

PROLOGUE: NINE'S MIND

From the darkness of his wooden den the chupacabra sensed everything. . . . The *whir* of fans. The *click* of the flickering lights. The *drip . . . drip . . . drip* of water. The *hiss* of doors opening. The grating sound of human voices before the doors hissed closed again. The sharp scent of his own urine in the corners of his cage. The scratching of rabbits and rodents against cold steel. The bleating of a kid goat. His belly churning with hunger. . . .

The kid goat bleated again. It had been several sleeps since the last one.

The night before, the woman with the box had made him go to sleep. At least he thought it was her. It only happened when she was nearby with the box she held.

“Sleep!” she had shouted.

A sharp, piercing pain in his head, then the darkness.

When he woke there was something wrapped around his chest and back. He tried to scratch it off with his razorlike claws, but his claws could not reach it. He tried to bite it off, but his long, sharp fangs were not long enough to pierce it. He had tried to rub it off on the bars of his cage, but that had made the chafing and constriction worse. Finally, he had given up

and simply accepted the discomfort, crawling into his dark den, his head toward the opening, watching, listening, scenting the air.

The man with the white coat and shining mirror eyes opened the door down the hallway. The chupacabra moved farther back into his den, his powerful hind legs pressed into the corner. He was not afraid of the man, but he was fearful of the things that happened to him when the man was near.

“Hungry?” the man said.

The chupacabra did not move. He stared at the man’s hand from the darkness. The hand was wrapped in cloth as bright as the man’s coat. He had tasted the man’s blood and wanted more, but he stayed where he was . . . still, silent, waiting.

“I have something that will get you out of that box,” the man said.

The man disappeared from the chupacabra’s view. His feet clicked on the concrete floor. The kid goat started bleating louder. Steel doors rattled. The bleating got closer with every door rattle. Closer. Closer. Closer.

The chupacabra knew what was coming. He felt liquid dripping from his jaw. His belly rattled like the doors. But he stayed where he was. Watching. Waiting.

The final door opened. The kid goat jumped into his cage, prodded by the man with a long stick through the steel mesh.

The kid goat pranced back and forth in front of his den, bleating, bleating, bleating. The chupacabra could smell its fear.

“Dinnertime,” the man said.

The chupacabra wanted the frightened creature, but he didn’t move. He wanted the man more. He had been studying

this man for days. Watching him. Listening. Trying to lure him closer.

“Suit yourself,” the man said. “Eat or don’t eat. I don’t care.”

The door hissed open. The man stepped through. The door hissed closed. But the man did not go away. He watched through the small window in the door.

The chupacabra waited. He watched the man. He watched the kid goat pacing back and forth.

The door hissed open again. The man re-entered the room. The kid goat bleated.

“Are you okay?” the man asked. “Are you alive?”

The chupacabra didn’t move.

The man stepped closer and squatted down to peer into the den, inches from the wire mesh.

This is what the chupacabra had been waiting for. He launched himself from the den and hit the steel mesh.

Bang!

The man screamed and fell backward. His shining eyes flew off his face and clattered on the concrete floor.

The man breathed through his mouth. Big, deep breaths.

The chupacabra tried to reach him through the mesh with his claws, but the man pulled his feet away and curled into a ball.

The kid goat bleated. It stood in the corner, shivering.

The chupacabra jumped on the kid goat, sunk his long fangs into its neck, shook it once, and began to feed.

As he lapped up the warm, salty blood, he looked at the man curled up next to the wall. He could smell the man’s fear. It somehow made the blood taste better.