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Revising the Horror Novella

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The Blood-Red Woods

By Kate Cavallaro

Set in a world where creatures of nightmares are real, the elusive Dark Huntress, Savannah, enlists the help of the lovely and rugged forest guide Eve and her awestruck younger sister Dorothy to navigate the Blood-Red Woods under false pretenses. The ghosts of Savannah's past are propelling her forward and the creatures of the Woods are eager to play with new prey.

Excerpt: Introduction

She arrived in a town like an Old West outlaw, dressed in all black and shrouded in mystery, her head hung low and a weapon at her side. If this was a Western, people would have peered out their windows and stared. But it wasn't, and no one stirred. A stranger in town wasn't news around here. Plenty of people passed through, dressed in plenty of mysterious ways with plenty of mysterious motives.

It wasn't the people that the town's residents worried about.

The Dark Huntress had arrived with a mysterious motive of her own. She was an extremely purposeful person; everything was done with a plan and a confident stride. She had a worn backpack slung over her shoulders, and nestled in that backpack, below provisions, a water skin, a rolled-up blanket, and a few spare knives, was a crumbled newspaper article with the headline "Renowned Monster Slayer Edward Hawthorne to Head New Training Program in Stagside". That was her motive.

Excerpt: Adventurers Sav and Eve search for Eve's younger sister Dorothy, a traveling companion who they have been recently separated from.

Sav was bent over her knees, retching out blood, for a worrisome couple of minutes, before she collapsed against a tree, struggling to take in air again. “Eve?” She asked, once she could talk again.

Eve didn’t respond, but Sav spotted her a few feet away, still bent over herself and gasping. Sav slowly made her way over, dragging herself through the dirt, a trail of blood-forming behind her.

Sav sunk to her knees next to Eve and put a comforting hand on her back. She used her other hand to gather up Eve’s curls and hold them gently out of the way of Eve’s retching. Eve’s hair was already pretty thoroughly matted with blood at this point, but at least Sav could save her from adding bloody vomit into the mix.

After a few more coughs, Eve collapsed to the ground with a groan.

Sav sat next to her. “You okay?”

Eve nodded, swallowing another bout of coughs to return the question. “You?”

“Fine,” Sav responded.

“*Dorothy!*” Eve sat up suddenly. “Where’s Dorothy?” She made her way back to her feet before Sav could stop her.

Sav shook her head. “I lost her.” She paused, not wanting to see the look on Eve’s face when she broke the news. She wished that she was better at comfort, that she could tell Eve more gently how her sister was missing. “I think she ran off the other way.”

Eve didn’t hesitate. “I’m going back for her.”

Sav grabbed for her arm, trying to hold her back before she marched back into the toxic blood cloud like some kind of idiot. “Don’t be stupid. The gas hasn’t cleared. Do you want to die?”

“I don’t care.” Eve shook her off, without bothering to look back. Clearly, she wasn’t thinking. “I’m not leaving Dorothy behind!”

Sav caught up with her easily. She wrapped her arms firmly around Eve’s waist to hold her back. Eve shoved at her, but Sav was without question the stronger of the two. She had wrestled monsters and come out on top; she could surely wrestle a five-foot-two human girl. “Dorothy isn’t back there, Eve.”

Eve fought her off still. “Let me go! I need to go save her.”

“You’re not going to save her if you rush back there like an idiot,” Sav said, trying to hold down Eve’s arms so she would stop elbowing her. “You’re going to die.”

“I can’t just sit here!” Eve yelled back at her. “What if she’s hurt or trapped *or*—“ Eve’s voice broke off, and she went limp in Sav’s arms, her body heaving with the force of her sobs.

Sav stood there, unsure what to do other than awkwardly keep her arms around Eve’s waist so she wouldn’t completely collapse. “We’re not going to do nothing.” She said softly. “We’ll circle around from a safe distance until we can pick up her trail. She’s smart, she’s out there somewhere, probably a safe distance away.”

After an excruciating pause, Eve nodded in reply.

