

The Wishbone Conspiracy: 2204 words... AND a scene snippet

By Holly Lisle

Today I'm just posting a snippet because it surprised me.

I have this big, scary, rich guy in the story who's powerful and dangerous... and here's where Cady meets him:

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With that said...

I'd been awake for over thirty-three hours, had eaten enough food for ten people during the banquet, had enjoyed the music and entertainers, and had found my host the most terrifying specimen of genetically altered humanity I had ever seen – and yet found myself laughing at his stories.

He was warm, friendly, funny.

He was sitting at the head of the same table as the rest of us, telling us a story about hunting down a pack of predatory saurids that had been attacking a village, and when he got to the part where one of the monsters had circled around behind him and bit a chunk out of his ass, he stood, turned around, and yanked down one half of his pants, and showed us a missing chunk of posterior the size of my head and shoulders.

He laughed. "I still got t' little devil, and skint and et him. And got what's left of 'im stuffed and 'anging on me wall."

I was laughing so hard my eyes watered. One of the braver men said, "Why don't you have reju fix your – er – posterior?"

"And give up me gorgeous scar? Are ya daft, man? The ladies love it. And how else could I show 'em me ass in polite company?"

It was a good fiction writing day. Now on to the other stuff.

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Snippet #2 from Longview 2: The Selling Of Suzee Delight

By Holly Lisle

I was planning on posting a snippet yesterday, but REAL LIFE™ intruded, and while I got all my words, I never made it back to the blog. I got all my words again today, so at the the moment, *Suzee Delight* is sitting at 5888 words out of a planned 20,000. More than 25% done.

Here's the setup. The famous courtesan Suzee Delight is

confessing to five murders before Pact Worlds judges, and both legal and illegal datastreams of her confession are going out into space, jumped through the origami points that connect the worlds of Settled Space to an audience of billions.

Charlie, who is the mandatory Pact Covenant Observer and enforcer of Pact regulations on the treatment of convict on the *Longview* Death Circus, is watching BOTH streams on side-by-side flat screens (not as cool as holoview, but much more practical for tight spaces). I'm bringing you in mid-interview...

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Left-side Suzee said, "I am ashamed of my actions. I betrayed the trust of five men I loved, and used my position of trust to murder them because I envied them their power."

Right-side Suzee said, "I am not ashamed of my actions. These five men betrayed the people they served and used their positions of trust to attempt to enslave free human beings."

The cutwork on the official version had been skillfully done. Charlie couldn't see or hear the blending between the segments that were actually her words, and those that had been inserted.

Most of Settled Space would see the raw version. Most people living on Pact Worlds would only have access to the official version, which had little enough truth in it.

Left-side Suzee said, "I failed my government, my educators, my selectors, my trainers, my clients, and my profession, which is the highest calling to which any woman can aspire."

Right-side Suzee said, "I accuse my government, my educators, my selectors, my trainers, and my clients for creating laws that make being a courtesan the highest work to which any woman can aspire."

"Damned right," Charlie muttered. Charlie had been lucky enough to be born homely and lacking in any discernible entertainment skills, and also infertile—she had been channeled into a low-level government job from which neither her intelligence nor her competence would ever elevate her. But her other government-designated career track had been D-3 Convenience Prostitute, and only the tremendously high suicide rate in the D-3 Pact Covenant Observer career field had saved her from that fate.

In front of her, left-side Suzee said, "Because I am guilty of five murders of men designated A-1, and because I freely confess that I committed these murders by intent..."

Right-side Suzee also said, "Because I am guilty of five murders of men designated A-1, and because I freely confess that I committed these murders by intent..."

Left-side and right-side Suzees both said, "I waive my right to trial in order to save the Pact Worlds the cost of such trial when the outcome is already certain, and instead elect to sell my death to the highest-bidding Death Circus, where my execution will be streamed for all viewers on all Pact Worlds."

Charlie didn't hear Suzee's final words, however.

She was out the door and shooting herself toward the Longview's Bridge, screaming "I need to speak to the owner, I need to speak to the owner now!" at the top of her lungs,

over and over.

Shay, the owner's representative, was on the bridge waiting for her when the passenger transport unlocked.

"Suzee Delight is selling herself to the highest-bidding Death Circus now," Charlie shouted.

