

*A  
Journey  
For  
Courage*

*A tale of a dog, his best friends,  
an evil cat and a hidden city.*

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Chronicles of the Hound:  
A journey for Courage  
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Summary: A young Great Dane, born of royal heritage and a magical bloodline is raised in the house of man. This reluctant hero travels through cities and over mountains with his pack of pals on a turbulent quest where he discovers a hidden society of canine warriors.  
A battle of good versus evil, of heroes and villains.

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# PREAMBLE

There are moments in life when time neatly cleaves itself into two parts—the “before” and the “after.” One such moment unfurled before me in my childhood when destiny delivered a newborn puppy upon my doorstep dangling from his weary mother’s snout like an unexpected gift on Christmas morning. Known as Scarface by his pals, this puppy grew into a massively-sized hound named Courage.

Born amongst a morning rainstorm underneath a huckleberry bush deep within Goblin’s Tooth National Forest, Courage was no ordinary pup—he was destined for greatness. He is the son of a king. That of course makes him royalty, a prince among hounds. But I’m getting ahead of myself; the tale of Courage deserves to be told in the proper sequence.

Courage no longer boasts the youthful, exuberant spirit of his early days. When I look back through the lens of memory, I see an enormous puppy with oversized clubs for feet, teeming with unyielding determination to take on the world. The years have taken their toll, and his once muscular frame now carries the weight of age and wisdom that shines through his aged skin with a healthy layer of doggy fat. He now rests his girth across from me on his favorite couch, eyes gently closed, likely lost in dreams of past adventures.

I bear the responsibility for the toll on Courage’s physique, as we share a love for fine meals. His palette appreciates a variety of pastas, with my meaty red sauce being a particular favorite. Surprisingly, like a well-mannered child appeasing a parent, he always eats his vegetables. He gets eggs for breakfast most days, yet I’ve discovered that pancakes will send his tail into an enthusiastic dance. And at night, after patiently waiting for me to finish my nightly bowl of cereal, Courage joyously laps up the remaining sugary milk like a child savoring their favorite ice cream.

With the years, Courage’s once-shiny, black pelt has surrendered to specks of gray, like wisdom’s brush on a canvas of fur. His muzzle, once a portrait of youth, has been overrun by an army of angry, white fur, giving him the look of an old man sporting a disheveled beard as his daily fashion choice. Yet, beneath this veneer of age, his navy-blue eyes, a gift from his grandfather, continue to sparkle with love and curiosity for the world around him.

Reflecting upon the dog I’ve known for most of my life, I feel incredibly blessed for having such a wonderful hound magically appear before me on that momentous day long ago. We became inseparable companions with a profound connection, and like siblings we caused mischief while exploring life’s wonders together. I witnessed his transformation from an unruly pup into a colossal hound who became a loving member of my family. However, destiny intervened once again, placing him upon a path to discover his true potential. That’s when he disappeared from my life, embarking on his grand adventure.

Upon his return, I found Courage to be a transformed hound—wise in the ways of humanity. I always suspected his exceptional intelligence allowed him to understand my words, a suspicion proven true upon his return. The tilt of his head while listening to my

words signifies a depth of understanding—he hears not just sounds but the intent behind my words. Our unique communication evolved, with a single bark signifying “yes” and a growl accompanied by a human-like side-to-side shake for “no”. Through much practice and effort, Courage mastered his own form of dogspeak by inflecting his bark and mixing it with a steady growl, making our conversations fluent. Interpreting his yowls became second nature, allowing me to understand his words clearly.

Our unique conversations have become a cherished part of my daily life. Over time, I discovered that he is very much a thinker; an intelligent hound who is content not being the center of attention. When Courage recounts his stories of old, his eyes light up with the radiance of youth and a broad smile curls upwardly at the base of his muzzle, exposing his white canines—a clear assimilation of humanity. His tales reveal to me how much he misses his old pals from long ago and by telling his extraordinary story, he gets to revisit his youthful adventures once again.

Courage is more than just a dog, he is a member of my family; a unique, four-legged best friend who has bridged the gap between the human and canine worlds. Comfortable in his own fur, thriving in a world not his by birthright, he is an authentic soul.

Long ago, I asked Courage for permission to share his story, and after careful consideration, he agreed. Otherwise, it would have remained a well-kept secret, shared only among hounds in the dark of night. In a world where the extraordinary often hides in plain sight, a tale exists that transcends the ordinary. I eagerly share with you the remarkable journey of a true canine prince!

This is the account of Courage, a Great Dane.

-J. A. Collins

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Through rugged mountains, 'cross fields where tall grass grows,  
a new melody whispers in the breeze, as across the land it flows.

Oh, wandering wind, what secrets do you bear tonight?

Have you glimpsed our young prince beneath the moon's soft light?

Rumors tell of his journey over distant hills and waters gray,

a royal hound seeking vengeance for the feline's treacherous way.

A beautiful beast of a dog, bearing a wretched scar,

from the land of man, he comes, traveling afar.

Little he knows what glory his future awaits,

until traveling through the majestic watery gates.

To the Hidden City of Hounds, where dogs roam free,

this epic quest leads to his ultimate destiny.

# PRELUDE: DREAM'S OF YESTERDAY

Thundering through the dense woods, my front legs reach out with colossal strides as my heart races with the intensity of a hummingbird's wings. I sprint, using every ounce of my youthful vigor, while my greedy lungs grasp for each breath. I am in pursuit of a spectral figure that shines milky-white in the moonlight ahead of me. This ethereal presence darts like a wraith through the forest's towering sentinels, their husky branches extend towards me like curious children grasping for a fleeting toy. But, I am too swift. Gusts of wind brush against my damp fur as these branch-like fingers miss their mark.

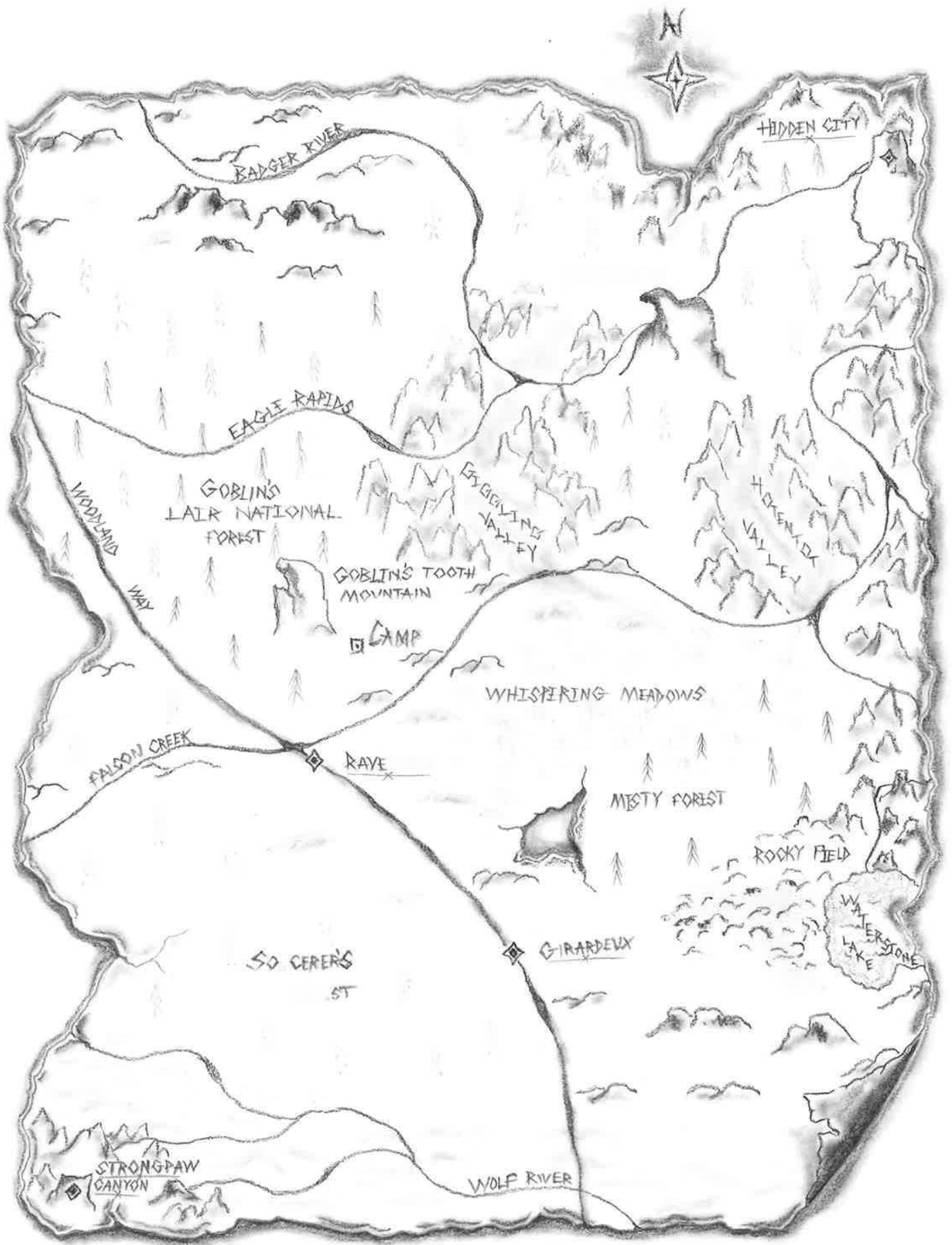
An inner yearning pulses within my soul; I must reach her. She is my missing half, the key to my completeness. Emerging from the woods, I finally catch sight of her, a white ghost standing proudly in a sun-drenched meadow. She waits, goading me to continue the chase, as if my very existence depends on it. With a desperate bark, her voice echoes through the valley as an ominous fog rises from the forest floor, hissing a warning of impending doom.

“This way, my brother!” she cries.

Without hesitation, I leap forward, while she sprints toward a massive waterfall that cascades into a clear, blue lagoon. She scurries across the water as if it's only an inch deep, then, she swiftly vanishes beneath the waterfall's thundering veil.

In pursuit, I launch onto this lagoon, only to sink like a hungry seabird diving for its prey. I did not believe I could cross the water as she did. I did not believe in the untapped power hidden within me. Simply put, I did not believe in myself.

Then, abruptly I awaken to the comforting scents of my lavish doghouse in the backyard.





