

Chapter 1:

A trail of paw prints weaved through tire tracks, with bones of birds and fairies scattered between them and detached brick walls. White ropes and exposed pipes glistened with morning dew, orange hard hats were planted in neat lines and between the wheels of excavators were holly sprigs and twigs.

Yet there was no sign of cats or construction workers.

When they had emerged from the Underground highway, in a large white van, Jenny had been greeted with large smiling faces, round blue eyes and flashing teeth. The colourful billboard advertising the new affordable and spacious houses of Mitchell Stop Square - Father, mother and daughter cuddled together in a tight bundle in front of a large white house. In the distance the sign looked down on them, the rising sun casting it half in shadow.

"Is this the place?" Her passenger asked meekly.

Jenny had to resist rolling her eyes. The van parked next to a puddle that reflected the logo of Hope Street Domestic and Non-Magical Animal Rescue; a dog, cat and bird wrapped up in a thin purple lead.

Diane's face was pressed against the window, wide eyes marvelling the expanse of green rolling hills, lush trees and the pink sky above. *City kids*, Jenny thought but the wonder and excitement in Diane's face was the same as when she had walked into Hope the first time. Back then, Diane had been pale with long, stringy black hair, dressed in baggy shorts and a sweatshirt, now her face was all pierced and her striped sleeves poked out of Hope's violet uniform.

Despite her eagerness Jenny's hope in the young volunteer was misplaced. First it was when Diane was asked to take care of a dog that had been surrendered. She was told to keep the dog with her until one of the experienced staff could review the animal. She did not alert any of them when the dog vanished from its collar. While Diane had desperately searched, Jenny and Rosaline had to coax the dog out of a reptile terrarium that it had teleported into.

That wasn't the only incident. Jenny had caught Diane crying in a storage closet after Paris told her why 'Cannibal' was the nickname of choice for a small dog she had been brushing. She was passable at paperwork but terrible at filing and Jenny was beginning to reconsider what was the right position for Diane.

Jenny stepped out of the Hope van and punched in a number on her phone.

Diane had been staffing the front desk when they had received a call about the feral cats at the new development. According to her, an old man, Mr Swan, had called about his concerns with the construction and among other things he told her many cats had moved into the area because of it. If there was an abundance of cats outside the city, Jenny knew it was an emergency. She brought Diane for help but wondered how much assistance she would be.

Mr Swan's number that Diane scrawled on a pink post-it note didn't connect so Jenny had called the construction company, Mitchel & Sons. They agreed that Hope could set traps for the cats if she found anything and to just get help from the workers. That was yesterday, now they were at an empty site.

Diane had said that Mr Swan told her that his father was an orc so his skin still petrified in sunlight. He wanted to schedule Hope's pick up for much later. Mitchell & Sons, though, were fine with them setting traps around the site in the morning as it was safer for everyone involved. Jenny stepped out, breathing the sweet natural air, the breeze cooling her skin and running through her tightly pulled black curls.

"You could try Mr Swan's number again." Jenny watched as Diane attempted to open the door and Jenny clicked her car keys. The van beeped musically.

"No, you wait in the car," Jenny said just as the line was picked up. "Hello, this is Hope Street Rescue. My name is Jenny we spoke earl-" a shrill beep interrupted her followed by a robotic voice: "Hello. You have reached the Mitchell & Sons customer support services. Please listen to the following options as to be directed to the appropriate-"

"Customer support services?" Jenny echoed. The voice gave her a list of numbers. Music blared from her phone; the sudden burst of noise hurt her teeth. If there were any cats hiding amongst the construction, they were gone now.

"I still have the number." Diane, in a tangle of sleeves and stripes, climbed out the van's window.

"Diane." Jenny warned. She pushed up her glasses, massaged her tired golden eyes.

Diane's face crumbled. "I'm sorry. I- we're safe here? Right? We're still close to the city and people are building here so... Shouldn't it be fine?"

Jenny knew Mitchell Stop Square wouldn't last long. When she was younger, Jenny had been taken to see another failed effort to create affordable and spacious houses for Free-Folk outside of the city. She remembered staring out from the window of her father's car at the skeletal remains of houses- copper pipes ripped up from the ground and structural supports with bite marks as big as her head.

"I thought Marica called ahead." But it wouldn't be the end of the world if they had to wait. Jenny crossed her arms and leaned against the van. Though Diane was twice the height of her, Jenny was three times the size of Diane, "Have you ever seen an elk before? Not the ones bred in captivity."