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Novel Snippet: Headless Dude In The Morning (from DTD)

By Holly Lisle

Got 1201 words this morning, and a scene that I just cannot keep to myself.

This was not a planned part of the scene, which I also love. I was just looking for a nice place to end it, playing with the physics of my world, when I tripped over a Muse Bomb I planted last week and hadn't really considered, and it blew up for me into the snippet below.

What you need to know: Aleksa Kralj is in the police station, where she is reporting three men who broke into her apartment intending to kill her, and the man who jumped out of her closet to kill all three of them. She has been in the police station for a very long time, telling and retelling her story to a detective who does not seem to be buying it.

She has just discovered that her building has hidden security cameras in the hallways. And now she is about to hear WHY the

detective isn't happy with her description of events.

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It might have been that she'd been awake more than twenty-four hours straight, it might have been that she needed food or a drink...or it might have been a premonition that what she was about to hear next was going to be the reason she didn't get any sleep for the next twenty-four hours. But Aleksa's stomach flipped, and she thought for a moment she was going to throw up.

"You all right?"

"Tired," she said. "Just tired. What sort of problem, Detective Hammond?"

"Only minutes after you and Mr. Fox left your apartment, the video monitor shows a short, bright flash of light through the broken door. For about three minutes after that, we have nothing. Then the man you describe as Derok, wearing a camel coat with no bloodstains on it, a dark silk shirt, jeans, and dark running shoes, and carrying a large black bag full of all the materials you and Mr. Fox did not take with you—since those items were not found at the scene—came racing out of your apartment, turned in the opposite direction the two of you had taken when fleeing, used the stairs, and fled the building."

"He...what?"

"The man you describe as Derok was not dead, and not headless. There were no bodies in your apartment. There was no blood in your apartment. All the wreckage you described was there, but not the gladius. Two sets of men's clothes were on the floor more or less where you described men who had been wearing them, but though it looked very much like someone wore those close, and did not take them off, no one, living or dead, was wearing them when we found them."

"Then...there was no head in the hall?"

Detective Hammond rubbed his eyes with his thumbs. "Oh, I wish that were true. That would have made sense. But, well...we found the head in the hall. And we found the blood spatters from the second half—and only the second half—of its journey there on the ceiling, the floor, and the walls. When we type-matched the blood we swabbed from your face with the blood from the head in the hall, we got a a match. DNA testing takes a while, but we'll get that back, too, eventually. I'm sure, in the way we can usually be sure about bad news, that it, too, will match. In the meantime, though—"

He shrugged.

The room spun slowly around Aleksa, and only settled when she leaned her elbows on the table and remembered to inhale. "Derok...ran out of my apartment. Alive. Unharmd. After taking what remained of my research notes." She tried to make the pieces fit, but some were suddenly missing. And one was conspicuously extra.

She looked into Detective Hammond's eyes, hoping for reassurance, or perhaps a sign that he was joking. She didn't find any help there.

"Where are the bodies? And whose is the head in the hallway? Does it look like Derok's? Long blond hair, blue eyes..."

Detective Hammond met her gaze with weary frustration. "Looks

just like him. And just like the man who ran from your apartment after you left to come here. And now, Dr. Kralj," he said, "you understand my problem."

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Friday Snippets: From the Ghost Files

By Holly Lisle

I'm at a point where I really can't post any more of the Moonroads book, at least not for a while. But I still want to do Friday Snippets. So I figured for your amusement and edification, I'd post snippets from the stuff I've had rejected but that I still intend to keep trying to sell, albeit perhaps in a different genre or in a highly revised version.

Black Dog: Chapter 1: Part One

Black Dog: Chapter 1: Part Two

Black Dog: Chapter 1: Part Three

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BLACK DOG

(...Chapter One continued...)

Real plant, scientific marker. F2 ... that was a genetic term. She tried to remember high school biology, and that was either the parent or the child second generation in genetic experiments, wasn't it?

Genetic experiments.

The chill she felt in that instant wasn't from the cold. The fact that tender flowers were blooming and tender plants were bearing fruit in a cold mountain valley while covered with snow could really only be explained by genetic engineering, couldn't it? Natalie couldn't make sense of any of the rest of the label, though the word 'human' in context with a genetic experiment involving plants scared her.

