

Sneak Peek from Talyn

By Holly Lisle

This is one of the few bits toward the end that doesn't include what would be huge spoilers for the beginning. And I like it. So.

All the caveats apply – this is raw, unchecked first draft, I do not want copyedits or corrections posted in the weblog because I do not check the weblog for copyedits or corrections, and it is not a final version by ANY stretch of the imagination so you may not post portions of it anywhere or quote it if reviewing the book at some point in the future. It's just up here for fun.

Here's the setup. Talyn and Gair are being hunted by their enemies. They have found an escape route from a large cave system where they're trapped, but it's a pretty crappy exit through a tiny crevice only large enough to permit one person to crawl through at a time.

I hope you enjoy.

Talyn

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I have never liked enclosed spaces, and I cannot say that I was brave going into this one, or happy about it. I was in absolute darkness, pressed in above and below and to both sides by rock, the floor of the crevice was slimy and a

trickle of icy water ran over is, and I kept feeling things crawling over my skin in the darkness. I could not tell if they were real or imaginary. I scraped my knees and elbows, smacked my head on jutting stone that I could not see, and thought cruel thoughts about Gair, who had a tiny bit of light in front of him and so was not crawling blind. The darkness, the stone, and the closeness all began crowding in on me so that I began to imagine myself alone, trapped, dying in the darkness unnoticed and unmourned.

And then I squirmed through one easy stretch of the crevice and received a solid kick in the face from Gair, who was fighting to get through the narrower next portion. I yelped.

He said, "Shhh. We're almost out. I can see actual daylight above me. Get rid of the map so that its light doesn't alert anyone."

Gair's feet vanished, and I lay in silence and darkness again, clutching my nose and tasting blood.

I started forward, making as close to no sound as I could manage, and found myself in a pile of slimy dirt and wet leaves and prickles and burrs and twigs. And things that squirmed and crawled across my hands and over my face and through my hair and down my neck.

I wanted to scream, jump up, brush myself off, dance around in circles getting whatever was on me off of me – and all I could do was squirm deeper into the mess. Gair had been where I was, in a horribly narrow section worn more or less smooth my eons of dripping water, when he told me he saw light. He'd been right in the middle of the slime and the bugs and whatever else was in there.

I peered forward and didn't see any light.

But then, he hadn't said he saw light in front of him. He said he saw it above him. I twisted around and looked up.

I didn't see it above me, either. But I did get hit by dirt raining down into my face.

Right. I didn't see light because he was plugging up the exit. I shuddered and felt around, dreading touching anything because I could see nothing and had no way of knowing what exactly was down in that hole with me. I'd run out of forward. The exit now went straight up, still narrow, offering some handholds and some footholds, but all of them wet and slimy and cold and covered with moss. I started up.

And heard, suddenly, softly whispered swearing in a steady, miserable stream.

"What are you doing up there?" I whispered.

"I'm stuck. We're going to have to go back."

"You can't be that stuck. We're almost out of here."

"I'm that stuck. I have my head and one shoulder and one arm squeezed through this narrow spot, and the other shoulder won't fit. I'm not even sure I can get back down to where you are without ripping my arm or my head off."

I was wet and filthy and shivering and I could still feel things crawling all over me, whether they were or not, and the only thing that had gotten me through that passage was the promise of fresh air and light and room to breathe and move at the other end of it.

I was not going back into the caves.

"Try harder," I whispered. "Here – I'll push you."

I climbed until I could feel his feet, and braced myself, and grabbed one of his ankles and shoved.

I heard his yelp of pain and a hissed, "Stop, stop, stop, stop!" And then silence. And then a string of what I

guessed would be profanity in his native language, and then, "I can't move forward. I can't move back. At all."

Jostfar, I prayed, let them not be looking for magic. Please. Please, please, please ...

And I reached into the Hagedwar and with the power there reshaped the rock that pinned Gair just enough that he could get through. I was done in the merest instant, half the blink of an eye, the smallest fraction of a single breath.

But in that instant, I heard voices some distance away begin shouting, "I have a direction! I have a direction. They're that way!"

"Go!" I whispered. "Hurry! We'll never have another chance."

Comments and questions are welcome, but if the answer to your question would include a spoiler, I'll just note that you'll have to wait and see.

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