"I was gonna say that I saw them at the zoo." Diane laughed nervously.

"Well, it will be the start of the rut soon, and wild elk and dire elk are out. The construction zone has no appropriate fences or deterrent."

Diane cocked her head, smiling shyly. "They're just elk, not drakes or dragons. What can they do?"

"Dire elk are an average of 13 feet or about 36 hands, I am sure." Diane swallowed. Jenny tapped her head. "They can eat anything then they can repurpose materials that they consume into their antlers. They need a good fence, or the workers could be gored by an aggressive buck with 12-point steel antlers. Dragons are just the start of the danger out here."

"B-but how can they do that? Are they magically altered? Or is it something else like a boon or..."

Jenny snorted, because she remembered during her interview Diane's excitement about working with magical animals in the future. "There is a reason they have not been hunted to extinction in this area. They need to adapt to survive."

"Then what are the cats doing here?" Diane asked, pointing down the road. Jenny saw an orange cat, patches of fur stuck up in all different directions. She noted the heavy matting and the crooked tail before it glanced behind them and bolted.

The music whining through Jenny's phone stilled a second as the track was repeated.

Diane shuffled her feet. "Do we have to wait for one of the workers?"

"Yes."

"But Mitchell's already knows we are coming out here and so does Mr Swan."

"I don't see a house that Mr Swan could live in," Jenny noted, unless there was an old half-orc man living under a rock somewhere.

"Should we at least put out a few traps?" Diane seemed eager at the prospect.

An automatic voice parted the grating music. "Thank you for holding. Your call is important to us. You are 23 in the queue."

"Yeah," Jenny decided. "Let's start setting them."

They opened the van.

Diane struggled with the traps but after a few demonstrations, was able to do them correctly. She identified some good places to hide the traps; maybe there was hope for her after all. As Jenny held a cage, the phone screamed in her ear, Diane moved along a trail of flattened grass.

"Did you pack more of the iron ones?" Jenny asked, critically eyeing the heavy cage in her hands.

Diane didn't answer, her focus was on a cat framed by holly. It lounged in the gravel, sunlight glistening on its blackish-brown fur. Slowly, one large yellow eye in the centre of its face opened.

Diane shook her head. "Is that bad?"

Jenny sighed. Hope was low on cages and it was more important to remove the cats before they attracted anything worse. If they accidentally caught a fairy or magical animal, they could simply remove them.

Jenny willed herself to be more patient. "Do you know what kind of cat that is?"

Diane screwed up her face to consider Jenny's question: "A one-eyed cat?"

Jenny tried to hide her disbelief. Cyclops cats or Cleyed cats were incredibly common in the city of Sabre. That was their common name as well. Diane didn't even try to pronounce the scientific name *Cleyus Felis*. The first day Jenny had met her, Diane babbled about studying and treating magic beasts. Hope was a starting point for her. Based on all she had seen, Jenny felt that today might be the end for Diane's 'dream', especially if she wasn't interested in putting in the effort.

Diane hesitantly approached the cat, whispering encouragement. She knelt and offered her hand. Its large pupil contracted, and the cat rushed into the underbrush.

The music began to play again.

Her phone pinched behind her shoulder and ear, Jenny set another trap. Her mind painted the future for Diane, over her head in University, drowned by debt and endless papers to write. A loud snap broke her from her own bad memories chasing a degree in the science of magical creatures. The matted ginger cat had already wandered into a trap. It stood stiffly, wide, glassy eyes circled aimlessly. Jenny began to carry the cat back to the van.

"Hello!" Jenny flinched as the music was suddenly replaced by a young man's voice. "You've reached Mitchell & Sons customer support services. If you're calling to support the strike, your complaints will be logged here-"

"Hello- I'm not an existing customer. I am Jenny Rayet from Hope Street Animal Rescue. When we called up earlier, we were given this number to contact Mitchell & Sons. We have arrived at the property and we're currently setting traps."

"You're not with the strikers or-" Jenny heard the unmistakable wet pop of chewing gum.

"No, I'm from Hope Street Animal Rescue. We organised for today for us to put around traps to deal with the feral cat problem at Mitchell Stop Square."

"You're not with the strikers at all?"

"No." Jenny heard shuffling. For one heart stopping second, she was worried that she was about to be fed that awful music again, "Is that why there is no one at the construction site?"

"Wait you're on your own- like completely?" The man clicked his tongue. "Huh. Sorry ma'am but I can't help you if you are not an existing customer or you're not logging a complaint or if you want to yell at me about feeling unsafe because of whatever magic you think you saw."