All her happiness at finding this miracle garden in the wilderness bled off, and she started snapping pictures of the markers at the bases of the plants for another reason. She'd bet her next year's profits that this was a GM live test site – a place where genetically modified plants were being grown outside of controlled conditions. And if the 'human' on the label meant someone was crossing human DNA with plant DNA, she would bet her 401K every bit of this was illegal. Dangerous. Something that could hurt people. With food crops involved – and she stared at the apple trees and the corn and the berries and all the rest – it could be lethal.

She snapped pictures as fast as she could, trying to get all the labels. Someone should be able to figure out what they meant. She had to get as much proof as she could, and as much information. She didn't know who she'd give it to, but she would worry about that later.

And then the feeling that something was watching her

returned, and she looked up. And on a post, fairly well hidden by plants, she saw a surveillance camera. Red light blinking on the base. Pointed right at her.

No.

She took two steps to the left. The camera tracked her movement.

A second snake in the Garden of Eden. Oh, God.

And then, right beside her, out of nowhere, a deep rumbling growl crawled into her ears and through her brain and straight down her spine and turned her knees to jelly.

She looked to her right. Slowly.

A black dog the size of a Shetland pony advanced on her, hackles raised, teeth bared, eyes glowing an insane fiery red. She heard a pathetic, whimpering, dying-rabbit noise and realized that it was coming from her. She turned to face the dog, but at the same time started backing away.

Oh, God, oh, God, oh, God was she in trouble.

The dog had to weigh at least two hundred pounds. At least two hundred. He was the biggest, most terrifying animal she had ever seen in her life; the only thing she could think as she stared at him and backed away was, Run, but if she ran, he'd jump on her and tear her apart. He would. She knew it.

She backed up the side of the mountain, through the carefully planted and labeled genetically-modified plants, past another surveillance camera, her feet leaving deep tracks in the snow. She kept backing, and then she was out of the test beds, and feeling scrub brush and forest understory plants smacking against the back of her head.

She bumped into a tree, and the dog snarled and stalked closer.

His eyes looked as big as saucers. And they were still glowing red. What the hell kind of dog was he? Was he the thing that she'd thought she felt tracking her through the woods?

I'm going to die here.

She skirted around the tree trunk behind her, never taking her eyes off the dog. She wondered if she could find a climbable tree, and if she could get up it before he could pounce on her.

Maybe to the first, she decided, not a chance to the second. She kept backing, with the bright colors of the nightmare garden gradually giving way to more and more leafless understory plants.

The dog seemed to be herding her someplace, she thought. And when she thought it, his ears suddenly perked forward and he stood up straight and the snarl went away, replaced for just an instant by a big, doggie grin that transformed him almost completely from something terrifying into something friendly. Except for those weird red eyes.

Natalie was staring at the dog. Something about him wasn't right. Not right at all. She was almost certain that she could see the outline of the tree right behind him through him. Which was insane.

And then, right before Natalie's eyes, the dog faded like fog under the hot sun.

She yelped.

And a strong arm wrapped around her chest and a leather-gloved hand clapped over her mouth – hard – and a man's deep voice snarled in her ear, "You have about 30 seconds to decide whether you want to live today, or whether you want to die."

End of Chapter One.

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BLACK DOG

(...Chapter One continued...)

She could see clearly on the other side of the stream. She could see everything over there. Bare-branch underbrush, unbroken snow, good light from nearly overhead that did not leave any dark puddles where something might lurk.

No big moving bulky skulking thing.

Natalie took a step backward and realized that she was shaking. She was not a nervous person. Didn't jump at noises in her apartment, didn't fear living alone, didn't have a bit of trouble falling asleep at night. She was imaginative – in her line of work, she had to be – but she'd never had the problem of feeling her imagination trying to push its way into her reality. She was a practical person; this was something that had always been a point of pride with her.

And yet she could look at that empty bank and still be dead certain that she had seen something.

She retraced her steps, stood facing the same way, walked forward slowly, trying to duplicate the flash of red that had caught her attention. Trash on the other side of the woods might have caused the sudden brilliant glow of red; a kid's bicycle reflector or broken glass from an automobile taillight might make such a flash if illuminated for just a moment by a stray beam of sunlight. It would make sense. But she couldn't get the flash again.