*StrongPaw Canyon, birthplace of kings.*

*This desert outpost, desolate and ageless, a symbol of canine strength, has been besieged by a rival clan of ruthless felines, led by the notorious Black Panther, Terror.*

*After weeks of encirclement, the royal family escaped certain doom by slipping through a hidden underground passage. Venturing through perilous lands they seek the sanctuary of the last canine stronghold—the Hidden city of Hounds; their journey continues...*

*Canines and felines of the wild, eternal antagonists, forever at war, are entangled in an epic battle that has endured for thousands of years.*

*This is their story...*





# CHAPTER 1

## HUNTING ROYALTY

**T**he air was blistering, with no wind to offer him solace. The pungent stench of death clung to his nostrils as if it were summer sap on a tree. Duke Swifttail, the fearless scout, crouched on his belly amidst an angry sea of thick, weed-soaked grass and unforgiving thorn bushes. The summer's once-lush foliage, now withered and vengeful, stabbed defiantly at his paws while he crept forward with painstaking slowness. Each movement methodical as he advanced, striving for a clearer view. Worry gnawed at his gut like a wild dog scavenging marrow from a long-dried bone. Though completely devoid of fat, or even of sustenance by this point, his stomach still churned with the intensity of a summer tempest. From his vantage point atop the high cliffs, he surveyed the valley below.

The land lay parched and barren, an unforgiving canvas that made it easy to spot movement simply by eyeing the approaching dust cloud. A low growl rumbled under the Duke's breath, revealing black gums that parted into a peculiar human-like smile, exposing formidable canine fangs that protruded menacingly from his muzzle. With

sharp, intelligent eyes, one blue, one gray, the mixture a testament to his bloodline, he carefully scrutinized the approaching army, trance-like. Meticulously counting their numbers, hatred seethed from his gaze while the hairs on the nape of his neck bristled as if an invisible monster just whispered a deadly threat into Swiftail's ears.

The enemy, moving brazenly across the dusty terrain, resembled a ravenous plague, driven by an insatiable hunger for the annihilation of canine royalty. They made no effort to conceal their pursuit. On the horizon behind them, a looming dark smear hinted of an impending, vengeful rain.

*They're gaining on us far too quickly*, the duke mused as he observed their approach, akin to a gazelle eyeing a pack of encroaching lions. Satisfied with his assessment of their strength, he cautiously retreated from the edge, gingerly lifting one frayed paw at a time. Felines were keen at detecting movement, and he couldn't risk being spotted now.

Racing back to his pack, the duke galloped like a horse, his massive frame stretching and compacting with each stride. His oversized paws glided swiftly over the earth, rounding bushes and trees with grace. Duke Swiftail, a Great Dane, ran with agility and never faltered, especially in such dire times.

The fastest among his kin, Duke Swiftail, boasted a handsome pelt of black fur adorned with irregular silver streaks that ran from the peak of his torso to the bottom, giving him the appearance of an unlucky zebra. Although quite skinny for a Great Dane, he was almost as tough as his older brother.

This royal clan of Great Dane's carried within them a majestic bloodline dating back to the most ancient of times. This heritage, unparalleled among the canine race, possesses the greatest strength and power of all the known hound warriors.

Observing his brother's return, the King Gallant a magnificent harlequin-colored beast paused his progression; providing the weary hounds with a much-needed respite. Like his father, King Valor, he bore an irregular pattern of black patches that adorned his pelt, bestowing him with a natural camouflage. Having honed his fighting skills early in life, he mastered the GoMan Arts of Tooth and Paw fighting long before ascending to the throne, becoming a formidable adversary to any who challenged him. Before today, King Valor rarely ventured beyond StrongPaw Canyon, named after his great-grandfather, King StrongPaw.

Over the years, he had grown into a proud, dignified king, however his appearance today was one of exhaustion and worry. The king held his head high, projected an air of confidence as the duke approached. But beneath that battle-scarred exterior of aged skin and husky, short fur, he was frightened. He clearly understood that they were facing a formidable enemy with a singular objective: the complete annihilation of his canine clan.

"Lord Gallant!" Swiftail barked as he neared, his stomach heaving like inflatable balloons from the journey. "They must have their finest trackers upon us! We've crossed two rivers, changed directions three times and they're hot on our tail. A storm approaches my liege, yet I fear it will not arrive in time to mask our scent. Whichever path we choose, they're bound to catch up with us by nightfall!" Each word weighed heavily as if a small dagger was dancing upon his heart and passing the burden to his

king, brought no relief.

“I estimate their number at about thirty cats, and... they have lions,” Swiftail groaned. Pausing before he spoke again, Swiftail was hoping even the slightest delay might soften the impact of his words. This time his voice almost broke and he had to clear his throat with a harrumph before adding. “Worse yet my king, I spotted Terror leading the pack. We’ve all heard the tales of his ruthlessness. He is undoubtedly the most cunning and merciless beast ever walk on four paws. If he catches us, there will be no prisoners. No creature is more vicious than he!”

For over a week, the hounds had been on the run. Fortunately, the royal family had successfully escaped their canyon fortress under the cover of darkness shortly after its walls were breached by the feline army. Amid the chaos of battle, King Gallant, his pregnant queen, Duke Swiftail, and seven of their mightiest warriors had evaded capture by using a hidden underground passage. Leaving the destruction of their homeland behind, they escaped into the shadows of darkness. Now, mere days away from reaching the safety of the Hidden City of Hounds, the last and most secret of the canine hideouts, they were being mercilessly hunted by their pursuers.

Upon hearing the duke’s report, a sigh of exasperation involuntarily escaped the queen’s muzzle. sensing the movements within her belly, Queen Truepaw knew that time was running out. “I can’t keep this pace any longer,” she complained to her husband from her resting place amid a patch of dry crabgrass. “My pains have begun; I can’t go on! I won’t make it to the city my lord.”

Contemplating their immediate future, a multitude of scenarios raced through King Gallant’s mind like a silent movie on fast-forward. Realizing he had run out of options, a rising tide of fury suddenly consumed the king, and his heart burned with a despair so profound that it would burst from his chest at any moment. Slowly, he turned to look deeply into the eyes of his beloved queen, the same eyes that he longingly gazed into every night. Now he knew this would be the last time he’d look upon such beauty, and he paused momentarily, taking one last mental snapshot, memorizing every little detail of her face.

Sharp pain constricted his throat as he struggled to speak past the massive lump that had formed. “Then let our puppies be born,” the king commanded. “We will stay here and make our stand; the cats will chase us no longer!”

Instinctively, the queen lifted her head and sniffed at the wind. Sensing a faint whiff of the approaching malevolence, her jaw clenched in pain, and an intense resonant growl emanated from her throat, a deep vibration that seemed to shake her very core. Her lustrous brown eyes bore into him; he was her entire world. Yet now, she carried much more within her womb. She bore the gift of new life—their future.

A look of profound wonder and tender love blossomed upon the queen’s features. She was acutely aware of Gallant’s presence. His fur, rustled and tattered, the wildness of his scent, the warmth of his breath upon her face and the fire in his eyes, one steel gray, the other ocean blue. Even the elongated patch of fur on his back that now stood erect, adding inches to his already massive size, would be etched into her memory forever. She understood the magnitude of the moment as much as he did, and took one last opportunity to rub against his body, mingling his scent into hers with the soft

scratching of their fur. Time itself seemed to stretch and slow, thickening like wet cement and she seized every last second.

Forcing a swallow, a wave of pain, disguised as a gasp of air coursed down the queen's body, assaulting her aching heart before reaching her lungs. Reaching deep inside herself, she steadied her resolve before speaking.

“Your pups will live on and follow in your path, my lord.” The queen barked in a gasping whisper, her voice catching as if a heavy weight had been dropped onto her chest. “One day, they will avenge you!”

“Find a comfortable spot, my queen, and focus on giving birth,” commanded her king. “Our legacy now rests in your hands! Ironcoat will be here to assist you, my love.”

Turning back to face his warriors, King Gallant pushed aside thoughts of his wife and offspring to focus on the problem at hand. His body quivered with fury as he addressed the remaining members of his clan.

“Hounds,” he began, his voice resounding with determination. “I will not tempt fate any longer. We travel no further until my puppies are born. We must make our stand and face the enemy here! The high ground we just came across with trees and shrubbery for cover will give us our best advantage. If they’re still following on our trail we’ll spring an ambush! This time the element of surprise will be on our side! Let’s head back and prepare our attack!” his words were imbued with a ferocity that mirrored his anger. If words alone could kill, the intensity of his voice would be sufficient to travel the distance required to slay their foe.

Turning to a gray-haired wolfhound standing nearby, King Gallant continued, “Ironcoat, stay here and help the queen! She must give birth soon. My warriors and I will fight until our last breath, yet if we do not prevail, you are our last hope.”

Drawing closer to Ironcoat, the king locked his gaze with the wolfhound’s clear, blue eyes and continued with an unwavering resolve. “I give you one final command, my old friend. The moment my first male heir is born into this wretched world, you must take him and run with all your might to the Hidden City. Stop for nothing or no one, no matter what you hear behind you. If I do not survive this day, you alone bear the responsibility for my future generation. Raise my young prince, teach him, show him the ways of the GoMan Arts as our fathers taught us. Share with my pup of our past glory and guide him to grow strong enough to avenge me. Our legacy must be preserved!”

“He shall be as my own son,” Ironcoat responded with a resolute bark. Standing tall before his king, he drew a deep breath, then moved his right paw to the center of his chest and respectfully lowered his head in a slow, reverent bow, accepting the solemn command from his lord. His gut wrenched as though caught in a vice, his throat swelled, and his limbs weakened as he comprehended the magnitude of King Gallant’s request—a final order from a fallen king.

“Long life to you my brother!” barked the king, his gaze stern and unyielding. He, too, inhaled deeply before pounding his right paw firmly to the center of his chest and lowering his head in a slow, respectful bow. This reciprocal GoMan salute, their most venerable sign of respect, communicated the enormity of his final request before King Gallant turned to join his warriors.

Smooth and stealthily, Ironcoat made his way to Queen Truepaw, who was carefully settling into a thicket of raspberry bushes. Ironcoat, a handsome Irish wolfhound, had been present the day his king was born. This noble breed was famed for its imposing stature and fearlessness in combating wild animals. His weathered body was adorned in scraggly, blondish-gray fur and a set of ivory-white teeth aligned perfectly along his lengthy jaw, creating a handsome smile when called for. His eyes, deep, ocean blue at their center offered tiny windows to an honest soul.

Wolfhounds, though not as skilled in the GoMan Arts as Great Danes, possessed an unmatched longevity of life and a unique ability to see into the future, superior to any other canine breed. Through intense concentration and meditation, GoMan Masters can glimpse future pathways, and wolfhounds excelled at interpreting these visions. This ability grows stronger with each passing generation. It was perhaps this very gift that led Ironcoat to this moment, as the one dog capable of safeguarding the king's first-born male puppy.

"The day has finally arrived, my queen!" Ironcoat barked with a smile beaming upon his face, false bravado concealing his angst. "Our future king will soon be born! I'll stay with you as long as I can, my lady, but when your first prince is born, I must take him and reach the Hidden City. It's his best chance for survival. Hide here with the remaining pups and wait for word from the king, or follow my scent when you're able. Do you understand?"

Groaning in agreement, the queen was already deep in the throes of labor. Queen Truepaw, an extraordinarily beautiful dog raised in StrongPaw Canyon amongst royalty, had spent her life in a world of grace and elegance. Her brindle pelt bore a striking mix of black streaks running vertically against a grayish-white background, resembling the stripes of a Bengal tiger. However, after more than a week of constant movement, the queen was sluggish at best.

