

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

This stuff may NEVER see print. I hope it does, but I acknowledge that you may be reading ghosts. However, in case I ever can find the right market for these stories, please don't repost, quote or copy the following excerpt. It is copyrighted and not yet abandoned. Hope remains.

BLACK DOG

(...Chapter One continued...)

Natalie didn't believe in miracles – she was a practical woman. And yet here she was, and the ground before her was just as snowy as the ground behind her, and yet the vision in front of her held steady. Summer flowers, summer trees, bushes with their thorny canes already heavy with blackberries and raspberries, corn in the tassel, something new and beautiful and exciting everywhere she looked.

Pictures, moron – get pictures, she told herself, and managed with trembling hands to raise the camera and start snapping. Framing her shots out of habit, but not because it was necessary, she started filling up her camera. At her current resolution, she had almost three hundred shots still available. That wasn't going to be enough, and she was glad she'd jammed her laptop into the backpack at the last minute. There were times during the climbing when she'd resented that extra five pounds, but now she'd be able to transfer all her pictures to the hard drive, then take as many more as she needed. She had two extra sets of fresh batteries. She could get all of this, every bit of it.

She stood there snapping away like a crazy person, taking a few steps forward, turning and clicking, because every angle revealed something new and wonderful, something impossible and magnificent and heartbreakingly pure.

Her mind fought for an explanation. There had to be one. This place where she stood was impossible. The plants she looked at couldn't exist in their current conditions.

And then, with a thud of clarity, the explanation presented itself, and she wanted to cry, and at the same time she had to laugh. Had it not felt like such a cliché to her, she would have thumped herself once on the forehead. The plants weren't real. She'd come upon some abandoned movie set or florist's dumping ground, and she was looking at charmingly realistic silk or plastic plants scattered around. Which would explain why banana plants were growing next to apple trees, and what papayas and some alien spiky things were doing next to corn and strawberries and dark red cherries.

But this place still made a hell of a photo op, didn't it? She snapped a few more pictures, imagining the bewilderment of her colleagues when they received the e-mail with these photos.

Her mind raced, trying to figure out how they could they use a place like this in a game, and for a moment her weariness with her career fell away and she found herself caught up in the sheer joy of creating a story.

She needed a few close-ups. She could send those in a separate e-mail later, after she'd fielded the demands from her team for an explanation and after she'd had her little laugh. She crossed the ground to the closest flowerbed; she was pretty sure she recognized foxgloves and hollyhocks, and a couple different types of daisies, or flowers that were at least daisy-like. Natalie's mother was a fanatical gardener, but Natalie had never had the chance to catch the bug.

She focused the lens for extreme close-up and crouched next to one of the hollyhocks, wanting to get the detail of thread patterns in the petals.

She couldn't find them. She put the camera down, leaned close, and looked.

The flowers appeared to be real.

No. Not possible.

She reached out with one finger, and touched not plastic or silk but the softness of a real flower. When she pulled her finder back, she could see pollen on her fingertip.

And at her close range, she could see something else. Down at the base of the plant, a little marker. She leaned in close. F2/ polymorphic SSR/ human batch 3084/ STMN2/ CNTN5/ DRG1

Natalie crouched there, staring at that marker for a moment, bewildered. It felt like finding a snake in the Garden of Eden.

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