But just because she couldn't duplicate it, that didn't mean that wasn't what it had been.

Just some trash. Nothing scary.

And yet, inside her, primitive hindbrain instinct was screaming, "Run. Go back. Get away from here."

Behind her lay the safety of her lovely rented log cabin and the idyllic lake. Ahead lay the siren lure of a mysterious waterfall, the sound of thundering water sweet to Natalie's ears, the possibility of something wonderful drawing her forward. Not just because she needed pictures for the team. Not just for the future of some as-yet intangible project. But for her, because something inside of her was hungry for wild water and solitude and places that no one else had ever seen.

So she caged the small, nervous creature at the back of her mind. That timorous, trembling prey that feared the shadow of the hawk and the gliding step of the wolf would keep itself where it belonged – well-hidden, where its fears could not control her.

She could no longer find calm within herself; the feeling of being watched, silly thought it was, had driven her self-assuredness from her. But Natalie wanted mystery and beauty, wildness and adventure, even if it was the mundane adventure of locating a hidden waterfall. So she kept walking.

The terrain got rougher. The ground began to rise sharply, and the stream and the valley both took a sharp jog to the right.

She climbed on, stopping for a few minutes at a time to catch her breath. Finally, she reached a sort of plateau, and found herself faced by a rusted chain hanging over the stream between two old fence posts jammed into the earth. And hanging on the center of the chain, a battered, pitted faded metal sign.

NO TRESPASSING

Black with pale yellow letters that had surely once been bright and commanding. But not anymore – nor did Natalie have any interest in being commanded. She'd put too much effort into getting where she was to meekly turn around and go back.

She gave the sign's warning only a moment's consideration, and then climbed over the chain, and walked on. She was very near the waterfall; she couldn't see it yet, but its music was rising to a thundering crescendo, and she could just imagine how beautiful it would be.

Past the chain, the ground again rose steeply. Natalie lost herself in the sheer physical effort of the next leg of her journey, as what had seemed like a path became, briefly, almost vertical.

And then she got where she was going.

She came over the top of the rise, and stopped, blinking, certain for a moment that the altitude or exertion were playing tricks on her mind. She rubbed her eyes, certain she couldn't be seeing what her brain insisted she saw. Looked behind her, down the steep slope, over at the short run of whitewater as the stream shot down the narrows, and then back to the impossible scene in front of her.

To vivid green plants, to drifts of flowers in gold and periwinkle and crimson, pink and amber and lavender and royal purple, to young trees fully leafed out and set with unripe fruit, and behind this paradise, a shimmering rainbow-wreathed waterfall in the background and a deep, sapphire pool at its base that reflected the gem tones of the flowers around it.

Garden of Eden, she thought, afraid to breathe for fear that a single exhalation might erase the vision before her.

"God," she whispered. The starts of tears blurred her vision; she found herself swallowing around a lump in her throat.

She'd come yearning for beauty and a mystery, and she'd found a miracle.

I'll post continuing excerpts from this for the next few

weeks.

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BLACK DOG

Chapter One

Out of the corner of her eye, Natalie Hammond caught a glimpse of something moving with her through the snowy woods. Just off to her right, on the other side of the brush. Something big. Something dark. She stopped, hand on the pepper gas canister in her coat pocket, and turned, ready to confront whatever it was. But looking directly at the brush, she could see that nothing was there. Nothing. And still the hair stood up on the back of her neck.

Natalie turned slowly in a full circle, scanning the terrain. The stream bed beside her. Her tracks along the path leading back to the rental cabin and the lake, both out of sight. Woods all around her, the mountains of north Georgia steep but not rugged, tree-covered but – because everything in early March the ground was still covered by snow and all those trees were bare – with decent visibility.

Natalie could see well enough in all directions, and all she could see was that she was alone.

Still, her pulse raced, and her mouth dried out, and she could not force herself to let go of the pepper spray. Her eyes told her she was alone. But her gut insisted something watched her. From nearby.

Dammit.

Natalie took a long, slow, deep breath and tried to slow her skittering heartbeat. She'd been in the city too long. Raleigh always had something going on, Natalie always had friends and colleagues around, and this sort of silence simply wasn't a part of her life. She was alone. She could see that. She wasn't being watched; she wasn't being followed. Her mind, used to the constant press of people, was manufacturing shadows.