Lying on her side, the queen could no longer delay the inevitable. She was now preparing to bring her royal litter into this harsh world.



With the faint but unmistakable scent of canines teasing their noses and the anticipation of a fresh kill fueling their bloodlust, the feline hunters were thriving on the chase. For nearly a week, they had pursued their elusive prey with little rest or sleep. Through countless miles of forests, over swift-flowing rivers, and across rugged, unforgiving terrain, this evil band of cats had proven to be relentless trackers, unwavering in their pursuit.

Leading the pack was Terror, a cat whose very name struck fear into the hearts of all who knew it. Terror was infamous for being a passing shadow of death concealed in the darkest of night. Born in a zoo, he inherited a legacy of vengeance from a mother who resented her captivity and an old, wise sire who ruled his clan with unrelenting cruelty.

Terror's father, once a wild panther, regaled him with grand tales of the untamed wildness, yearning for his young cub to one day experience the vast world beyond the confines of the zoo.

Growing up in a prison of cold, stone walls, Terror developed a fierce hatred for

man. A charcoal-colored Black Panther, he possessed a pair of vicious-looking yellow eyes that seemed to penetrate flesh and bone revealing the very essence of those unfortunate enough to cross his path. His eyes absorbed every detail while divulging nothing, collecting knowledge and secrets while betraying none of his own. Terror's face was angular, mimicking the most ancient of cats with each feature pronounced and definite as if carved by a craftsman. His body was massive, much larger than the average panther and though he was quite young for a leader, he ruled his pride with fear and intimidation.

In his youth, Terror's parents instilled in him the innate hatred that existed between canines and felines and how they've been mortal enemies for thousands of years.

He heard tales of dogs roaming freely in the outside world, and dreamed of achieving such freedoms for himself. Eventually, Terror cleverly organized the first known "zoobreak." Leading his clan, the Black Panther escaped before sunrise, then slipped unnoticed into the hills. With each passing year he grew bigger, stronger, and more ruthless, while his faithful band of followers continually expanded with fresh recruits from the wild. Fueled by hatred, this fugitive was waging a full-time war against both man and dog.

"Keep up the pace!" hissed Terror, his voice cold and unyielding. "We're closing in; the stench of those wretched hounds is growing stronger!"

The siege of StrongPaw Canyon, nestled deep within the desert, had unfolded perfectly according to the felines' plans. Locating the hidden canyon had taken decades, and many more years were spent amassing an army formidable enough to attack. When they were finally ready, Terror led the assault. After first encircling the canyon, they began a relentless siege. Following days of brutal combat with many dead on both sides, the felines claimed their hard-fought victory. However, their triumph turned bitter as they discovered that the king had escaped, causing them to immediately go on the hunt.



A gentle breeze assaulted the air, carrying with it an ominous sense of impending doom. Ironcoat, ever the vigilant GoMan, felt the approaching felines in the distance. Every GoMan warrior possessed an innate connection to the world around them, a sixth sense that allowed them to sense the encroaching evil, an unseen force advancing like a dark sun casting its' shadow upon the land. This awareness triggered a heightened state of perception: sounds became razor sharp and immediately identified, every scent defined and sourced, and each tiny detail in the visual field stood out with perfect clarity as though peering through a magnifying glass, with the precision of an eagle's gaze.

Every muscle in Ironcoat's massive body quivered with the burning desire to join his king in battle. His very soul yearned to fight mercilessly alongside the last of his clan. Yet duty bound him to remain, a command he longed to defy, yet understood it to be the wisest choice.

Turning back to look at his queen; Ironcoat re-focused on the task at hand. "Push!" he barked. "The cats are near!"

Lying on her side, concealed within a thicket of huckleberry bushes at the forest's edge, the queen felt the presence of two young lives within her and willed them to enter



the world beyond.

Simultaneously, her heightened senses were also engulfed in the struggle around her. Great Danes, the mightiest of GoMan Warriors, possess the unique ability to reach out with their senses and manipulate the energy around them, allowing for communication with one another over vast distances.

Casting her thoughts outward, the queen found her king concealed on a sturdy branch of an oak tree poised to strike against the approaching enemy. Feeling the connection, he spoke to her. "*Hurry, my love, we haven't much time!*" His words carried the responsibility that she now bore.

Then, she felt an icy finger trace along her spine as she sensed an evil presence rise over the hills like a dark, piercing spear slicing through the land: the cats were approaching.



## CHAPTER 2

### AMBUSH AT DUSK

**A**tacking was never part of the plan. King Gallant, along with his finest warriors, had managed to escape the siege of their canyon hideaway unscathed, but their scent would prove easy to follow. Hampered by a very pregnant queen, their goal of reaching the Hidden City of Hounds, now a mere ten leagues away, proved unattainable and the warriors found themselves with no alternative but to make a final stand.

It's been many generations since the GoMan Warriors last attacked felines. The GoMan Arts of Tooth and Paw were first developed thousands of years ago by the earliest generations of Tibetan hounds. This ancient fighting style was created to defend canines from the primitive order of Bastet, a league of wild felines who were waging war against mankind and domesticated animals. These ancient fighting techniques were meant for defense, not aggression. However, when pushed to their limits there are no fiercer fighters than GoMan Masters, and among them, the Great Danes reign supreme.

As the afternoon waned and the bright noon-day sun relinquished its scorching hold to the impending storm, it clung to the forest canopy with its last golden fingers.

Concealed like silent samurai among the forest's hidden shadows, the last of a once-great clan prepared for battle.

King Gallant connected to his queen through their telepathic bond, and felt her distress over the distance, yet amid the concern he held for his beloved, he couldn't help but swell with pride for his fellow hounds. He communicated his thoughts to them with the power of his mind.

*Noble hounds, we stand together as brothers, and I am honored to fight alongside you today. If our end shall come, we will meet it as one! By standing strong and fighting to the last, we increase the chances of survival for my precious pups who carry on our legacy! I express my deepest gratitude to each of you for your valor and dedication to our cause.*



Moving with swiftness, the feline war party emerged from a long-dried riverbed and came upon a grove of wheat stalks that framed a towering, old-growth forest. An aura of darkness clung to them as if a spell cast by black magic was guiding them along. Their relentless pursuit had brought them close to the weary canines, and Terror had pushed his cats relentlessly, determined to catch the Great Danes before they escaped his grasp once again.

“Keep Moving!” Terror hissed as they ascended the first hill. “I can smell those dirty hounds; they're close!”



Refusing to budge a muscle or release a heavy breath, King Gallant grappled with a barrage of dreadful thoughts that invaded his mind like a horde of invaders ransacking his sanity. As he braced himself for the impending battle, he took a moment to communicate with his queen across the distance.

“My love, you alone now bear the weight as savior to our lineage. Survival is now your sole purpose. You will forever reside in my heart!”

When the perfect opportunity presented itself and the unsuspecting felines were marching directly below his perch, King Gallant dropped from the oak tree like a hammer strikes a nail and pounced upon the enemy.



At that same moment, beneath a huckleberry bush not too far away, Queen Truepaw grappled with every breath, her labor pains causing her to gasp loudly. With her bones weary, body tired, and mind exhausted from intense travel, and now on the cusp of giving birth, she now confronted the agonizing throes of labor. Despite the tumultuous sounds of battle emanating from the nearby hills, she mustered every ounce of strength and pushed with all her might, calling upon muscles that had long remained dormant.

Reaching out with her mind, she connected with her king. Viewing the chaos through his eyes, she was immediately overcome with fear. Feeling the imminent birth of her first puppy and the agonizing pandemonium occurring just across the nearby hills, her mind and body were waging their own battle. The happiness and joy of new life birthing from within her loins was being assaulted by visions of her loved ones fighting for their very lives. *I am running out of time!*

A full moon broke free from the storm clouds, reflecting the sun's glory as her pains of labor suddenly eased. Growling with relief, her first puppy was born. *A girl, she sensed. Born under a day moon, you will be our savior.*



With the ambush sprung by their king, the rest of the hounds leaped from their concealed positions in a coordinated attack. These GoMan Masters were skilled warriors with superb strength and exceptional fighting techniques, one a match for any lion. The fierce guttural barking of the dogs answered by the ear-splitting hisses of the cats echoed chaotically throughout the woods, creating a pandemonium never before heard in this part of the land.



A short distance away, a newborn puppy was experiencing her mother's gently cleansing tongue. The little princess lay cradled in her mother's embrace, taking her first breaths of life while Ironcoat stood guard over the royal family.

"She will be named Savior, (*or... Moonpaw, Moontail*)" declared the queen as she lovingly cleaned the face of her ivory-white puppy. "And she will avenge her father. This shall be her destiny."

"My queen," Ironcoat whispered, his kindly face etched with deep worry as the gut-wrenching cries of battle echoed closer. "I fear I can wait no longer for the birth of a prince; the enemy may discover us at any moment and I cannot fail our king. But I cannot leave you here, alone and defenseless!"

Tormented by inner conflict, Queen Truepaw understood the urgency of the moment and how vital the survival of her kin was to this never-ending war.

"Go my noble warrior!" She commanded, hesitating no longer. "Waste no time! Take my first-born to the Hidden City, whether prince or princess, today there is no difference! I command you to go!" she barked with an iron resolve as she sensed hesitation parading through Ironcoat's mind.

With a heavy sprinkling of battle scars displayed amongst his gray fur and war-weary eyes that missed nothing, it was clear that Ironcoat had already lived an eventful life, and after living such a life, he knew this was a moment unlike any other: a moment of consequence. Ironcoat now stood on the brink of a pivotal juncture with a before and after, where once it had passed, it could never be regained. This was a point in time that would forever alter the course of other's lives. At this moment, Ironcoat bore the responsibility to do the right thing... This was his time to be a hero.

With the first darts of warm rain now descending upon them like happy parachutes carrying liquid encouragement, Ironcoat took one last look at his beloved queen. She appeared more alive and more beautiful than ever before. Her eyes, resembling silver storm clouds glinting under a full moon, shone with immense strength and profound sorrow as grief rode heavy in the air. She, too, grasped the monumental significance of this very moment. With an aching heart, Ironcoat inhaled deeply, placed his right paw on his chest, ducked his head and bowed solemnly, touching the sacred birthing ground before her in an ultimate sign of respect. With that final act, he agreed to her request.

Delicately engulfing the newborn puppy within his mouth, Ironcoat carefully

navigated his way out of the huckleberry thicket that had concealed their existence. Stealthily, he kept low to the ground, crawling away from the clamor of battle that unfolded just beyond the hillside. Spotting an opening through the woods, he quickly galloped away, never once looking back.

With Princess Savior delicately hanging by his muzzle, Ironcoat aimed for the far mountains in the distance, home to the Hidden City of Hounds.