Sav lowered them both slowly to the ground, letting Eve lean against her.

Eve looked up at her with a bloody, tear-stained face. “Why did you save me and not her?”

“You were closer,” Sav said, and it was the plain truth. “I couldn’t see anything. I would’ve grabbed her too if I could find her.”

Eve nodded. “I wish you had saved her instead.” She said quietly. “I can survive on my own. She—“

“Can too.” Sav interrupted. “Give her some credit.”

Eve just nodded again.

After a moment, Sav pushed herself back to her feet and offered a hand to Eve. “Come on, let’s get moving. We want to cover as much ground as we can before dark.”

Eve took the hand, letting Sav pull her back up to her feet.

Excerpt: The search eventually leads them deep into a cave.

Just when it felt like the passage would shrink smaller than Sav could fit through, the light was upon her. She pushed her way through a final circle of rocks and came out into an expansive cavern, with light streaming in from a hole in the cavernous ceiling.

Sav whipped around before Eve had even made it out of the hole. “Turn around. Go back.”

“What?” Eve asked, ignoring Sav to make her way to her feet. “We haven’t even looked-“

“*Turn around.*” Sav said again, practically shoving her back towards the small hole in the wall. “Hurry.”

“Calm down,” Eve said, pushing her way past Sav. “What’s going o-“ She stopped, finally seeing the cavern as Sav did.

The room was large and domed, a hole in the middle of the ceiling allowing some light to pour in. There seemed to be another tunnel on the other end, probably a good thirty feet from where they were standing.

And the walls. The walls were no longer the same rough black stone of the tunnel they had come through. The walls here were white. No, upon closer inspection, not white. Webbed. The walls were in fact stone but coated all the way around in a thick layer of white webbing.

Of course, it was not the webs themselves that were so startling, but the spattering of bodies, or, more accurately, body parts, woven among them, in various states of decay.

“Come on,” Sav said, grabbing Eve’s wrist and trying to pull her back towards the entrance.

Eve shook her off, walking further into the cavern. “What about Dorothy? We saw her tracks.”

“What are you going to do?” Sav snapped. “Check to see if any of these detached legs are fresh enough? If Dorothy came in here, she’s gone now.”

“She’s not gone!” Eve whirled around. “She could be hiding in here!”

“Where? Behind the ripped open torso or the skull?” Sav said.

Eve was already making her way across the floor. “Through there.” She gestured towards the open tunnel.

“You’re being stupid,” Sav said. “Come back here before whatever lives here comes home, or there won’t be any pieces left of you to find Dorothy.”

“Don’t you dare call me stupid!” Eve whipped around, and then terror quickly overcame the anger on her face. “Fuck, I’m stuck!”

“What?”

Eve leaned over to examine where her foot had sunk into a small dip in the ground filled with thick webbing. She braced her other foot against the ground to try and push herself out, but the webs held surprisingly well. “Sav?” She said, eyes big, her animosity seemingly gone for the moment.

“Fuck.” Sav mumbled. “Okay, stay put. I’m coming.”

“Sav?” Eve repeated, voice uncharacteristically shaky. “What does that mean?” She pointed up towards the hole in the ceiling, and Sav followed her gaze. A writhing black mass was making its way through the hole. No, not a mass, spiders. A few hundred spiders, crawling in through the hole and then spread out among the walls, weaving in and out of the webs.

“Fuck.” Sav mumbled again.

Creepy, but not all that dangerous. It wasn't the spiders that worried Sav. It was what would follow, what almost always followed.

She spared a quick glance back towards the entrance. She could make it, easily, but she pulled herself away. *Not without Eve*. Not even if it was the smart choice.

Sav bounded across the cave, careful to be light on her feet, only her toes grazing the floor.

She had just made it to Eve's side when the rumbling began, a low roar that started somewhere above them, and soon began to make the very walls vibrate.

Sav wrapped her arms firmly around Eve's waist and yanked, to no avail.

“Plant your other foot,” Sav instructed. “Push with me.”

