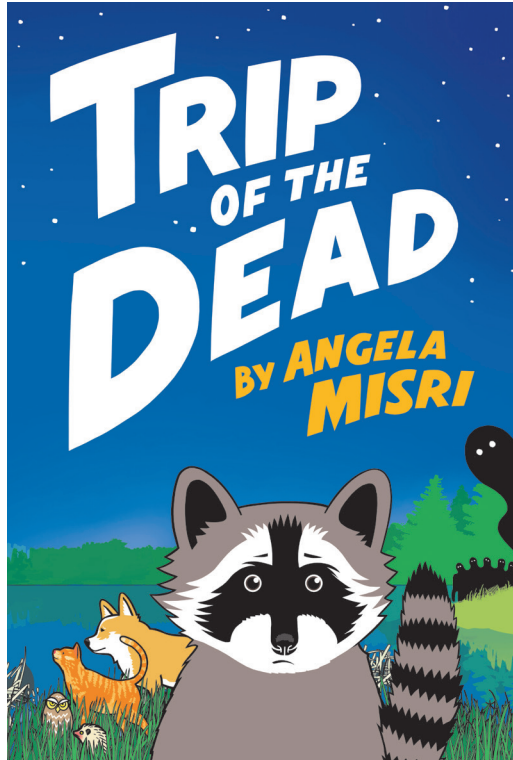


**Excerpt from *Trip of the Dead*
by Angela Misri**



Published by DCB

Publication Date: February 2020

176 pages

\$13.95

Ages 9-12; Grades 4-7

CHAPTER ONE

There's a man over there wearing my tail.

Well, not *my* tail, literally. My tail is still securely attached to my rump. I'm running my paws over it right now, just to be sure.

"Don't look at him," Ginger says, seeing what I'm staring at. Ginger's my best friend, a former alley cat with the style sense of one of those picture-perfect cats in one of those glossy magazines that we'd use to line our burrows behind the garbage bins in the city. It's a weird mix of personality traits packaged up in a slim orange cat with paws that look like slouchy white socks, but somehow, Ginger owns it.

Problem is, I'm not listening.

I can't tear my eyes away from the black and gray striped tail adorning the man's hat. It's not as sleek as mine, but then again, it's not being stroked the way mine is right now.

It's the first sign of another raccoon I've seen in months and it's so *not* the way I'd like this to have gone.

Every night I've gone out looking for more of my kind, searching high and low, from garbage pile to hollow tree. You might think that sounds easy. Fun even.

It might be.

If not for the zombies.

Dead humans in varying states of decay roam this land ready to pounce on anything that moves. They've taken over the top of the food chain, and raccoons and every other living thing do their best to avoid them.

The days of living in neighborhoods full of humans who helpfully walked their extra food out to convenient bins where we could sample it like a buffet were long gone. In the days before, my

small gaze of raccoons lived in a large maple tree that we shared with four elderly chipmunks and seven squirrels from three different generations of the same family. I never really found out why a family of raccoons was called a gaze, but my den mother always said it was better than a “herd” or even worse, “a litter.” Ew. Imagine being named for a box where you pooped.

But it was my brother who was the first to notice the change in our human neighbors — and of course, he noticed because of the food. First the humans just seemed to be spending more time in their houses with the doors locked. They seemed to throw out less food, and when they did it was sparse and tasteless. Fruit and vegetables all but disappeared to be replaced with mostly empty tin trays of frozen lasagnas and pot pies and curries. Those were my favorite, and I ate them even when my siblings purposefully put them under the garden hose, or kicked dirt in them. Then those silvery trays disappeared from the garbage bins as well. No humans came out. They stopped walking their dogs and letting their cats out. And if they did come outside, the humans were armed. Out in the maple tree we started to hear from birds and other animals about a new predator stalking the streets — the undead human. Other raccoons we knew from the wider ’hood started to disappear and chipmunks and mice and many more. By the time my gaze disappeared, we were the last of our kind left for at least ten blocks in each direction. And then it was just me and the ancient chipmunks. And then, one morning I woke up and they were gone too. I started thinking I was the last raccoon on Earth. If not for the birds, I might have thought I was the last animal on Earth. And if not for Pickles and Ginger saving my life, I might not even be here at all.

So, my nightly searches for others of my kind are careful and stealthy, two traits I’m not exactly known for. They’re also total

fails. We've found cats, dogs, birds, and even an injured deer, but not one raccoon. The voice in my head tells me I'm the last raccoon on Earth. It's an annoying voice, that doubt. Sounds a bit like a snake hissing its negativity into my ear with its long, forked tongue. I've never met a snake, but I guess if you were making a list of animals I don't want to meet, snakes would be up near the top. Number one would be zombies.