Watching Ironcoat scamper out of her little nest in the woods, the queen's heart became heavy as a stone that grew larger with every beat. Queen Truepaw knew she would never lay eyes on her puppy again. *Long life to you, my young princess...*

Alone amid the intensifying rain, the queen searched outwards with her mind, focusing on her king. She sensed his fear, felt his anger, tasted his blood, and shared in his pain, yet she also experienced his pride. This pride was for her and the legacy they were passing on.

*Have courage my love, (or... He will shine bright like the sun)*, King Gallant calmly spoke to her from the throngs of battle. Amidst overwhelming odds, and surrounded by a maelstrom of destruction, he still managed to be her tranquility in the storm.

Abruptly, Queen Truepaw was yanked back to her hidden lair as pain once again encompassed her loins. With all her might, she pushed, bringing another puppy into the world.



The moment his next puppy was born, the second smile of the day graced the length of the king's face, revealing black gums rarely seen this last week. Looking over at his brother who was engaged in combat with a mountain lion, King Gallant noticed that Duke Swifttail also had an equally large grin dancing across his face. Even during their most dire moments, the brothers knew that their clan would endure.



Thoroughly licking her second-born clean, Queen Truepaw coddled her puppy, examining his black fur. "You will be named Courage (**or... Sunpaw, Suntail**)," she whispered to him. The newborn nuzzled closer as if he already understood.

However, this wasn't a moment to be cherished, not with the cries of battle encroaching ever nearer. This was a moment for survival, and the queen instinctively knew what she must do. Rising on wobbly legs amid the downpour, she gathered her strength as Courage growled beneath her. At any moment the queen could be discovered by the enemy and any dreams of the future would be immediately silenced. She had to survive, that was her only goal.

Blocking her mind from the horrendous sound of battle raging through the pitter-patter of rain bouncing off the nearby foliage, Queen Truepaw delicately picked up her young prince within her muzzle and cautiously stepped out of her hiding place.

Looking up towards the hillside, she could now see the carnage and knew her loved ones were desperately fighting for time. The queen had no time to spare. Away from the hill, she observed a pathway through the woods. Crouching low to the ground like a stalking tiger, careful not to be spotted, the queen made her way towards the trail

where the lingering scent of Ironcoat still hung listlessly in the stormy air as a guiding beacon. Stealthily, she moved away from the skirmish with Courage dangling helplessly from her mouth.

Staring across the expanse of land, the queen could barely make out the top of Eagle's Peak as it played hide and seek with the distant clouds. She knew that on the other side of this mountain lay the Hidden City of Hounds, where she hoped Ironcoat would safely arrive with her first born. Knowing that her strength would not last much longer, she needed to find a closer sanctuary in a hurry.

Looking past the open meadow before her, she saw a row of houses marking the border of a small town. *Civilization*, she thought. *This is where we shall hide. I will keep you far away from the wicked claws of the felines. We will melt ourselves into this little town. Man will protect us!*

Realizing her newborn's safety lay within the confines of this small town, Queen Truepaw gathered her remaining strength and marched onwards with Courage cradled in her motherly grip. All dogs knew that wild cats avoided human-populated areas at all costs. Roaming city streets was a dangerous proposition for wild cats, and contact with man was a recipe certain death.

Crossing into the city limits, she cautiously stepped onto the first structure of man; cement, solid and unyielding. Reaching this first sign of civilization, she gently laid young Courage on a soft patch of grass and rested for a moment, taking stock of her options.

The evening sun stoutly pierced the clouds as the queen, exhausted and weak, turned backwards to reach out with her telepathic senses. Searching with all her might, she felt nothing—no visions of battle, no sensations of fear or anger; no communication from her king or fellow Great Danes. The unsettling realization washed over her; they were the last of her kind.

There are many fates worse than death, the most common being to survive the death of a loved one. For the dead, their journey has come to an end, yet for the survivor, a new journey of loss has just begun. Stabbed suddenly and unexpectedly, right in the core of her heart, Queen Truepaw's legs gave way and she fell to the wet ground crying out in anguish for the loved ones she lost. Impulsively, she howled long and hard with every last breath in her lungs.

"Oooooooooohr-ohr-oooooh!" *Goodbye my love!* The queen lay on the ground mourning her loss as Courage whimpered quietly by her side, feeling her pain.

Then, once again, she began to sense the presence of evil. It approached like a dark fog slowly creeping from the shadows of the nearby forest, raising the hackles on her back. Anger and vengeance consumed her thoughts, teasing her sanity. She yearned to exact revenge, to vanquish their army and destroy their leader, yet these desires could not be fulfilled. Not by her anyway.

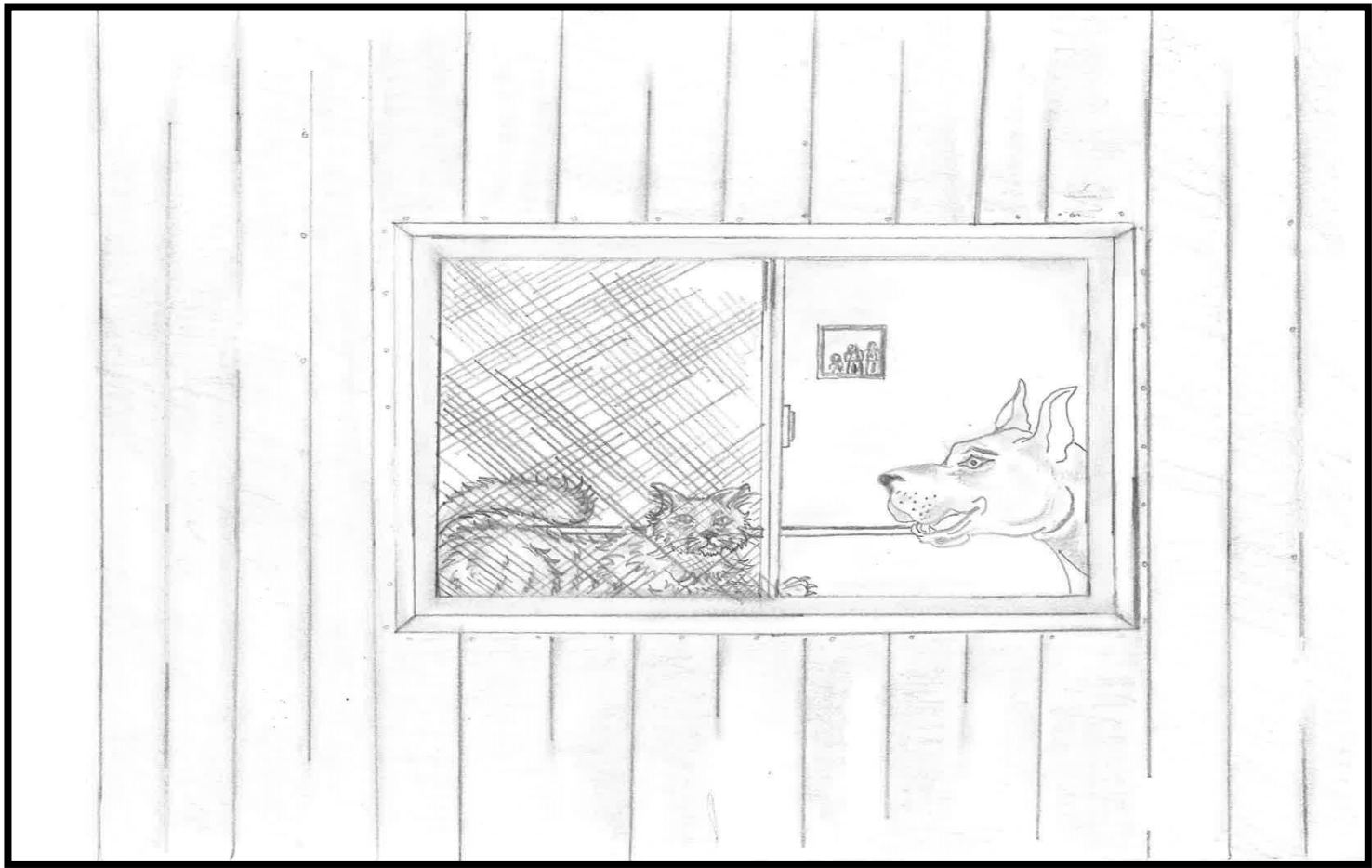
A warm breath of wind ghosted past Queen Truepaw, tickling the fine fur of her ears as it forcibly hugged a wave of damp, summer leaves against her body. One leaf in particular hung listlessly in the humid air as if it were being held by the ethereal hands of the wind itself before gently falling feather-like to the ground. Amidst this rustling of nature, a faint whisper, barely discernible in the sudden maelstrom, whistled along the

edge of the wind. “*Go my love!*” she heard.

Drawing strength from those words, like warmth from a fire in the midst of a blizzard, she quickly rose and continued to carry Courage into the city. Meandering through the maze of houses and crisscrossing roads, the deeper she journeyed, the safer she felt. The queen was looking for a place to take her young prince. She was searching for a sign.

Journeying deeper into the city, she turned down another roadway and suddenly encountered an unmistakable melody that all dogs yearned to hear. The high-pitch of this clamor echoed down the street much like the faint sound of church bells, on Sunday morning—joyous, reassuring, and welcoming. Completely spent from her travels, and still in pain from giving birth, Queen Truepaw sluggishly stumbled forward as her ears, like radar, honed in on the amorous melody. Approaching its epicenter, she observed happy children running about on a lush green lawn, their laughter filled with the unmistakable sounds of joy.

Finally ending her long journey, with Courage still dangling from her mouth, she dropped onto the yard in exhaustion.



## CHAPTER 3

### UNLIKELY PRINCE

**C**ourage, a youthful and very energetic Great Dane had no comprehension of just how much of a lucky dog he was. Growing up in a spacious house with a loving human family, he lived a life of joy and luxury. Spending the nights in the backyard alongside his mother, they shared the comforts of a massive dog house that was comfortably carpeted, heated for the cold winter, and painted bright red like a fire truck. However, for these two hounds, bright red meant black because of course, all dogs are colorblind. Courage spent most of his time frolicking around his very own playground—the backyard. Filled with toys, balls, and numerous bones, cleverly buried in secret locations, it was a canine paradise.

This canine paradise was unfortunately home to his most hated nemesis, a constant thorn in his side who resided up the nearby cherry tree. This creature, a tiny, back-yard squirrel, seemed to exist solely to torment Courage from the safety of its lofty perch.

With a long, rectangular shaped head, a massive, muscle-encased muzzle and enormous paws that dwarfed the average human hand, all engulfed into an oversized



frame, he looked to be a giant dressed in a furry dog costume. This gargantuan Great Dane lived without fear and quite often dove off the rear balcony without hesitation in chase of a ball. Oftentimes, he'd smack head first into the wood fence, breaking cedar panels in the process, yet with a canine head full of muscle, he felt no pain.

Courage's pelt was jet-black with a distinctive patch of white owning the center of his chest like a sheriffs' badge that will never wash off. He ran like a small horse galloping over the ground, yet to his family he was a gentle giant that they loved unquestionably.

