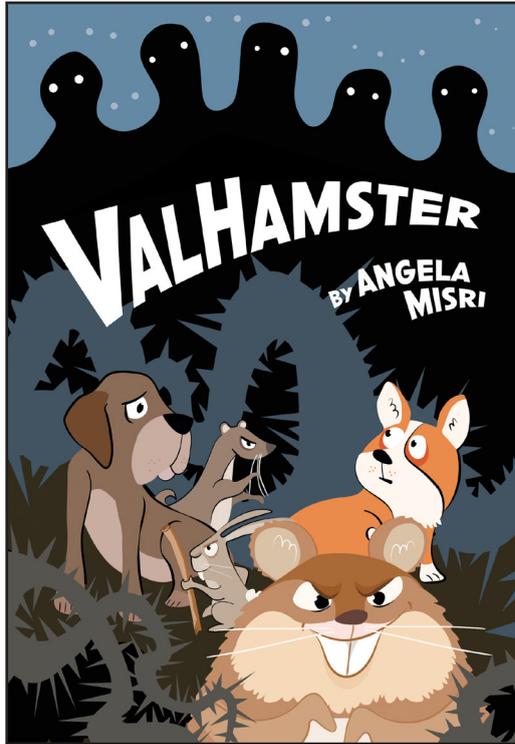


**Excerpt from *ValHamster*
by Angela Misri**



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CHAPTER ONE

I dream of a glorious death.

At least, that's what I've been told heroes should dream of.

I am a warrior, and every day could be my last.

The zombies who rule this world may think they have won the battle, but I have killed more of them than I can count. More than any other mammal here. Certainly more than any hamster before me. And I'm not done yet.

I wish I had a cape.

"Emmy!"

I ignore Diana, the dog with no tail. She's beautiful with her bright orange coat and fox-shaped face, but she's a dog. And dogs can only mean heartbreak.

"Emmy, didn't you hear me calling you?" she asks, bounding up the stairs on her squat legs to where I sit, watching over the battlements of our camp.

"Busy," I say, not even turning to look at her.

"Pickles has called a full meeting," she says, panting slightly at the exertion. See, this is why dogs are trouble. This corgi is so out of shape, she's practically a sausage-shaped zombie snack.

"I'll come," I say, "alone."

I don't have to look at her to know my words hurt. After all, I've lived with dogs since leaving the pet store as a pup two years ago. I know dogs have two moods — crazy happy and wretchedly sad. There is no in between. I stare straight ahead, concentrating on the zombie couple slouching their way through the trees just a few meters away. You could mistake them for a pair of lovebirds the way they move in unison. But as they get closer, you notice the greyness of their skin. The bones that poke through their ragged

clothing. And the way they keep chomping at the air as if eating a footlong sandwich.

The humans did something right when they built the fences around this compound. I sit ten feet off the ground, above the zombies, safe from their grasping hands and gnashing teeth. And they are safe from me. For now.

“Oh, okay,” Diana says, walking away, taking the stairs one at a time back down. If she had a tail, it would be between her legs. But since she’s a former show dog of the corgi breed, her human pet removed her tail when she was just a pup. Supposedly that makes corgis cuter. Humans can be cruel even when they’re not undead.

I wait until I can no longer hear her slow, sad movements, counting to seven, and then to seven again. Yes, it’s as high as I can count. I start humming my theme music under my breath. A war ballad set to a drumbeat that strikes fear into the hearts of my enemies.

I take the steps down two at a time, because I’m just a hamster and I shouldn’t be able to, but I can. I’m flying down them with a speed horses would be jealous of — if horses were smart enough to live through this zombie apocalypse, which, based on my experience, they aren’t. I think it has something to do with their eyes being on the sides of their faces rather than facing the front. It’s a common issue with prey animals that I do not have because I refuse to be a prey animal. I am a warrior. Lacking a cape.

I tear across the compound and zip up the ramp that leads to The Menagerie, our private enclosure, built by the humans we protect. I do a complete circuit of the roof, sniffing the air and cataloguing the locations of each and every zombie out there. I can’t see them all because the sun is going down, but I can hear them, and I can sense them. I glare into the darkness, projecting all my wrath at them as hard as I can. If my eyes were weapons they’d be

thunderbolts. Thunderbolts with whirling scimitars.

Once I feel like they've been sufficiently intimidated by my scowls, I skim down through Pal's owl perch to land on the floor of The Menagerie beside Ginger.

"Ack!" the orange cat yelps, nearly jumping out of his white-socked paws. "Where did you come from?"

"Up," I answer nonchalantly, as if I totally didn't mean to scare the fur off him. Warriors don't worry about feelings like surprise or worry. We like to keep everyone on their toes. Speaking of toes, Trip has every toe he owns extended toward the hot stones in the center of our shared space. He just returned from a visit to his gaze of raccoons — two hundred mammals who live about three kilometers from this location, at a river that features a new beaver dam.

