

Friday Snippet–Green Magic I–Chapter 1

By Holly Lisle

This is the first 40% of Chapter One in the first book of the series project that I'm calling Green Magic, the part marked "Out of the cage" on its index card. In spite of the fact that if it sells it's the first section of a pseudonymous category romance, I think my regular readers, men included, may still like this section. So I'm giving it a shot and posting it here.

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Chapter One

In the darkness just outside his cage, a voice murmured, "Don't move, don't make a sound. I'm getting you out of here."

Tom O'Riley, beaten, bleeding and bound at wrists and ankles, lying in a fetal position in the cage where his captors had left him, decided he was probably hallucinating. The voice was a woman's, a soft contralto that sent shivers down his spine. The few faint outlines of her body that he could make out in the darkness curved deliciously. And she was alone. In a hellhole like this.

So she couldn't possibly be real.

Tom hadn't heard a woman's voice in over a month, since he and two members of his five-man team had been taken prisoner.

He hadn't heard a friendly voice in three days, since Merrick had been dragged from his cage, not to return. Stikes had fallen off Tom's radar two days before that.

He'd become the last survivor, in the hands of men who hated Americans and who had captured him as he and his team were rescuing a kidnapped American mother and her three kids from the foreign-national husband who had dragged them back to squalor and captivity in his home country.

Tom knew he was going to die soon. He'd been humiliated, beaten, tortured, starved—and he knew damned well the only reason he still lived was because Stikes and Merrick had died with some secrets still untold.

He was the enemy's last chance to find out who had sent the team, who else knew about the location of the kidnapped Americans, and who—if anyone—knew the true nature of the location from which they'd been rescued. But the bastards had to figure they were running out of time, if they hadn't run out already. Tom might still be breathing for another twenty-four hours. Probably less.

And now...hallucinations.

Starvation and lack of water were finally finishing him off. He was seeing people, hearing voices—he was plagued by wishful thinking and a deteriorating mind in what were certain to be the last hours of his life.

His hallucination knew her way around a lockpick, though.

She knelt by the lock at his back, and he lay watching her as best he could from his awkward angle. He had to twist his head around, and even then he could only see part of her with one eye. She worked in shadows and dressed in black—skin-tight, light-absorbent black—with a mask over her face and what he had to guess were infrared goggles covering her eyes.

With a faint click, the door came open, and she touched his wrists, and picked the lock on his handcuffs. He could feel the warmth of her hand through the thin layer of soft, silky gloves. Could a dying man feel a hallucination, he wondered. No. He didn't think so. In spite of her unlikeliness, the odds had shifted in his favor. She was probably real. And probably rescuing him.

Suddenly he wished she were a man—he was naked and starved and filthy, beaten and broken, and he didn't care if a man saw him like that. But he had no doubt he would repulse a woman.

And then he shook his head. The stupid things men thought of when they were dying, or were likely to be dying at any time.

Sensation started returning to his hands. They hurt. A lot. Meanwhile, the woman rested her hands on the manacles around his ankles.

And both of them heard footsteps. He jumped. She didn't twitch. She made no effort to hide. She simply sat there for a moment, head down, as still as frozen night, with her breathing gone deep and slow—and he felt cold energy blast through him. It made him shiver and lifted the small hairs on the back of his neck straight up.

She turned to him and put a finger to where her lips would be under the black mask, while both of them could still hear those footsteps coming closer, and she went back to work on the manacles around his ankles. At the same instant, very close to the room in which Tom and the unknown woman waited, a cell phone rang, and the guard answered it.

"I'm checking on the prisoner," the guard said in Tarifit, a dialect of Berber.

A pause, while a voice Tom could not make out shouted over the phone.

"I'll go check," the guard said, sounding like he was trying to placate a crazy man. Tom heard the click of the cell phone being closed, and then a heavy sigh. The footsteps receded down the corridor and died away into silence.

The woman muttered, "Thank you," and kept working on the lock that held the manacles in place around his ankles.

"There," she said after another moment. Then, "Can you walk?"

The trick with the phone bothered him. Did she have a team member outside who'd managed to place that call—to exactly the right guard's cell phone, and in perfect Tarifit, and in a voice the guard recognized as one in authority? Or had she perhaps set off some sort of diversion elsewhere, and it was just luck that the guard got called away.

But she hadn't been worried. So he asked, "How did you do that?"

"I didn't do anything. Can you walk?"

She had done something. He'd felt that burst of cold blast through him from her while her head was lowered. But he didn't press her. If she had new tech, he'd just wait until he had the chance to get an up-close look at it. They weren't in a good place for an exciting chat about R&D hardware, anyway. And if, as the creeped-out feeling at the back of his neck suggested, she was pulling a Raven...well—later would be the time to deal with that, too. So he crawled out of the cage and pulled himself to a standing position, doing his best to hide his agony in the process. The room spun crazily for a moment, then steadied. He felt like hell—his captors had left no part of his body unharmed, from the soles of his feet which they'd whipped until they bled, to body parts they'd electroshocked, to the fingers they broke, and the hands they'd bound so tightly they were still tingling to painful life. He wanted a stretcher, his four best friends, and a Huey with a MedEvac team hovering overhead.

But the black-clad woman was still alone, and his best guess was that the two of them were walking out. She sure wasn't big enough to carry him.

"I'll manage," he told her.

"Then come on. You can lean on me when you need to." He heard the sympathy in her voice. It goaded him a little, made him want to prove that he could carry his own weight. Something in the line of her body, in the richness of her soft voice, made him need to have her see him as a warrior, not as a victim. "We have clothes and other things you'll need in the van," she added, and he felt relief that she did have a team. Somewhere.

"But I couldn't carry them in with me," she continued. "So for now, you have to do two things, or we'll both end up dead faster than you can imagine. You have to stay no farther than a foot from me at all times, and you have to hold my hand."

He considered that for a moment. Staying no more than a foot from her sounded pretty good. His mind dipped for just an instant from the very important issue of getting his ass out of there before he died, to the distraction of his rescuer. She was tall but curvy, and that voice of hers made him remember other types of desire besides water, and food—and safety.

But...safety. Right.

He focused on business. "You have some sort of new invisibility technology?"

She looked at him sidelong. He wished he could see her face—he sensed amusement in her gaze, but her eyes didn't give him enough information.

"Something like that," she told him, and the voice verified what the eyes suggested. His question had amused her.

They started forward, and she kept them to shadows. She moved

quickly, though, much faster than he would have dared move had he been relying solely on stealth. The speed they were making hurt like hell. So did her grip on his broken fingers and battered hand.

"So who are you?" he whispered.

"You don't yet have need-to-know clearance for that," she said. "And I suppose I should have mentioned the third thing you can't do while we're moving is talk."

Right. He should have figured.