Courage had far outgrown his mother, yet no matter how many times he challenged her to wrestle, he could never best her. Truepaw was too clever, too agile, and too experienced to be outwitted by her own puppy.

For Truepaw, wrestling with Courage was a simple game of keep away. She skillfully avoided his attacks while playfully nipping at him every time he left his guard down.

Truepaw was a learned master at deflection, at counter-attacking. She would swiftly glide her body to the left or right of Courage when he advanced, causing his body, with his forward momentum to fly right by her, then she would playfully smack his rear end as if spanking a disobedient child.

It was frustrating for Courage to never gain the upper hand in these sparing matches, however, she always provided him with words of wisdom as any teacher would do. "Don't feel bad my son, a pup should never be able to outwit or out-manuever his own parent. Whatever you have done, whichever angle of attack you try, I have already done a thousand times over. I give you my best effort, as any adversary would.

"Here you face an opponent who is more skilled than you, though you tower over me in size. But, you are learning to fight a superior adversary, you are getting faster and smarter every time we wrestle my young pup. Perhaps one day you will beat me," she would tell him with a broad grin dancing across her muzzle.

Truepaw faithfully watched over Courage, rarely letting him out of her sight. She never liked to go for walks, or even out to the local park with the children, and she always discouraged Courage when he barked about the mysteries of the outside world. She was content simply by being a safe, loving, human home.

"Everything we need is right here; you just don't realize how good you have it," she would explain to Courage whenever he asked questions about the outside world. Truepaw never disclosed her nobility to Courage. This proud queen of canines had always fantasized about living a normal life under the loving care of a human family. She was now living that dream, happily enjoying her days without the responsibilities and dangers of living as royalty. With no wild cats, no wars to fight, and no training for battle, her young prince was to live the most ordinary of lives.

Since escaping the woods years ago, Truepaw has kept her mind closed off from the outside world; a barbaric realm consisting of struggle, wars, and death. She had never tried to communicate with Ironcoat, nor her first born puppy, whom she knew in her heart had safely arrived at the Hidden City. Surely Ironcoat assumed she perished with her king in the forest outside of town. With her mind closed to the world beyond, Ironcoat could not feel her presence; he would have no reason to search for his queen.

From the moment Truepaw discovered those joyful children playing in the front yard, she knew it would be a perfect place to raise her son. *They sound so happy*, she remembered thinking—and she was right.

Truepaw had stumbled upon a wonderful home with two young boys and a little girl who was the cutest of them all. These rambunctious children came home from school every day to play ball, wrestle, and share the afternoon with Courage and Truepaw. Sometimes they would dress the two Great Dane's in sunglasses, shoes, and funny clothes, just to parade them around the house. His favorite game was Frisbee and these devoted children always found time to practice Courage's mid-air catch. Truepaw would never be far away, always dutifully watching over her pup.

Communicating with his family like he did with his fellow animals proved difficult for Courage. Struggling with the limitations of his canine vocalizations he would bark relentlessly, inflecting his cadence a multitude of ways as he attempted to speak in their language. However, his mother would always admonish his efforts, worrying he would upset the tranquility of their household with his constant musings. But, it was impossible for Courage to keep quiet since he had so much he wished to say, and so many ways he could be of more help around the house.

Courage often felt that he was more human than canine and always suspected there was something about him that was different from other dogs. However, he could never be as interactive with humanity as he truly desired. Communicating between species proved to be a difficult concept and no matter how much he practiced, Courage was constantly frustrated with his inability to project the human language. He was painfully aware that his canine tongue lacked the capabilities for human speech.

His family talked to Courage as if he clearly understood their phrases and over time he learned to comprehend most every word they spoke to him, yet the phrases they spoke to each other simply brushed along his ears, never finding purpose.

With the youngest child, Judy, Courage had a unique bond. She spoke to him in a secret language, whispering tales that were meant for his ears only. Courage cherished these moments and never revealed the young girl's secrets.

Being a young pup, Courage loved to explore the house, often encountering creatures of different varieties. Exploring upstairs, he came across a water snake similar to the one in the backyard, yet this one stood strong and proud, spilling its' waters onto a wide tub that usually held two rambunctious children within it. Biting or attacking the snake did nothing but frustrate his canines—in his infinite wisdom, Courage ultimately decided the water snake was friendly.

In the next rooms, he discovered where the humans slept—their kennels. Courage was well-versed in the house rules—he was not allowed on their kennels. However, Courage always managed to leave a trail of slobber along the sides as he protruded his snout in search of a warm hand or tasty face to lovingly lick.

In the kitchen lived two of his favorite creatures who never attacked him like the water snakes. These beings were so quiet and docile that one could argue they were not actually alive, as Bubba and Ghost, his feline friends often proclaimed. But, Courage knew better than to believe everything he heard from house-cats, they liked to bend the truth whenever it suited them.

Speaking to them had yet to work, these beings were not the talkative kind and never once responded to his inquiries. Nonetheless, they seemed to be the center of attention for the whole family. Which Courage thought was crazy since they never talked back nor performed any tricks for food—a talent he'd discovered was extremely useful.

He had discovered a few things about the creatures however. The smaller one had a strong appetite and was fed multiple times a day like it was a ravenous dog. Its larger brother however, was a different story altogether. Nicknamed, "The Giver," by his mother because day or night, it always had something tasty to offer, making it a favorite stop for every member of the family.

However, the strangest creature in the house lived in the front room. Courage called it, "The Transporter," because this magical creature had the power to transport humans, animals, and even other dogs into it, where they would talk and bark directly at him. However, he wasn't allowed to wrestle with them as he once tried. Having no obvious benefit for Courage, this being was simply tolerated.

Two felines lived with them too. However, these were welcomed members of the family. Bubba, a short-haired tabby, was a philosopher, otherwise known as a felinversationalist. He loved sitting on his favorite windowsill where he would spin imaginary yarns about adventurous mice who fell to the clever fangs of a world-renown mouse hunter. However, this mouse hunter did exist—Ghost, the ever-vigilant mouse hunter, was his girlfriend.

Ghost, a blue Russian, was a rare breed of cat. Originally hailing from the northern parts of Russia, her breed flourished in the wintry weather. Born with thick, furry pelts, this ancestral grayish fur provided them with tremendous resistance from the coldest of storms. During the summer she could be found hovering over the air-conditioning vents, patiently waiting the return of colder weather. Always on the prowl, or sitting in preparation for an ambush like a stone statue, she enthusiastically kept their home mouse-free.

Bubba and Ghost rarely ventured beyond the safety of the backyard, their shared domain. They learned of the outside world from what they observed through the front windows and from observing life through the front window and from the small bits of information that Truepaw would provide. Truepaw always proved evasive when asked about life outside of town, especially in Courage's presence. Nevertheless, these two felines were content with their lives in the house of man. Feral cats considered them traitors for residing with the two-legged beasts, but to them, life couldn't be better. Bubba and Ghost didn't spend their days consumed with wars or battle—they enjoyed peaceful lives. They were spoiled cats and they knew it.

As time passed, Truepaw began to feel her journey through this world coming to an end. Viewing the future, she understood that one day Courage's destiny would come calling for him. After this vision, the queen decided it was time to speak to Courage about his noble lineage.

"Young Courage," she began, "I have avoided speaking to you about my past or even of your wonderful father for a long time now, yet I must acknowledge that the time has finally come to tell you of our proud history. I have tried hard to keep you sheltered

from the past, yet I feel it is essential for you to know about the long lineage of noble Great Danes that you have come from. Looking down upon you from the heavens above, I know your ancestors are proud of the kind-hearted hound you've become."

Courage stood in wonder, mesmerized by his mother's soothing voice. "Your father was a great king, named Gallant, he was the most honorable hound I have ever known. Tales of his heroics in battle were known throughout our land. Just before you were born he called out your name, young Courage. Those were the last words he spoke to me. With the last moments of his life your father fought for your survival, my young prince. He sacrificed his life so that you and I could escape from the most wicked feline this world has ever known.

"Our family lineage is quite a story to tell, my pup. Your lineage carries a proud race of fierce and noble warriors of good who earned the highest levels of respect in our canine community. Their spirit will always be with you, guiding your actions through the challenges of life. "I've been overjoyed to watch you grow in such a wonderful home. Yet I know that one day your destiny will come calling for you. When that time comes, live up to the moment without fear and remember that I will always be watching over you from another realm, as your father watches over us now."

One cloudy morning soon thereafter, Truepaw didn't wake from her sleep—her earthly journey had come to an end. Courage stayed by her side all day, grieving her loss until the children returned home in the afternoon. That night, the children's father held a small ceremony to lay Truepaw to rest in the corner of the backyard.

Unbeknownst to man, GoMan Masters live extraordinary long lives. Queen Truepaw was seventy-two human years old when she peacefully passed away.



## CHAPTER 4

### WOUNDS OF THE CLAW

**T**hat summer, the family went camping in Goblin’s Lair National Forest. It was a lengthy drive from their home in the town of Stonehill, yet Courage relished every minute of the ride in the family suburban. He had his own spot in the back of the truck where he loved sticking his enormous head out of the rear window and feel the wind in his face. His long tail wagged incessantly, causing his chest and shoulders to swing back and forth like counter-weights as he imagined himself a winged animal flying over the ground.

The day was warm and cloudless, with a deep blue sky, perfect weather for a camping adventure. Approaching the forest, a harsh ache battled Courage’s chest as he felt a deep longing to be part of the wild, in tune with his feral ancestors. The unfamiliar scents of the forest tickled upon his nose like a soft feather, both intriguing and alien. All about him were monstrous trees of green and brown sprouting from the soil as if they were wooden fingers yearning to scratch the clouds above.

After arriving at their campsite, the children set up tents while Courage did his best to “help” by chewing holes in them, considering everything a potential toy. The

oldest child dug a hole for the fire and applied rocks to the surrounding area while Courage marked this new structure as his territory, a natural habit of his race. Courage comprehended that his job was protector of the pack, so he constantly prowled the area in search of any lurking dangers.

During his first night in the forest, Courage found it difficult to sleep. In the sky above, the stars burned clear and sharp; a sight he never had the pleasure of viewing in the city. Sniffing the forest air, a horde of smells invaded his nostrils as a faint wind sighed through the woods causing the dry leaves to stir and float about like agile swimmers in a current. The scent of unknown critters residing just beyond their camp, constantly assaulted his city-dweller nose, yet the cacophony of noises randomly broadcasted as darkness invaded, intrigued him the most.

With ashen smoke from the fire sending columns of clouded warriors upwards to battle the clear forest air, Courage rested on a soft den of freshly dug dirt and rotated his canine antennas towards every sound that sprang from beyond.

Suddenly, a lonely howl announced itself from the distance. Tickling Courage's ears, this anonymous howl caused the hairs on his back to rear upwards with perfect posture. Instinctively, he gave a reply, offering his best howl in return. Back and forth these howls were served in a verbal game of canine tennis, until finally annoyed with his belligerence, Courage's family emerged from their tents to stop the madness. Finally subdued, Courage lulled himself to sleep pontificating about which wild creatures were singing such wonderful noises.

