Friday Snippet: from THE RUBY KEY

written by Holly
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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 your 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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