But just to be sure, she walked through the layer of snow to the place where she'd thought she saw movement. The snow there was pristine. No footprints. No trails.

She sighed, forced her hand to let go of the pepper spray, and, just to kick her day back onto its planned track, she took a picture of the woods with her digital camera. It was nothing spectacular, but maybe the team would find a use for a shot of underbrush and unbroken snow.

She returned to the faint path she'd been following, breathed in the cold, crisp air, and finally felt like she was getting back under control. She stood quietly for a moment and listened. The waterfall sounded nearer, and she was hoping that she'd be able to reach it in time to get some good shots of it before she lost her light. She checked her watch. Just past noon. She should have plenty of time to get the pictures, then make the hike back to the cabin. And if she decided to be really ambitious, she load all the photos onto the laptop, put them into some sort of format, suggest a possible storyline, and e-mail the whole thing to the team.

Natalie would bet money she wasn't going to be feeling ambitious, though.

She thought of PirateBox, of her friends back in Raleigh researching conspiracy theories and bouncing ideas off each other at a hundred miles a minute and creating wild stories that they then turned into award-winning video games – and she could be proud of everything she and her colleagues had accomplished together. She loved all of them. She loved seeing the joy they got from doing what they did. But she couldn't feel that hunger inside herself anymore. She didn't know when she'd lost it, but her own fire was gone.

She trudged beside the stream bed, getting nice shots of boulders and overhangs, doing what she'd told the team she was going to do. Wondering if, when she had to leave this haven, she would be able to go back to her old life. Natalie

had reached her mid-thirties with a great career and wonderful friends, and she was one of the tiny percentage of people on the planet who could honestly say that she was living her dreams.

She wondered how many of those others found themselves probing their dreams like an aching tooth, wondering if what they had was really all there was –

She froze.

Across the stream bed, from the corner of her eye she caught flash of glowing ruby, a shadow slinking forward. Something as big as a man crouched over, as big as a calf – something bulky, and fast. She jumped and turned in a single movement, the pepper-spray canister in her hand, her index finger on the trigger.

Again, nothing.

I'll post continuing excerpts from this for the next few weeks.

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Friday Snippet: from MOONROADS

By Holly Lisle

I wrote this and liked it. It's a bit after the last snippet,

but not so much that you can't ellipse the missing action and figure out things have not gone well.

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The dragon said, "It was quite clever on their part. And sure as sunrise in the morning. Because no one who walks into my lair walks back out. The bones of my victims line the passages, and the screams of the sacrifices who have been thrown to me echo still through all these chambers. Your deaths will end a lot of people's plans, and bring joy to some nasty fellows."

"But," I said. "But. You know the truth. And you do not sound like you love the rich old men and all their power. Surely you'll let us go."

"Surely I won't," the dragon said. "If any lived who had walked into my domain, do you think humans or nightlings would still fear me? Do you not think they would then send in hunters to kill me for my skin, and meat, and bones. Do you not think a pack of them would sneak in here intent upon claiming my head to hang above their fireplaces, forever after to have the bragging rights for having killed me?"

His head lowered until it lay almost on the floor, and he said, "None who walk into my lair walk back out. None. Not even little human girls who have my sympathy. "

His great jaws gaped wide, and he roared to deafen us both. We screamed. Oh, Spirit and little gods preserve me, but I screamed until I was sure my throat would tear itself apart. I was in his mouth, his teeth a cage around me, and Catri was with me. His tongue pushed at me, at her, and I toppled into a great bag of skin I thought must be his stomach, and Catri

was gone. I kept screaming. Screaming, and flailing. I had my dagger yet, and I tried to stab anything, anything.

I did not even scratch him. Catri was gone, though I could hear her screaming, too. And beyond the gaps between the dragon's teeth, which the light around my neck still showed me, I heard cheering from a distance.

The cheering of men and monsters.

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Friday Snippet: From MOONROADS

By Holly Lisle

This picks up about where the last snippet left off. The stuff that was in the last snippet has been totally rewritten. But still. Genna and her best friend Catri being chased by human-haters.

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We ran down the darkening passage, with them behind us, and they began to run, too. The corridor grew darker yet, and beautiful Arrienda became rough around the edges, where

worked stone was replaced by living rock, where the ever-glowing moon-lights gave way to intermittent, smoking torches, and where smoothly graded floors ceded their place to uneven ground.