Each afternoon, the family went hiking, with Courage leading the pack, always the first to face the wild. Courage chased after every new scent or shadowy movement he encountered, yet the squirrels and small rodents he pursued were too agile to be caught in his canines.

The last day of camping was a day no one in the family would ever forget. Hiking in a different direction this time, they crossed into the unfamiliar territory of Goblin's Tooth Mountain. Courage demanded the lead with Mason, the middle child, following directly on his heels. Courage's perfectly tuned canine snout kept the two youngsters on a well-traversed game trail. Venturing far ahead of their pride, Courage noticed something strange concealed behind a tree stump ahead. At first, he thought it was a fallen tree on the side of the trail, but as they approached, the object shifted into a crouching position, raising the hackles on Courage's back.

Mason, remaining unaware, took no notice of the object, yet Courage, as it was his duty to protect, quickly realized that this was a creature of the forest. With dark, black fur, this animal blended into the shadow of the stump, yet it was its evil eyes that caught Courage's attention. This animal possessed two piercing circles of liquid gold that seemed to shoot poison darts of malevolence directly at them. Like icicles on a winter night, large, white fangs hung menacingly from its mouth. This creature was a Black Panther, the meanest, most temperamental cat of the forest.

This wild cat, well-versed in the arts of battle, knew how to take advantage of cover, how to crawl on its belly like a snake, and like a snake, how to strike with quickness. Without warning, it launched fearlessly towards Mason with its mouth open and teeth exposed. Mason noticed the approaching beast, at the last moment, yet fear

paralyzed his vocal cords, stealing his ability to scream.

Instinctively, without hesitation, Courage leaped forward and collided with the beast head-first. A searing pain shot through his body from the impact as he stumbled backwards, trying to regain his senses.

In response, the panther instantly swung its razor-sharp claws, slicing deeply along Courage's muzzle. Yelping in pain, Courage was knocked to the ground by the force of the blow.

Quickly gathering himself, Courage scrambled to his feet, blood dripping from his muzzle where skin had parted. He spun around, eyes wincing in preparation for another blow when Mason swung his walking stick at the panther, screaming in anger. The stick broke in half right over the panther's thick skull, but the cat was undeterred and quickly struck back, swiping at the remaining stick with its' claws, knocking it loose from Mason's hands. Desperately, Courage protectively interjected, placing himself between Mason and the panther as he endured a volley of knife-like swats from the felines oversized claws. In response, Courage counter-punched, attempting to catch a mouthful of feline fur with his powerful canine incisors.

Mason screamed at the top of his lungs, but his verbal attack had no effect on the beastly cat who remained solely focused on Courage. Moving with speed Courage had never before seen, the panther lunged and deftly swung its' sharpened claws like iron swords, slashing a deep gash along his chest. Courage whined in agony, as a torrent of pain burnt into him. Valiantly fighting back, Courage thrust forward, snapping at the cat in quick successions. However, the panther was too agile and deftly evaded his attacks by using Courage's own momentum against him as it stepped to the side and thrashed deeply into Courage's front leg, each swipe landing with precision. Once again, the panther's claws drew blood by separating skin from bone, his injuries announcing their presence like searing fire.

The relentless assault continued as the cat connected with each blow, drawing ruby tears of blood with each gash. Yelping in pain from yet another slash, this time to his hind legs, Courage's rear quarters buckled beneath him as he fell to the dirt. Without hesitation, the cat pounced on top of him. Aiming for his neck, the panther tore deep into Courage's skin, slicing off his dog collar with a massive swipe. It fell to the ground amidst a pool of blood while Courage helplessly squealed like a stuck pig.

*Where did this beast come from? He thought, I'm looking into the eyes of pure evil.*

In that moment, time slowed to a crawl as memories moved of home, his mother, and playful days in his backyard flooded his mind. These cherished memories were moments from being taken away, causing his survival instinct to take over and Courage knew he had to fight with every ounce of strength he possessed if he wished to keep those memories. A rising tide of fury consumed him as a wave of adrenaline pumped through his body that erupted with a surge of canine power.

Kicking, clawing, and biting with every extremity, Courage struggled to break free from the panther's stranglehold. Fighting for his life, an opening finally appeared and Courage grasped at it like a pit bull clamping onto a rope. Staggering to his feet, he managed to stand on four trembling legs as blood poured from his numerous wounds.

With teeth like daggers and snarls of fury deep within his throat, vengeance consumed him.

Amidst the frantic struggle, the children's father, alerted by the screams, instinctively ran with the speed of an Olympic as he caught sight of the struggle. Without hesitation, he raised his hands in the air and yelled wildly as he neared the animalistic fray.

Courage heard the screams behind him as he stood face-to-face with this beast of the wild, instantly recognizing the voice as that of his master. The panther, shocked by the approaching screams, realized it was now facing superior odds and quickly turned to flee through the woods like a bouncing jackrabbit.

Courage, however, was not deterred by the panther's escape. The initial fear of battle had subsided and though he was bleeding profusely, he was no longer a victim to the pain. With adrenaline coursing through his veins, he did not pause to think, but immediately chased after the panther without concern for his own well-being. Behind him, Courage heard the human calls to stop, but those commands that always held him in place momentarily rolled around the hallway of his mind, yet never found purchase. He was locked in pursuit.

The tables had turned, and Courage was now the predator. Barking wildly, he pursued this beast who dared to attack his beloved pack, with swift, determined gallops.

Eyes dilated, ears pinned upwards, his every breath intense as Courage took little heed of his surroundings, leaving tiny clouds of dirt in his wake. Filled with anger and bent on revenge, the only thing that mattered was the Black Panther ahead of him. As he ran, blood drained from his wounds like water from a sprinkler.

No matter how well Courage maintained his pursuit, the more agile cat seemed to pull ahead with every twist and turn of the forest. Eventually, the panther morphed into a shadow, finding obscurity amongst the woods. Sprinting hard to keep pace, Courage kept up his pursuit, though his blood-soaked body was reeling from the toll. Yet he continued on, determined to get his revenge.

With the panther no longer in sight, the forest became a labyrinth of trees and shrubs, with no true path to follow. Attempting to sniff for any lingering scents of the cat, his snout, flooded with blood proved worthless.

Finally, Courage had no choice but to stop, and the repercussions of the fight quickly caught up to him as he felt a pulsating beat of pain invade his enfeebled body like a conquering army.

Weakened, in pain, and disoriented, Courage examined his wounds, licking the ones he could reach as his body begged for relief. As dizziness and uncertainty clouded his mind, he longed for the comfort of his family's arms. Whimpering in pain, every step now a struggle, Courage knew he was in trouble.

Gazing at his surrounding with uncertainty, flames of fear engulfed his thoughts as the forest appeared to swirl around him. The towering trees above began spinning as if he were standing in the center of a giant, shrubby-laden whirlpool. Suddenly, his wobbly legs collapsed beneath him and Courage fell to the ground in surrender. Invaded with a myriad of white stars, his vision then descended into total darkness. Above him, the forest trees stood sentinel like protective parents keeping a night vigil on their kin



and all was quiet once again.

*Wake up brother*, echoed from the silence that was Courage's mind. Lying placidly on the muddy, forest floor, a strong summer rain pelted at his battered body, cleansing his wounds in a steady, soothing rhythm as thunder struck nearby—as if mother earth was clearing her throat.

*We need you, wake up!* This time he heard the comforting, female voice more clearly.

*Am I dreaming?* Courage wondered, his mind awakening from the darkness. Feeling the stings of pain long before opening his eyes, Courage tried looking about him, yet the cold rain dancing upon his eyes blurred his vision. *How long have I been here?*

Assessing his body, Courage found himself to be a mess; he was covered with a multitude of gashes and scabbed patches of dried blood, yet he was alive. Attempting to stand, Courage raised himself on four wobbly legs, surveying foreign woods all about him. Licking his cuts, Courage noticed the bleeding had stopped, but the lingering pain from where skin had parted was still agonizing.

Surveying the unfamiliar wilderness, a youthful whimper erupted as he felt the weight of his predicament. Sniffing the air in every direction, then the ground all about him, proved fruitless since the rain washed away all lingering scents.

Moving slowly, with a limp to his step, Courage wandered amongst the maze of trees, finding nourishment from small puddles of dirty water. Stopping for a rest under a monstrous oak tree, he reminisced of being home. Remembering back to a warm summer day when the children snuck scraps to him directly from the dinner table while his mother looked on disapprovingly from her perch in the living room. A smile erupted from his war-battered face; in an ocean of turbulence, his memories were an undisturbed sandbar. For the first time in his life, he was truly alone. Moving aimlessly through the woods Courage now had only his instincts to rely on.

His innate habit of smelling the air for signs of life still proved futile in the downpour as Courage limped onwards, blindly meandering through the forest. Eventually, the rain subsided allowing for a bone-colored, quarter moon to rise in the half-light of the evening. Alone, hungry, and hurt, Courage huddled his sore body under the safety of a massive evergreen. Lumbering through a broken sleep, he kept a night vigil for signs of danger.

With the dawn's light preying upon his eyelids, Courage was woken by a symphony of birds singing their morning bugle. He found himself entombed in a pile of wet mud and discovered his beaten body still bore the pains of battle.

Rising to shake the wetness off his pelt, Courage searched all around him for signs of life. Wondering aimlessly, hopelessness began staining his spirit, like an octopus's ink clouding a clear sea, until he finally caught his first break—he happened upon a trail.

The path was unfamiliar, yet a glimmer of hope invaded his mind, knowing one end of this trail had to lead to civilization. *Left, or right?* He surmised. Opting to turn right, Courage ventured down the trail with a renewed vigor to his step, hoping he picked the correct direction. From time to time he would look back, wondering whether he had

chosen correctly.

Hours later and days without food, his body was growing weaker as sunset spilled across the upper tree-line, turning the western sky blood-red. As darkness invaded, turning shrubs into a prickly warriors Courage caught a faint whiff of something familiar. This remnant of a once burning campfire lingered in the air as a homing beacon, enticing him onwards.