"Do you think he's staying?" I ask Ginger, watching as the humans of our compound flock around the stranger.

"I don't know," Ginger answers, his own tail flicking back and forth quickly, betraying how badly he wants to satisfy his feline curiosity.

"Ooof!" I say, expelling all the air from my lungs as Emmy barrels into us. For a smallish hamster, Emmy has this uncanny ability to inflict more damage than her size should allow. Thankfully, her berserker-like aggression is very effective against zombies.

She growls at the newcomer, sounding more like a panther than a hamster. I drop my tail and start stroking her instead. She puts up with it, something she never would have allowed when I first met her.

"Emmy, stay with Trip," Ginger says. "I'm gonna find out what's up."

As usual, I'm being handed off to a more capable mammal, in this case, a hamster about a quarter my size. Ginger scampers off to the front entrance where the humans are gathered. It's really just a large wooden gate wrapped in barbed wire. The stranger had to walk around the wooden spikes that form a perimeter around the camp, but the spikes are there to fend off zombies, not live humans with dead raccoons on their heads.

I climb up and onto the raised platform, Emmy at my side, and we watch Ginger weave and wind himself around the humans' legs.

There's a lot of courage crammed into the small body of a cat; they're like those backpacks with so many pockets you forget where you put things. I learned that months ago, following a cat named Pickles on her quest to find her pet, Connor. She didn't let anything stop her, not zombies, mad opossums, zealot cats, or greedy chipmunks. Did I mention the zombies? Yeah, they still freak me out.

"I heard there was trouble," says Wally, walking down the gang-plank that links this raised platform we're sitting on to our home, The Menagerie. As always, the senior cat is followed by his squadron, whom he called the 4077th (which he explained as referring to an old television show about humans and war ... I didn't really understand). Ranging in age from 3-6 months, the 4077th are an excitable bunch of kittens of many colors and fur densities. Most had been rescued by humans and our own small fellowship, but not a few had been born within the safety of this compound and had never been outside into the real world. Lucky mammals.

Sonar, a particularly bouncy recruit, is hopping from one paw to the other behind Wally's wide gray body. Either she has information she's dying to share or she's in desperate need of a litter box.

"Sir! Sir!" the small white cat finally calls, her patience exhausted. "I can report that at thirteen hundred hours, a dead raccoon was reported entering the compound!"

Wally's thick eyebrows shoot up and into his bangs.

"Not a zombie," I say quickly. "Not even a whole raccoon, Wally, just a tail."

I turn away from the squadron, throwing back over my shoulder. "And you've got your hours wrong, Corporal. It's after six in the evening."

Wally shakes his head as he says, "Corporal Sonar, take the squad down to check on the repairs to the east wall. I'll meet you

there shortly.”

I listen to them tumble down the stairs in a hissing, hurried heap.

“It must be a shock, Trip,” Wally says, sitting down next to me, “to see your kind paraded around like a trophy on a human’s head, but I saw many such displays before the apocalypse.”

“Before the apocalypse, there were more raccoons than you could shake a stick at,” I reply. “And believe me, I know. A lot of sticks were shaken at me. Though nothing compared to ...”

We both look out over the fence that borders our compound to the forest that surrounds us. We can see a few zombies roaming in the trees, searching for live things to eat, their movements jerky and clumsy, not unlike myself when compared to the graceful cats I live with.

Since we had found Pickles’ pet, Connor, our rag tag fellowship had been lovingly incorporated into this human community. They built us The Menagerie, a sort-of tree house off-shoot with a large central room and three entrances: one that leads directly to the humans’ living quarters, a small hole in the ceiling that Pal uses to fly in and out and this smaller one that leads out and into the compound. Pickles and her partner Hannah live in a small room off the corner of The Menagerie, and Pal has a perch in the opposite corner above Emmy’s burrow — a pile of shredded cardboard and fluff I had helped her gather.

In the very center of The Menagerie is a metal fire pit on wheels, really just a pile of warmed stones that the humans keep a fire burning underneath. That’s where I sleep. Just another bump on a log. Nothing special for Trip — after all, I’m a raccoon, and raccoons live in trash and eat garbage.

All around the fire pit are pillows and blankets, so this is where I wander down to, leaving Wally on the platform. I bury myself in

a cocoon of warm blankets. Trying to forget how very alone I am. Trying not to think about the ghost of a raccoon who drifted into my life this morning.