Faint light gave way to darkness—and the passageway became the raw rock walls of a crevasse in a true cave, a place where things dwelt that never saw the light, and never needed to. Blind and groping things. Creatures who could hear the faintest breath, the beating of a heart, the rush of blood through veins.

We pressed ourselves against damp sandstone and did not move. I could hear the trickle of water, but I could not begin to guess whether it was far away or nearby. I could not hear any footsteps, any voices, anything other than the two of us breathing. We had left nightlings and taandu monsters and nightworlders behind us. Where we had come, they had not followed.

Pursuing that thought, of course, I tripped over a second and more worrisome one. Perhaps we had moved into a danger so great it frightened them away. This is the sort of thing I think when I am in the dark, and lost. I'm never much of a comfort to myself.

"Genna?" Catri whispered. "Something's dripping on my head. And the back of my neck."

We couldn't see anything. I wore a crystal on a chain around my neck—a gift Yarri, the same nightling friend we had been trying to meet, had given me—and if I tapped it, clear pale light would illuminate the area around us.

If I tapped it, anything that still searched for us would find us.

If I didn't tap it, of course we might discover only as we were devoured that the liquid dripping down Catri's back was

not another cut tree root, but drool from a monster crouching on a ledge above us.

I am no comfort to myself.

I pulled the light from beneath my sweater and whispered, "Get ready to run." I tapped the light.

Water trickled down the rock wall against which Catri leaned. No monster. No taandu root. No one ran screaming at us, brandishing a club or a sword. The darkness beyond our circle of light stayed dark, the silence around us stayed silent, and there we were. Two girls alone beyond the Arrienda Deeps, where no breeze blew, where nothing skittered or whispered or moved, where I could see no sign that anything had ever walked where we walked.

Catri's eyes were huge. "Where are we?"

I gave her the look we reserve for people who ask stupid questions.

"I was just hoping you might have some idea," she said.

We started back the way we had come, trudging, listening for the sounds of pursuers.

"Why wouldn't they have followed us here?" Catri asked. She walked at my side so she could stay within our circle of light. This created terrifying shadows that ran along the rough stone beside her.

I shrugged. "Because it's dark?"

"There were torches. They could have brought them. They would have caught us easily."

"Because they didn't really want us?"

She shook her head.

Behind us, a growling voice said, "I suspect it was because they have the sense to be afraid of me."

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Friday Snippet: from THE RUBY KEY

By Holly Lisle

The cat has led our heroes to a cave mouth and instructed them to go inside, telling them they'll know when they've gone far enough. And then, he's gone off hunting. Genna picks up the story from there.

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The look of the cave mouth gave me no comfort. A narrow vertical cleft jagged upward through sandstone to about to the height of a man, with the base wide enough for us, but the top of the opening nothing but a crack that ran upward as far as I could see. Inside was darkness, and nothing but darkness, and it was all I could do to crouch and move inside.

Dan and Yarri squeezed in after me. We could see nothing.

"Do you suppose there are bats in here?" I asked. I'm

terrified of bats.

“Bats,” Yarri said, “and lizards, blind snakes, various toads and frogs, worms, all sorts of insects. Maybe rats. Fish, but again, probably blind ones. And cliffs and ledges and dead ends and drop-offs. Probably some larger predator who has found this a convenient den—”

“Yarri,” I said. “Still your tongue, please. And turn on your light.”

Yarri didn't say or do anything for a moment. Then she said, “Oh! You didn't want to know what was in the cave, did you?”

“I wanted you to say, ‘No, Genna. I'm sure nothing is in here but us.’”

She tapped the little light she wore as a chain around her neck once we got to the first sharp turn, and we and the inside of the cave were illuminated in cool, blue-white light. We couldn't see far. The low, narrow passageway turned sharply to the right just ahead of us.

“I don't see any bat guano,” Yarri said after a moment. “So there probably aren't any bats.”

I didn't believe her. In my mind, they were all just waiting around the next corner. And I did see spider-webs, so my skin started crawling anyway. Outside, I don't mind spiders much. But in low places, where I'm sure they'll drop into my hair and I won't know, just the thought of them makes me want to shiver. Or scream.