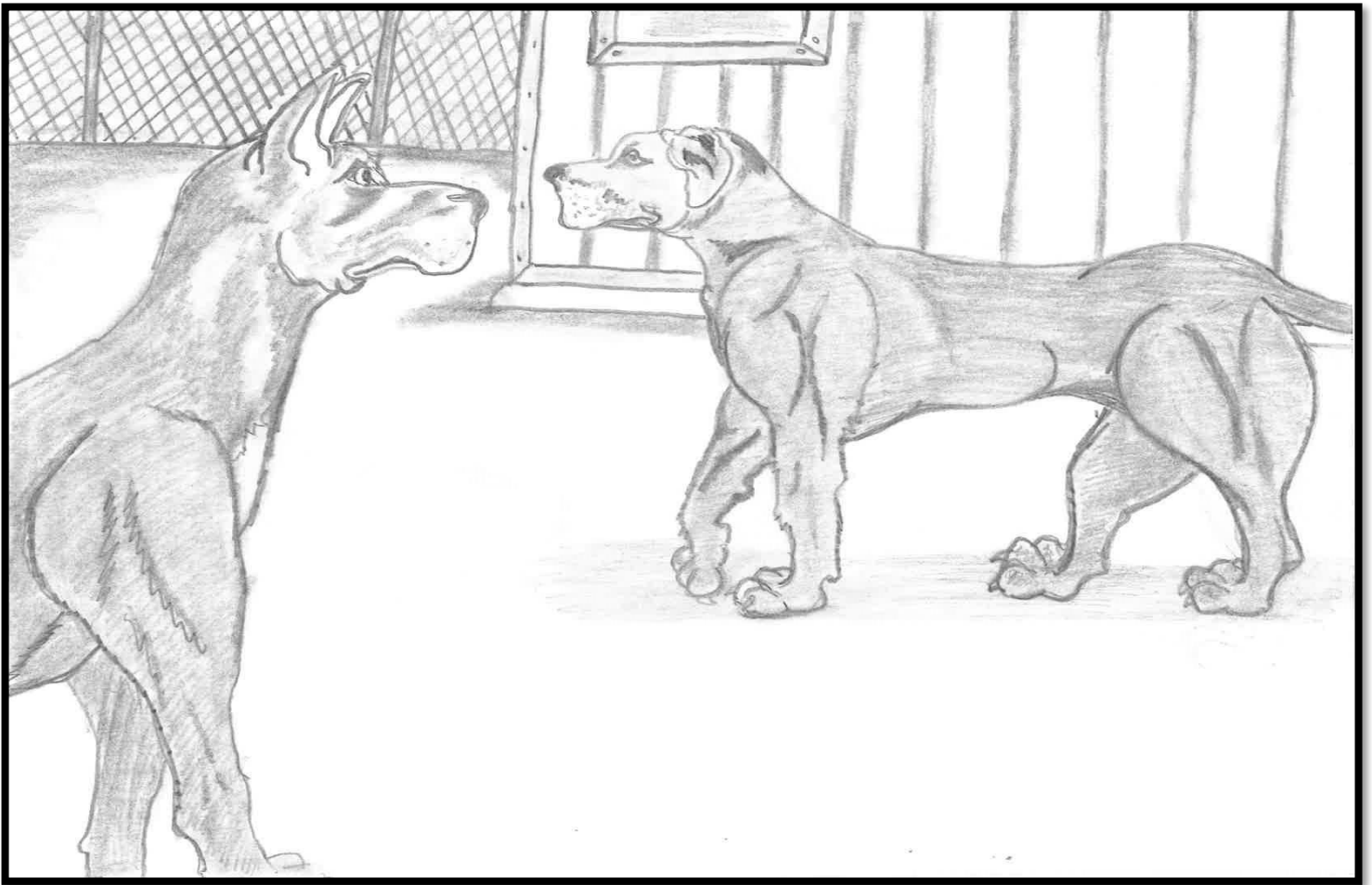
Following his nose in the approaching darkness, Courage finally stumbled upon their campsite. Searching the grounds in disbelief, he found no tents, no vehicles, nor children to greet him. Dropping his nose, he inhaled the aroma of old footprints in the mud and quickly realized the truth. *They left without me!*

Fatigued, Courage settled his massive frame in the dirt next to the old campfire and laid his head against an old tree stump. Dejected, Courage fell asleep still hoping for a reunion with his family.

Courage woke as dawn spread its brilliance like a fire on the horizon. The mountain air was cool, but not too cold, and the sun's arrival in the east gave the prospect of warmth. With the aches of battle fetching pain with each movement, Courage rose onto unsteady paws and hesitantly scampered along the road out of camp.

At days end, a young couple, driving towards their favorite campground came upon a disheveled Great Dane scurrying morosely in their direction. Overcome with grief by the sight of this sad, dirty dog they immediately stopped to help.

Courage could walk no longer. Closing his eyes, he fell to the ground...



## CHAPTER 5

### BLOOD AND RAIN

**S**oft, loving hands caressing his torn body woke Courage from his slumber. Looking about, a pair of gentle eyes were staring down upon him as he lay motionless on an examination table. Inhaling the room, he recognized the scent of the woman as his rescuer. She was gently holding him down while the veterinarian tended to his many wounds. Too exhausted to resist, he acquiesced.

Two Bears Dog Pound was named for a pair of abandoned bear cubs discovered on the old school grounds which eventually became the dog pound. This refuge provides strays sanctuary from the winter cold and respite from the summer heat. Runaways and those without a home have heard whispers in the streets about the pound.

If a hound was captured wearing the mark of man (a collar with a name tag), it was typically just a matter of time before they were reunited with their families. However, for dogs like Courage who entered without the mark of man, the only way out was to get adopted by a loving family.

Those unlucky dogs, the meaner type with unfriendly, untrusting, hearts were rarely

picked up by human families and were eventually transferred out of the pound, never to be heard from again. Courage spent the next few days recuperating in the safety of his kennel as he watched the daily life of his peers. He heard tales from other hounds that passed by, telling stories of loneliness and yearning for a place to call home.

When his wounds were healed, Courage was introduced to the general population. Walking down the main hallway, sorrowful barking reverberated from the cages ahead as unfamiliar dogs announced their presence from hidden shadows. His heart skipped a beat as he realized this was the beginning of something dreadful.

Placed in a kennel, Courage was given the essentials—water, food, and a blanket balled up in the corner. Surrounded by other dogs in similar cages with their own sad stories to tell, his thoughts were consumed by the loving family he dearly missed. *Who would protect them now?*

Resting on top of the blanket, he was startled by a small yelp coming from underneath. “Ay vatch out you ninkompoof!” The blanket roared with a heavy German accent.

Jumping up in surprise, Courage observed a small, lengthy dog climbed out from beneath the blanket. With short, little legs that carried an extra-long body and a stretched-out stomach that nearly touched the floor, this dog resembled a hot dog. Wearing a black pelt of fur and a full, gray head of hair that sat like a crown upon his head, this unique-looking hound was a dachshund. Standing merely a foot tall and a mere eight pounds, with a little ketchup and mustard, Courage could almost eat him like a real hot dog!

“You almozt zat on me, you big oaf!” The dachshund angrily barked.

“Oh! I’m sorry, I didn’t know anyone was here,” Courage innocently replied.

“Vat are you een for?” The dachshund asked.

“In for... I didn’t do anything wrong,” Courage whined. “Where am I?”

The dachshund looked at him with astonishment resonating from his eyes and chuckled, “Ziz eez ze end of ze road, haveen’t you ever ‘eard of ze pound?”

Once he figured out what the dachshund was telling him, Courage quietly whimpered to himself as chills ran throughout his body. He had heard many stories about the dreadful pound. His neighbor, Chomper, the meanest dog he had ever met, had met his fate after biting his third human, and no hound ever heard from again.

Feeling the heavy weight of his new situation bearing down upon him, Courage cried out with a long, sad howl that sprang from deep inside him. In nearby kennels, other hounds bellowed along, creating a canine chorus. Each distinct yowl bore its own tale of woe, a testament to the fear and loneliness felt by those all around him.

When the cries died down, Courage turned to the dachshund he was sharing his cell to inquire, “What’s your name, little guy?”

“Ooh, I’m Hans Von Strudell, niz to meet you,” the dachshund answered. “Und, vat eez your name?”

Courage looked straight down into those dachshund eyes, “I’m Courage,” he answered.

Hans could see the fear in Courage’s eyes and the tremble in his stance. “I’ve

been 'ear before, you know. Eet'z a piece of cake," Hans told him. "Just look az zad az you can und ven someone comez to pet you, go ztraight for ze littlezt member of ze family und lick'em continuzly until zey ztart laughing. Alzo, no matter how happy you are to be petted, never pee or bark een frunt of any humanz. No family vantz a dug zat izn't properly houze brokeen!"

"Thanks for the tip, but I already have a family, I don't want another."

"Vell, eet'z eezer a new family or un eternity 'ear behind zeez barz. You'll figure eet out zoon enough," Hans told him. "Zat eez of courz, unlezz your family vill come 'ear looking for you, like mine family vill. I've been running away from home for yearz, und eventually zey alvayz come 'ear looking for me. Eet'z not zat I don't like mine home you zee, I have a vonderful family. Eetz just zat I know zere eez zo much more out zere zan juzt mine little yard. I vant to run free and zniff every ztreet corner. I'm alvayz looking for a chanze to ezcape. Az zoon az zat front door eez left open, I'm running outzide like I'm chazing after a zauerkroust dinner!" he barked intensely.

"How 'bout you Courage, do you zink your family eez coming for you?"

"I wish they were," he responded. "But I have this awful feeling that they think I'm dead."

"Vell zen eet'z up to you big dug. You've gotta go find zem. Get yourzself picked up by a new family und run away ven you get your firzt opportunity. No matter vere zey live, you can zniff your vay back home."

"Good idea little guy. I miss my home so much. What's next anyway?" Courage asked.

"Zoon you go to ze big room. But don't vorry, no no dug 'ear eez going to mez vith you, you're one of ze biggezst dugz I've ever zeen!" Hans replied.

Courage knew he was a large dog, yet his size didn't prevent him from being scared. Hans' words, although hard to decipher from his German accent, proved comforting. Trying his best to relax, Courage lulled himself to sleep thinking of table scraps young Mason would feed him from under the table.

The squeaky noise of a cage door opening awakened Courage from his slumber. A burly guard, entered his kennel and grabbed Courage by the scruff. As he was being led away, Courage heard Hans bark, "Have faith 'een your future und alvayz remember, your nose alvayz knowz!"

Courage's introduction to the general population was far from welcoming. As he entered a large, open room filled with various breeds of hounds, he was met with a mix of curious glances, threats, and challenges. Multiple cages in this room were home to different groups, each with their own dynamics and hierarchies. Courage put on his best poker face and ignored the glares from others. Advancing confidently to the first cage door, he was led into a kennel where he quickly occupied a spot in the corner.

Resting in the opposite corner, an older hound sporting a white beard and long flowing, white-ish gray fur, was intently watching Courage from the moment he entered the room. The rest were busy playing poker or huddling around a large, confident-looking bull mastiff whose menacing demeanor made it clear that he wasn't a hound to be taken lightly. This mastiff had a dark, tan coloring throughout his body with a muzzle and ears

of all black.

The moment Courage made eye contact with this massive bull mastiff; every hound in the room suddenly stopped what they were doing and slowly placed their attention at the new meat. Courage knew this wasn't a good sign. Quite imposing of a figure, this mastiff was a beast of a dog with overgrown muscles protruding from every part of his canine body. Carrying a huge, square head on his shoulders and a pair of large, brown eyes, he fired a glare upon Courage that was a thin degree from hostile.