"Magic." Jenny froze. She almost dropped the cage. "There is magic here?"

"Sorry. Realmstar be with you." the line cut.

Jenny looked down at the cat, the cat still stood, shifty eyes caught on something far ahead of it. She opened the van and pulled the cat out. It was like holding taxidermy; the cat did not resist her, all fur and bones. Jenny grasped its scruff and her fingers parted fur revealing large pink gashes, almost diamond-shaped. Her heart plummeted.

"Diane!" Jenny called desperately. She quickly placed the ginger cat in another cage and slammed the van door, the empty iron cage swinging painfully against her side. "Diane!" But the

construction yard was completely empty and without the music blaring in her ears, the silence was heavy.

With trembling fingers, Jenny pressed in Diane's mobile number. She paced the length of the van. There was no answer.

Jenny retraced her steps where she and Diana had split. The holly bushes had been parted and the long grass behind it had been flattened. She had chased the cyclops cat- didn't city kids know not to stray into mysterious woodland? Diane had grown up in the city and it was only in the movies where children got whisked away and eaten by fairies. Jenny remembered nights, her mother slept on the couch while Jenny watched movies far above her age range. She would have to hide under a blanket as she watched dramatizations of all the evils Free-Folk or humans and dwarves had endured before they escaped the great magical tyranny when High-Folk or the fae ruled Everwing and the rest of the human world.

Gripping the empty cage with sweaty fingers, Jenny swallowed and raced into the forest.

Trees blurred past her and a few strides in she saw barbed wire curling from bushes. Many footsteps had flattened the brush before her. Jenny crept forward, whispering Diane's name. Light seeped in through cracks in the branches and she crept into a clearing full of long grass and tire tracks. Dogs barked and yowled in derelict cages, weeds and ivy twisting through the bars.

There was a large garage before her, pressed against what looked like a large lumber mill, grey and brown with age. The shack was a patchwork of metal and wooden plates, and right at the entrance was a bright pink phone case.

Jenny rushed forward, calling out Diane's name again. Before she could reach the phone, she felt herself trip, her feet ringing. She steadied herself and glanced down, trying to wriggle away from whatever bells had attached themselves to her boots. There was no string connecting them and she struggled and failed to kick them loose.

"Diane!" The silence pulsed through Jenny's veins, drowning her thoughts. She tightened her grip around the cage and removed her glasses, storing them safely in her uniform pocket.

The smell was the first thing to turn Jenny's stomach, the air was thick with faeces and cat urine. She felt a strange softness under her feet, and there were lines of floor to ceiling cages with silent, shifting grey bodies inside.

Voices drifted from between the cages. Jenny shuffled her feet, the bells jangling softly as she crept closer. Bags with red liquid hung from some of the cages, clear tubes snaking between the bars. In the centre of the garage, there was a large, stainless-steel table, a draining apparatus in the centre. Perched on the silver edge was Diane.

Diane's legs swung, her head sluggishly low. Jenny felt herself freeze as a very old fear played out in front of her. Instead of the late-night hum of static from her family's old TV, there was nothing stopping the sound of the vampire wetly sucking on Diane's neck. She could see the blurry shape of the vampire's bare back, its cool blue grey skin, between long locks of Diane's hair and the nightmare Jenny used to have come into clear focus.

Something in her snapped to attention, dimming the horror Jenny felt as glimpsed the red dripping. She hoped the sensation was her many years of experience as a veterinarian. There was a wound and there was a treatment. She tightened her hands around the iron cage and charged.

The bells rung out harshly as Jenny swung the cage down and onto the vampire's back. The result was instantaneous - the vampire snarled and the skin underneath the iron bars sizzled. It screeched from beneath her, an ear-splitting cry of pain. A blue arm struck out wildly but Jenny dodged, her cage brandished as a shield. The vampire stumbled away and collapsed against the cage wall. She cast her gaze down before it could lock with the predator.

"Diane, we have to go!" Jenny said urgently.

"Hi Jenny." Diane sat up, even attempting to button her uniform. "See, I told you that Mr Swan lived here." She hiccupped, warm blood peppering Jenny's face.

Diane's eyes were glassy and unfocused. She had clearly looked into the vampire's eyes. Vampires being lesser Highfolk had a magic where they could still the human mind much like a predator does for a shivering rabbit. With just a few smooth words, vampires could make humans walk right onto their dinner plates. But Jenny was safe, at least until the vampire figured out that she needed glasses and then he would warp his magic to whatever he needed to make her submit to his fangs.

