat, Enza couldn't help but stand up straighter in response. Her hair was elegantly twisted to form a crown around her hairline, blue flowers arranged in her hair. Her dark eyes sparkled, her full mouth looking as if her lips were always ready to smile. Her white garments were accented with a blue hip scarf, the daintiest of silver bells shimmering at the hems. The scarf of a dancer. She smiled at Enza, the corners of her eyes crinkling as she did.

"Please, tell us your name and your home village," Zaya said, her voice as soft as a breeze. "And tell us, how do you wish to serve Miz."

"My name is Enza Gwedne of Salithe, my Champions," Enza said, bowing again. She watched as Iyzani sat up in her chair. "I come to offer you by blood. My blood for the soil of Miz." Enza raised her eyes to the three figures, the beating of her heart louder than anything she had ever heard before.

"The soil of Miz does not need blood, daughter Gwedne," Iyzani said. When she spoke, Enza could hear the similarity in their voices, their sisterhood more apparent. "Blood is too easily spent, and too much has already been spilled. If we are to protect Miz, we will need your brains. We will need your muscle. We will need your heart."

Enza looked to Zaya, her mouth suddenly dry. "I have all these things, my Champions," she said, using the same honorific her village used.

"Salithe is a fishing village, is it not?" Kish said, sitting forward in his chair. He rested his elbows on his thighs, twining his fingers together to rest his chin upon them.

"It is. It has been attacked three times this year, our neighboring villages attacked as well," Enza said, keeping her eyes on the ground now, focusing on the golden ring in the earth. She wondered how it had come to be there. "I have fought in the last four battles. We came to the aid of Kaltha just three phases ago." It was where she had earned her last three trophies.

"We had word of that battle," Zaya said quietly. "We poured wine and water for those who were killed."

Enza looked up, catching herself before she stared. The Fair's face was full of so much tenderness, sympathy

making her eyes shine with tears. Enza bowed her head again.

“We fought as hard as we could and pushed them back, my Champions,” Enza said. It was true. She remembered the pain in her joints after the battle, the dust and blood caked to her skin. The cry of seagulls as they stood over the bodies of her fellow villagers and Marauders alike, ready for their fill. The green sand was red that day, and Enza couldn’t tell if the salt taste in her mouth was from the sea or blood.

“If you leave your village to join our cause, who will keep the Marauders from Salithe’s shore?” Iyzani asked. Enza looked up at her. She couldn’t tell from her tone if the mage was mocking her or not.

“I...I just...” Enza blinked, trying to keep from frowning and shooting a glance at Iyzani. Despite the Innate’s coy demeanor, Enza knew Iyzani was the most powerful of all of them. The power of She Who Now Dreamed ran through the Innate’s blood. No mages lived in her home village or her neighbors. And so Enza had learned to fight.

“My father,” Enza spoke up, standing up straight. “And the others of the village. I am the only one of my village who has answered your call.”

“Why is that?” Kish asked, resting his hands on the armrests of his chair. “Why has more of Salithe not come to our cause?”

“Because,” Enza said, grasping for her words. “I have read your words, I have heard your songs,” she said, trying to keep her voice strong as she spoke. “You speak of Miz, five isles with one heart, beating in the sea. Five fingers on one hand, striking those who would come against us, building towards the sky. My fellow villagers see Salithe as a part of the Big Island, answering to the chief, who

speaks to the other chiefs, those who remain. But I know Salithe is a part of your Miz, and I want to ensure it exists, that it becomes strong." Enza's face was hot and she could feel sweat dripping down her sides. This time, she knew it was from nervousness. "I want Miz. I want your Miz. I will give myself to you for that."

Enza lifted her head, trying to read their faces. She gripped her clubs at her side, her palms damp. She thought this would be a test of her martial skills, not her oratory skills. Had she spoken correctly? Enza gulped as she watched the three of them look at each other.

"Step inside the golden circle, please," Kish said, rising from his seat. Enza nodded and complied, not sure how else to respond except with obedience. A hum blew through the air and she looked up. Iyzani was moving her fingers, her lips mouthing words. Kish glowed for a moment, golden sparks radiating from his skin as he entered the circle as well. In his hand he held a wooden sword.

"You can't hurt him," Iyzani said. "Not while he has the spell upon him. Feel free to hit him as hard as you want."

Enza gripped her clubs again, resting their shafts across her forearms. "I...you want me to fight you, yes?"

"If you'll do me the honor," Kish said with a smile. It was a more of a smirk. Enza smiled back, falling into a defensive pose.

"Oh, and if you step onto the gold ring, you won't like it," Iyzani called. Enza heard her giggle but she ignored it, her eyes locked with Kish the Wise. The strategist.

CRACK.