"Icy paws, it's cold out there," the raccoon says by way of explanation, seeing me looking at his toes, "but most of the gaze are out of their hibernation cycle."

I nod, secretly wondering how we will protect two hundred raccoons who live so far outside this compound, but not voicing it. I find that silence usually invites explanation from the more talkative members of this group. I prefer the simmering anger of a long, drawn-out war to the quiet worries of the day. Also, words stress me out. Especially words coming out of my mouth. Words are not action, and without action, emotions seem to bubble to the surface. Better to act than to speak. It's why I speak so little. I'd rather be fighting.

I cast my eyes around to where Hannah, our Abyssinian feline, is hovering at the door that leads from The Menagerie to the human quarters. Her long ears are pointed at the door, waiting for her mate, Pickles, a calico cat with freckles and a terrible name. Pickles is the supposed leader of this group — she brought us all

together in the first days of this zombie apocalypse. She was my neighbor, living a few doors down from my pets' home, but I didn't know her until the humans began to turn into zombies. She and Wally were indoor cats, and I was an indoor hamster. Our missions were never meant to cross.

Then Pickles' pet, Connor, didn't come home, and Pickles set out on her quest to find the small human. She left before our block of houses caught fire. Before I was the hamster I am now, back when I had two canine partners named Ralph and Vance. They were Great Danes, dull and slow-witted, but loyal to me and to our human pets. Unlike me, they were outdoor animals, and they went outside every day. They'd return with stories and gossip from our neighborhood, which is how I knew Pickles and Wally and Ginger's names. Our pets would take me out of my cage to run around the house with the dogs or to sit in front of the laptop on their laps chewing on celery sticks while we all watched action movies. When those same human pets turned into zombies overnight, the dogs were the ones who destroyed my cage and released me. Ralph threw himself in front of the zombie pets when they lunged for me, and he died protecting me. Vance survived only a few days after that, poisoned by a bite from the zombie who had been our pet. It fell to me to set our house on fire in the hopes that they would make it to ValHamster, the mythic land of warrior souls where we would be reunited someday in all our glory.

I shake my head of those terrible memories, refocusing on Hannah and her vigil.

I admire Pickles and that she was brave enough to leave the safety of her home to find her pet. It's one of the reasons I followed her after the fire, and why I stay here with these mammals. She set out on a noble quest and pursued it regardless of the dangers in front of her, finding Connor and his mother here, at this compound of

humans. As a warrior, I was duty bound to help her on her mission to find her pets, but that didn't mean I trusted the humans at this camp any more than I did my own. After all, any human could turn into a zombie at any moment. All it took was a bite.

"Hey, watch it!" exclaims Ginger, batting at the fur around Trip's ankles. Trip yells and falls backwards, using his striped tail to smother the sparks. Ginger shakes his head at his best friend, used to the raccoon's bumbling antics, and Diana sniffs at Trip's ankle. I can't believe this raccoon has lasted as long as he has. I don't think he would have without the support of these cats. Ginger is a short-haired orange tabby who lived in the house next door to mine. He was an outdoor cat, so, unlike Pickles and Wally, I saw him often, prancing through the neighborhood stirring up trouble with his bombastic chatter. He was the one who convinced me of the importance of Pickles' quest and got me to leave the fiery remains of our houses, where I would have been content to be consumed along with Vance and Ralph.

"Thanks, Ginger," Trip says, panting a little at the exertion, staring at his slightly singed fur. Diana, whose canine nose is more sensitive, moves a little further away from the raccoon.

"Are we all here?" Pickles says as she walks into the room with Wally at her side. Wally is followed into The Menagerie by the troop of kittens who train under him, and they scamper about with their characteristic hissing and tumbling sounds. The band of kittens calls themselves the 4077th, and Wally spends far too much energy training them. They are not soldiers. They are just another bunch of mammals we could lose to the zombies.

"Over there, Sergeant Sonar," Wally says, pointing a small black cat at a corner of the room, "and keep the rest of the troop in line or it will be litter duty for a week for all of you."

"Yes, sir," Sonar says, giving a sharp salute and then leading the

rest of the kittens in the direction Wally pointed. Sonar waits until the rest of the kittens are seated before sitting herself, at attention with her back ramrod straight.

“I don’t see Pallas,” Wally says, coming all the way to the stone pit in the center of the room and sitting down to rub at the bronze star on his collar. The rest of these animals look to Pickles as their leader, but Wally is their strategic brain.

“Present!” Pallas the owl announces, flapping into the room from the window next to his perch. I instinctively get out of the way of my best friend because I know landings are not his forte. He does a slow loop of the stone pit and skims the rough wooden floor before hitting it and rolling into the corner where Pickles and Hannah sleep, disappearing behind the short curtains with a dull bang. This is actually one of his better landings because no one else got hurt.