"Have you met Mr Swan?" Diane asked. There were diamond marks under her chin and above her collarbone. The gashes were not deep but vampire venom had an anticoagulation agent so until Diane could get help, she was at risk of bleeding out. "He invited me in for tea my- his cat was just here. Where has he gone?"

"Diane." Jenny pulled Diane off the table, the sound like rushing wind. Jenny glanced back to where the vampire had lain crumpled. She saw nothing.

"I'm sorry." Instead of moving, Diane pulled her sleeve over her fingers and attempted to wipe the blood off of Jenny's face. Jenny pushed Diane ahead.

Jenny gripped the iron cage with one hand, and roughly dragged Diane towards the entrance. With every step, the bells chimed, but Jenny's mind whirled too fast to consider a curse on her feet while a vampire was stalking them between the rows of cages, its footsteps silent over the floor of faeces.

Something pressed at the corners of her mind, something prodded her forcing Jenny to wonder whether Diane was the only staff member that she brought from Hope. The vampire was looking into her mind and Jenny realised she must've caught his eye somehow.

Her hand closed around nothing. Jenny looked behind her, Diane was gone. Jenny retraced her path quickly, bells chiming with her every step.

"Jenny, look I found him." Diane appeared from behind a metal bin, holding the black cyclops cat. It weakly struggled in her grip. Jenny saw red down his flank, the exact extent of the damage was unclear without glasses. "He was hiding under the desk!"

Suddenly Diane was thrown against the wall of cages, somehow managing to keep the cat in her arms. "Sorry Mr Swan, I didn't see you there."

Jenny glanced downwards. A dark, shadowy mass stalked towards her. His movements were even and fluid and inhuman. He lunged for her and Jenny brought the cage up between them, just as she saw the red and white of his fangs. His face pressed against the bars and their eyes locked, as blue skin began to boil and blister.

I need glasses. The thought was clear in her head, plucked out from the memory where she tried on her first pair, a bright pink and blocky frame with thick lenses that magnified her golden eyes. Another thought surfaced. She could hear her own three-year-old voice. *I look like a lizard.*

She felt the sharp pain of the vampire above her and the heat from his face. She should bring the cage down, stop hurting him. She thought of the first time she had to hurt a patient and the guilt was pulled to the front of her mind.

The smoke of burning flesh was quickly overwhelmed by the stench of the room and sunk into her skin. Shit, blood and urine. They were in a breeding facility and as a veterinarian, she couldn't stand for that cruelty, not towards the animals or her staff. With all her might, she pushed the cage and the vampire reeled back, hissing and spitting like a feral cat.

Jenny felt a pinch on her hands and at her back as she was pushed against the cage wall.

She heard a voice behind her eyes, a hand grasped her wrist. "You're worried about your tetanus shot? It's been too long, why don't-" Jenny didn't let him finish, she slid the cage up his arm and heard the trap loudly snap. She pushed him as hard as she could and ran back to Diane.

The girl stood, a sloppy grin across her face as she lazily stroked the cat in her arms. Jenny grabbed her and as fast as her round legs could carry her, she rushed them both out of the garage.

They reached the clearing and the dogs erupted into a chorus of howling and snapping. Jenny glanced at the dogs and then at Diane and the blood hid her pale neck. She promised to come back for them and the cats as soon as she could.

More horror stretched out before her; the heavy forest Jenny had run through had vanished. Just a thin line of oak and pine lined the edges of the empty construction site. Jenny hated magic- those workers were right to strike. This was an unsafe work environment. She squeezed Diane's hand firmly and dragged her along the tire tracks. The bells still rang with every step. Jenny could hear the crashing of metal against metal and the snarl of an angry beast.

"Don't look back, Diane." Jenny's voice cracked with fear. She clung to the thought that she had seen the vampire's dark blue under skin. There was obviously no human in him so he couldn't chase them, not without burning in the sunlight. She struggled to reassure herself as she maneuvered Diane around the holly bushes.

And then graciously waiting for them was Hope van. Jenny looked back nervously and saw the full and thick forest again. She seethed as she gasped in cool air. Jenny hated magic and all the folk who played with it like toys. Today had only given her more reasons.

The family on the billboard smiled down on them.

"Are you okay boss?" Diane gurgled. "Are we lost? This doesn't look familiar-"

She didn't get to finish, blood flooding from her mouth, Diane muttered out of an apology and with the black cat firmly pressed into her blood-stained chest, fell.