

Snippet from THE RUBY KEY

By Holly Lisle

I'm not going to give too much set up here. My young heroes have made a life-or-death deal with the nightling Kai-lord, and have realized he doesn't intend to keep his end of it. They've gone to visit an ancient audiomaerist—a woman who can track people through time and space from the words they've spoken.

And the old woman is studying the cut the heroine, Genna, received on her hand from the dream she was dreaming.

I held out my hand.

“Here are the bits of gravel I dug out of it,” Yarri said, and put her little handmade bag on the table.

The old woman ran one gnarled finger along the edges of my cut, and hissed. She undid the little tie on the bag, and touched the grit, and suddenly she wrapped her arms around herself, closed her eyes, and began rocking back and forth, making keening noises. Dan and I both jumped, but Yarri held out her hands, a calming gesture. “Wait,” she mouthed.

“He hunts the three of you, by the roads and also through the second world, the world that the wounded child has entered. He has set the silver women and with her blind hounds on you, and the bard with his harp strung with the hairs of long-dead warriors. When the bard's harp sings on its own, the warriors come forth, and their eyes see through the worlds and through life and death and time.

“And the one you seek hides from him, and has hidden from him for a long time, bearing many faces and many names, and our enemy has only the one name to follow. You seek a trickster, and perhaps you will find him, and perhaps he will find you.

And if he finds you first, you may face danger from all sides."

She opened her eyes, and stared at my brother and me, and then at Yarri. And then she turned to her cat. "You'll go with them, of course. They'll be walking the moonroads, and we cannot think they'll find their way without your sort of help."

"I thought you'd want a favor," the cat said, and I shrieked, and Dan jumped. "I might go with them, even if just for a while. I don't like the silver huntress or her vile white-eyed hounds, but that old harp and I have crossed paths a time or two before. I might play with it again, just for the fun of it."

Even Yarri looked shaken. "How did you make him talk?" she asked our host.

The old woman looked disgusted. "I have done nothing with him but feed him at night and listen to his long-winded tales. If you value your sanity, don't let him tell you about the time he sailed all the seas."

"I'll take them along the moonroads," the cat said. "But you're the one who will have to tell us which roads we'll need to follow."

"Dare I say the name of the one they seek?" she asked the cat. "Though better you than them, better here than later. He can't see them here. Or me. I always feel better when he can't see me."

*"I don't think he concerns himself with cats," I said, and the cat turned all his attention on me, and looked straight into my eyes, and from his mouth I heard the words, "Neither do I," while in my mind, just as clearly, his voice said, **And you, Dreamer ... do you think I'm a cat? Here, kitty, kitty, have some nice fish?"***

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