“I’m fine,” he calls, and then trundles out on his two legs. I give him a bit of a dusting off as he walks by me. “Sorry about the mess, Hannah, Pickles.”

Hannah flicks her long tail at him in amusement, and they all find spots around the stone pit. I start my usual orbit of the perimeter at a slow jog, keeping an eye on all exits even as my ears are trained on the conversation. I’m not expected to talk if I’m on guard. And I am always on guard. We are, after all, in a camp surrounded by humans, who are surrounded by zombies. Constant vigilance is required.

“Thanks for coming together,” Pickles says. “I have camp news I want to share, and I know Trip and Sonar have an update on the tree-to-tree highway out to the dam.”

Trip nods, the furry black mask around his eyes crinkling in a way I know means that he’s pleased. Sonar is too well trained to move while Wally is watching, but her black whiskers quiver in a

way that tells me she has an impressive report to deliver.

“What’s the news?” Ginger prompts Pickles.

“A new group of humans will be joining our pets,” Pickles answers. “They’ve been traveling for some time, and they need help.”

I slow down behind Pickles to ask, “Trust?”

Pickles nods as I leap over her orange, black, and white tail. “They’re being thoroughly checked out, Emmy, by our humans, and Wally’s taken a look at them too.”

Wally speaks up then. “They’re a ragtag bunch with not a lot of organization, but they come bearing lots of human weapons and medicines, which we need. Plus, they had to be tough to make it the distance they did through all that zombie territory. Came all the way across the provincial lines, or so they tell it.”

“Any children?” Trip asks.

Pickles and Wally shake their heads. “Sounds like they lost more than half their group along the way. Only the strongest survived.”

One of the 4077th kittens snorts, earning a glare from Sonar. It’s a white kitten with a brown stripe between his eyebrows that makes him look like he’s always angry. I throw a look at him as well for his disrespect. Meanwhile, Pal wraps his feathered wing around Trip, who looks downcast. It’s not that Trip particularly loves baby humans, but some time ago he lost a friend and seems close to tears a lot. A weakness I don’t allow in myself. I love no one enough to cry at their loss. You can’t. Not in times like these.

“We can’t take on any more pets anyway,” Ginger says, looking around the group. “We’ve each got too many assignments as it is.”

“They’re actually spoken for,” Pickles says, exchanging a glance with Wally before seeking out my eyes as I pass behind Trip. “They’re traveling with a rabbit and a weasel.”

I screech to a halt, my claws digging into Trip’s tail.

“Ouch!” he squeals, leaping away from me.

“Weasel?” I spit out, incredulous. Weasels are the sworn enemies of hamsters. Horrid, smelly creatures of deceit and dishonor. Cats have a list of five things they hate the most: rats, water, wet dogs, number four, and cucumbers. Hamsters have one: weasels.

“Uh-oh,” murmurs Pal.

“Listen ...” Pickles starts to say.

“Weasel,” I repeat, walking straight up to the calico cat and glaring up at her.

“Yes, a weasel,” she answers, averting her eyes from mine, “but Wally says —”

“Weasels can’t be trusted,” I say, now directing my ire at the big grey cat.

“I’ve heard that stereotype before, but have you ever actually met a weasel?” Wally asks, his eyes on the kittens in the corner, trying to maintain order, no doubt, with his disapproving scowl. “I interrogated this one for over an hour, and not only do they seem loyal to their pet humans, but he and the rabbit have skills we could use. They seem to be a package deal.”

I cross my arms over my chest, standing on my back paws.

“First of all, the bunny is tough,” Wally says. “From her stories, she’s killed more zombies than any other mammal I’ve run into.”

If possible, I stiffen even more, and Pal immediately says, “Other than you, Emmy. No one is saying they are better at zombie killing, right, Wally?”

“Of course not,” Wally says with a nod that is highly unconvincing and slightly condescending, “and by the Sabre, that weasel can shoot off a smell that would impress a skunk. Could come in handy. Not against the zombies, mind you ...”

“That was not a pleasant demonstration by all accounts,” Diana says, shaking her head at me.

“There’s nothing pleasant about weasels,” I mutter under my breath. I’ve stopped moving long enough to say the important words.

“And he can play dead almost as well as you can, Emmy,” Wally points out. “I couldn’t even tell if he was breathing, I swear.”

He’s referring to the time a zombie landed on me and I played dead rather than give the zombie the satisfaction of crushing me. The truth is that I played dead for so long that I thought I might actually *be* dead. It wasn’t until these mammals buried me in a grave that I realized playing dead wasn’t for me. It made me question the whole concept of a glorious death. Was this death glorious? Had I been heroic enough to reunite with Vance and Ralph in the after-life? What made a life heroic enough?

“Where are they going to sleep?” asks Ginger, dragging my attention back to the present threat.

Pickles’ whiskers quiver before she answers. “We’ve offered them a spot in The Menagerie, of course.”