“Genna, you have to go,” Dan said. “We can't spend the night here.”

We could. We wouldn't be comfortable. But we could.

Still, I had to believe the cat had brought us to this place for a reason, and I had to trust that it was a good one. So I

started forward. I could hear Dan and Yarri shuffling forward, and I could hear Yarri whispering to Dan.

But worse than that, I could hear whispers from ahead of us. I reached behind me to wave them to silence, and hit my brother in the head.

“OW!” he yelped. Ahead of me, a thousand voices shouted, “OW!”

I tried to turn, and discovered I could not—the passage was too narrow. “If anything in there didn’t know we were coming, it knows now,” I whispered. My angry whisper scuttled forward to add its rustling-paper sounds to the diminishing chorus of shouts. It also skittered back to my brother and Yarri, and they fell silent.

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Friday Snippet: from THE RUBY KEY

By Holly Lisle

This is more of the new material from the revision. Genna, Dan, and Yarri have fled Arrienda in search of help. On the road, they run into trouble.

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Suddenly Yarri stopped, her hand raised, her body tensed. "Listen."

Dan and I stopped as well. I heard the wind in the trees brushing bare branches and whispering through new leaves. And then something else.

Faint, distant, but coming closer. A howling, almost as if from a pack of wolves. But ... not. I heard something wrong in those long, quavering wails, something exaggerated, mystical, unearthly. Something that did not belong in forests or on roads where people walked.

Yarri grabbed both our arms. "We have to get off the road, but unless you do exactly as I say, even that won't help."

"What is it?" I asked.

"Death," Yarri muttered. "If it's what I think it is, fast, ugly death. Come on."

She bolted off the dirt road and beneath the trees, and Dan and I raced after her. She didn't go far into the woods, though—just deep enough in that I lost sight of the road. "That gets us away from her view," Yarri said, opening her pouch and pawing through it. "Now to get us away from their noses."

The howling got a little louder, and a lot more eerie.

She found what she was looking for, and with a soft cry of, "Ha!" pulled it out. She said, "Stand downwind of me. Quickly."

I tested the breeze and did as she said, as did Dan. She had a bottle in her hands, and when she squeezed the little bulb attached to it, it misted us lightly. I smelled nothing. She sprayed each of us all over, quickly, and herself last, getting even the soles of our feet, then sprayed back just a ways along the track by which we'd entered the forest. Then

she pulled a small knife from her kit and sliced two long strips from the bottom of her tunic. She tied one strip around my wrist and one around Dan's, and then had each of us tie the other ends around each of her wrists. "Crouch, keep close to the trunk of this tree, and don't move at all," she said. They're blind, but they can find you by the faintest scent or sound."

"What are blind?" I whispered.

But she put a finger to her lips and crouched down; she closed her eyes tightly and pressed her forehead against the rough bark of the tree trunk. Dan took a place at her left, I at her right, and we did as she did.

For a moment or two, nothing changed but that the howling grew louder.

Then, though, a hard wind rattled the branches over our heads and tossed damp leaves up from the forest floor into the air, and slapped them against us. A cold fog rolled over us, wet as the fogs that plague the highland, but thicker, and laden with the sweet-rotten stench of spoiled meat.

The reek of death.

Such a smell terrifies. It knots the belly; it tenses the muscles; it sends a shudder through the brain. It screams, "Run! Or die!" I felt that urge. Everything in the forest felt it. The beasts that inhabited the ancient forest fled as if before a fire, and every bone and muscle in my body fought to bolt, to run, to flee mindlessly, to mark myself as prey. But to get away, away, away.

I took Yarri's, thin, fine-boned hand and held onto it for life and sanity. I prayed she was holding on to Dan on the other side.

Then the howling was right on top of us, and I wondered how I

had ever mistaken the noise for wolves. Surely only from demons could such hideous sounds erupt.

The fog, lit by the moon, buried everything. I could not see the bark of the tree upon which my forehead rested.

The howling stopped, replaced by wet snuffling, and what sounded like hundreds of shuffling feet pushed past us on all sides—close enough that if any of us had reached out, I was sure we could have touched them. Or perhaps it was the fog that made them sound so close. I hoped it was that, and not the first thing, but I feared at any instant sharp teeth would sink into my neck and shake me the way a dog shakes a rabbit.

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