Enza blocked the blunted blade as Kish brought it down. She flipped her club around at the spoke, bringing it diagonally across so fast, she heard it whistle through the air. It cracked against him, as if his skin was made of

coconut shell and not flesh. Enza yelped, leaping back. "I'm sorry!" she shouted.

Kish laughed out loud, flourishing the sword in his hand as he grinned at her. Enza's mouth fell open slightly. This close up, she could see he wasn't much older than she was. He had the same boyish grin many of the young men in her village had, though he lacked the cocksure stance and coolness they sported. With the sword in his hand, Kish simply looked...happy." "No need to apologize," he said."My sister told you, you can hit me as hard as you like."

Enza nodded, trying to push down her misgivings, gripping her clubs again. She side stepped, the smooth swept dirt easier on her feet than the sand of the beach, her footwork taking her to an opening. This time when Kish swung, she blocked with one arm and aimed for his head with the other, the spoke of the club landing squarely at his temple. She stopped the motion as soon as the wood touched his skin, sparing him the blow.

Block, crack, crack. Her club whipped through the air, sometimes meeting his fake blade, sometimes smacking against the strange spell Iyzani had placed around him. Enza breathed as she swung, sidestepping, careful not to cross her steps too much and risk being thrown off balance. She jabbed with the end of her club, grunting as she did, trying to hit her marks.

Kish whacked her with the sword once, twice, three times, barely missing a blow to the head. Enza dove in, catching his arm between both clubs, pushing the wrong way on the joint. He laughed. Enza let go, her face growing hot as she realized how close she had stood to him. She looked up at the mage and her sister, wiping the sweat off of her forehead.

"Who knew villages produced such good fighters?" Iyzani mused, her chin resting in her hands.

"It's the heart that makes good fighters, Iyzani," Kish said. He exhaled deeply, his face glowing with energy, a smile still on his lips. "You are a good fighter, Enza. Your technique is good. And your passion is high. If you will allow yourself to be trained, you may join our cause."

Enza blinked. She felt herself tremble. Her mouth felt dryer than the dust she stood on. "I...I would be honored to."

Zaya rose from her seat, taking something out a small basket at the side of her seat. She approached Enza, the bells of her hip scarf jingling as the sea breeze made her garments flutter in the wind. Zaya took a hand and pressed something into her palm. Enza looked down at it, her hands shaking as she did. A three sided coin.

"You are one of us now," Zaya said with a smile. "Take this token as a symbol of our loyalty and dedication to the cause. You are part of the peace that will come to Miz."

"If you want to send a letter to your family, there are scribes at the inn," Kish said. "We will all be heading out two mornings from now. You can let them know you have been accepted and will be coming with us."

"Where to?" Enza said, trying not to sound stupid, the coin already warm in her hands.

"To the North Bay, Gethe," Kish said. "The new capitol of Miz."

"I hope you're ready for hard work, recruit," Iyzani said, still sitting in her chair. "Revenge is hard work."

Enza looked to Iyzani, once again unsure if she was joking or not.

"Iyzani, stop," Zaya said, annoyance in her normally kind voice.

“The inn will take you in. Just show them the coin. And get some rest.” Kish clasped her shoulder with one hand. Enza couldn’t help but see the two of them together and think of how beautiful they looked, standing besides one another. Beautiful, graceful Zaya and strong, benevolent Kish. And with the mage at their side, it was no wonder villagers were flocking to join their cause.

“I will,” Enza managed, her giddiness bubbling up in her stomach as she put the coin, her newest trophy, in her pocket. “I won’t let you down!” She bowed to them again before she turned, walking past the curtains which seemed to part at exactly the right time.

Enza walked past those waiting to be called, her shoulders pushed back, chin raised. A man, the same young man who had startled her before crossed her path, his dark eyes wide with surprise.

“Did you make it?” he asked, his voice seeming higher than before. Enza locked her eyes on him, her clubs still in her hands.

“Of course I did,” she said, walking down the street away from him. Enza smiled, the coin jingling in her pouch with her sword points. She would give her all for Miz. She would give her all for her Champions. As the Fair sang in her song, the past may be scrawled in blood, but we write the future of Miz in ink, in might, in magic. Enza hummed the tune as she walked down the street, knowing she would help to tell that story as well.

About the Author

Tristan J. Tarwater is a writer of fantasy, comics and RPG bits. Her titles include The Valley of Ten Crescents series, Hen & Chick, Shamsee: A Fistful of Lunars, and Reality Makes the Best Fantasy. She has also worked for both Pelgrane Press and Onyx Path.

Born and raised in NYC, she now considers Portland, OR her home. When she's not making stuff up, she is usually reading a comic book, cooking delicious meals for her Spouse and Small Boss or petting one of her two cats. Her next RPG character will most definitely be an elf.

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