

Friday Snippet: from THE RUBY KEY

written by Holly

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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 yelled. 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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