Eve gritted her teeth and nodded, as the rumbling around them increased. A trail of spiders ran past their feet, but Sav couldn't stop to think of stepping on them. One skittered across her ankle, and she flinched as its coarse hair tickled her skin.

“Okay. 1... 2... 3...” They pulled and pushed in tandem, and Eve's foot came free with a pop.

“Thank god,” Eve muttered as Sav pulled her towards the tunnel.

One step. Two. Three.

The whole cave went dark, something massive and ominously dark eclipsing the hole in the ceiling.

Sav stopped and stared for only a second, before pulling Eve along, throwing her careful steps to the wind in favor of an all-out run.

The creature dropped into the cavern with an all-consuming thud that echoed off the walls.

Sav didn't stop to study it. She used the returned light to dive for the tunnel, hand in Eve's.

And then suddenly Eve's hand was limp in hers and then she was being yanked away, and Sav couldn't hold on.

"Eve!" Sav called useless as it was.

The tunnel out, just a few feet away.

Silence from Eve.

Something sharp at her neck.

Her whole body seemed to freeze in place and then crumple to the ground.

Then darkness.

Just darkness.

Excerpt: Now thoroughly tied up, Sav and Eve contend with the spider monster inhabiting the cave.

The Terachne was there, off the floor and climbing up the walls.

Sav didn't know whether to pray for her life or Eve's to be spared.

And then she didn't have time to worry about that anymore because the monster was hovering right over her, its grotesque face just inches from hers. She could feel its hairy legs brushing against the parts of her body not hidden behind layers of web.

Sav could no longer see Eve or the cavern beyond. Her whole field of vision became the creature, its skin scarred and oozing this close up.

She had enough time to hope it wasn't about to bite her face off, and then it sank its fangs into her shoulder, and Sav screamed.

Sav could withstand a fair amount of pain as a trained professional, but the fangs dug deep into her shoulder, seemingly never-ending, a chisel burrowing under her skin.

Eve was screaming something next to her, but Sav wasn't listening.

The Terachne raked its implanted fangs down Sav's arm, shredding her skin in two jagged, bloody lines. She screamed again, or maybe she just hadn't stopped.

Sav didn't even notice the clamor until the monster was suddenly off of her and back on the floor, stopping to investigate the noise.

Eve was saying her name repeatedly.

"What's-“ Sav mumbled, and then the cavern lit up.

Dorothy descended from the top of the cavern in a halo of flames like a punk guardian angel, a rope secured around her hips.

Her line stopped her a good few feet off the ground. The Terachne approached her, fangs bared, eager to dispose of the new intruder. Dorothy opened fire on it with her flamethrower, blasting it straight in the face.

The monster staggered, but then redoubled its assault, charging for her again.

Dorothy traded her flamethrower for a dagger and cut herself loose from her rope, landing squarely on the monster's back.

She quickly embedded her knife in the monster's surprisingly thick skin to use as an anchor as the monster began to spin around in an attempt to throw her off.

It tried to swipe at her with legs, but couldn't reach.

"The heart!" Sav tried to yell, but it came out more as a mumble. "Red spot." There was no way Dorothy heard her, but luckily, Eve did.

"Red spot!" Eve yelled, her voice coming off much stronger. "Aim for the red spot!"

"Thanks!" Dorothy yelled back. She gritted her teeth in concentration.

Only one knife, Sav realized. She would have to give up her handhold to go for the kill. Risky, but Sav would've done it herself. She knew she was fast enough to pull it off, however she wasn't sure about Dorothy.

With a raucous battle cry Dorothy yanked her knife out of the spider, and with one fluid motion, turned and jammed it into the pulsing red spot on its back.

The monster lurched forward, and Dorothy was shaken loose. She rolled into the impact as she hit the ground, getting up and brushing herself off a few feet away.

Smart girl.

The monster pitched from side to side, inky blood spurting from its impaled heart. It gave a great call, and then collapsed to the ground. Its legs continued to twitch for a few moments, and then it was still.