Never once breaking eye contact, he strolled challengingly towards Courage whose heart felt like a wild salmon was desperately flopping about, trying to escape the net that was his chest. Courage once again put on his toughest poker face, trying to hide the fear he was feeling.

The bull mastiff approached then sniffed Courage as all dogs do. "Wher' yeh from, Scarface?" the enormous dog questioned with a thick Russian drawl to his voice. "Wha' is yeh crime?" he asked before Courage gathered a response to his first question.

Courage hesitated, what could he tell this beast of a dog? He considered many different lies, yet he knew in his heart to tell the truth. *Lies will only cause trouble*, he told himself before words poured out of him like marbles from a glass jar. "I was with my family camping in the woods and some black cat attacked us. He clobbered me good until I managed to chase him away, then somehow, I guess I got lost. By the time I made it back to camp, my family had left. They probably thought the cat got me! I wandered down the road and ended up here."

Pondering Courage's words for a moment before responding. "Tha' is 'e sad story," the bull mastiff barked, while the hairs on his shoulders dropped back into place. "I 'ate dose stinkin' catz!"

"A family dug eh? Well, 'm Don Garbage an' these are me 'ounds." He explained, turning his head to point over the other dogs he was sitting with. The don looked at them proudly, as a king gloating over his subjects. "We bin doin' time 'ear for three months, since tha' dug catcher found us causing trouble downtown. We found 'e prize dumpster in tha alley behind tha main groc'ry store. I had just tipped it over when 'ee grabbed us. Sumbody must 'ave ratted 'en us," he growled. "We've bin workin tha' alley for months without n'arry 'e sign of tha law. 'Ee grabbed tha whole gang! Bu' we managed te get en 'e few good bites on 'im. They call me Don Garbage becuz aye 'm tha king of tha garbage. I can smell 'e good dumpster from miles away. Once wey find 'e good dumpster, I knock 'it over an' me 'ounds grab all tha food. We've bin eatin like kings fer years!"

"Ye'll get yer chance te meet tha oth'r dons when we go outside for our daily recre'tion. Yer such 'e big hound, Scarface, everybody is goin' to want yeh en their gang; but watch out, gang life isn' all eets cracked up to be. There's nuttin' like tha peace an' quiet of family life, or so I've 'eard. I've always lived 'en tha street, tha's me home. Tha other don's an' me been plannin' an escape for quite a while now. Perhaps yeh can help us. We can use a pair of paws like yers. It's worth yer freedom!"

"If you think we can make it out of here, I'm with you," Courage remarked with a low growl, trying his best to sound tough. "But, I don't want to be in a gang. I've got my own family to get back to!"

Don Garbage looked Courage over once more before slowly ambling back to his

hounds.

After meeting with the head of the pack, Courage now felt more comfortable with his surroundings. From the opposite corner, the grey-haired dog was still watching him intently, his gaze displaying friendliness. A feeling from within gave Courage strength and he slowly walked towards the old hound who remained completely focused on Courage. He possessed an air of aristocracy about him, as though he felt himself in a class above these mangy hounds of the pound.

Cautiously, Courage approached and took a seat beside this Irish Wolfhound. Known as the great dog of Ireland, this breed is known as a gentle giant, yet are extremely fierce when provoked. His pelt was a tired, graying color that spanned his lengthy frame and was accompanied by a muzzle of snow white. The Wolfhound's eyes of pure silver surrounded by a sea of ocean-blue exuded wisdom and knowledge.

“What’s your crime?” Courage asked, attempting his best prison lingo.

“No crime. I’ve been waiting for you,” the wolfhound responded with a toothy grin. His teeth, Courage observed, were perfectly aligned, as if he wore braces as a pup, and when he smiled, their ivory whiteness shone through with such beauty, it looked like he had just come straight from the dentist’s office after a bleaching.

“Waiting for me?”

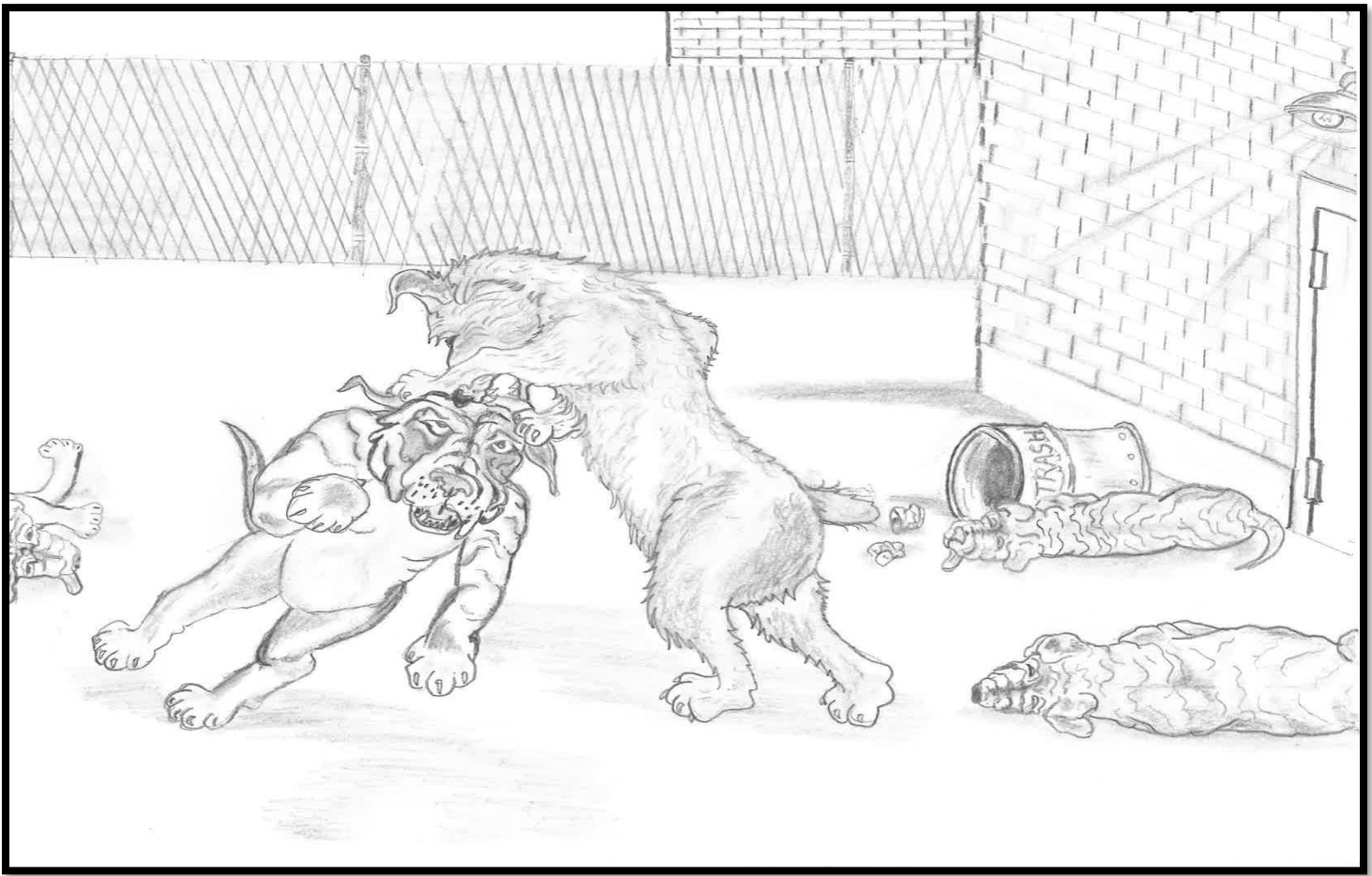
“Yes, I’ve spent many seasons searching for you, my boy! I found you in my dreams and they brought me here. I knew you would find your way to me.” The wolfhound explained.

Tilting his head to better assess this strange hound, Courage looked at him from a different angle, assessing the lunacy of his words.

“Courage,” he said, “I knew your father very well. He was an extraordinary hound and the noblest dog I have ever known. We spent our entire lives together—he was a brother to me,” the wolfhound explained.

Leaning in closer to Courage, as if preparing to tell a great secret, he continued in a low voice, no more than a whisper. “His name was King Gallant, known as ‘Gallant the Great.’ Young hound, you have descended from a noble line of warrior Danes. There is much I need to tell you, but this is neither the time nor the place to discuss these matters. There are too many listening ears here. The past and your future destiny are too magnificent to be discussed amongst these wretched hounds of the street. You must trust in me and follow your instincts. My name is Ironcoat, and it is truly a pleasure to finally meet you, my young prince. Now you must rest. Soon we will arrange for your escape.”

Questions swam like ravenous fish below the surface of Courage’s mind, yet for now, the fish remained hungry.



## CHAPTER 6

### RUMBLE IN THE YARD

**A** warm gust of wind ruffled his pelt as the massive outer doors creaked open. Courage extended his tongue to taste the breeze, drinking in the scent of the outdoors as it wafted throughout the room like a ghostly hand petting his fur. Adjusting his eyes to the midday sun as it attacked through the doorway, Courage prepared himself for the madness he knew was about to unfold. Every day at noon the dogs were granted an hour of playtime in the courtyard, turning it into a canine circus.

Courage wearily observed the unfolding pandemonium as he cautiously made his way outside. Dogs of all sizes, colors, and breeds were racing in circles, colliding like bumper cars on a racetrack. Courage was unsure how to navigate such the madness and followed Ironcoat along the fence-line, relying on the elder wolfhound for guidance.

“Oh, go have some fun; I’ll catch up with you later,” Ironcoat barked to Courage before trampling off towards his favorite nook along the fence line.

With so many hounds of every conceivable size and breed, Courage was surprised to note that the smallest dogs were the loudest troublemakers. *I guess the little guys have*



*something to prove*, he surmised. Scanning the courtyard, he realized he was the largest dog around and with this observation, his fear of the dog pound quickly diminished. Spotting a nearby golden retriever enticing him to play, Courage quickly ran off in chase.

Sitting along the fence, Ironcoat intently watched Courage's antics. *He moves just like his father*; Ironcoat reflected, recalling memories from a time long ago. Resting his head on his paws, Ironcoat reminisced of his own youth in StrongPaw Canyon, recalling countless hours of playful romps, adventures, and hunts through the mountains with his best friend, young Prince Gallant. At this point, Ironcoat had already lived an extraordinary long life. First tutored in the GoMan Arts as a young pup, he devoted his energies to the practice of these sacred arts and trained his body to live well past its normal years.

All GoMan Masters have gained the necessary knowledge to live exceptionally long lives. These privileged dogs were taught the spiritual benefits of the GoMan Society from the masters who studied before them. Through countless years of training, these warriors gained remarkable powers, including extraordinary strength, speed, stamina, telepathic communication, longevity of life, and dream casting—the ability to see into the future through one's dreams.

Ironcoat, now entering his eighty-second year, slowly fell asleep as he recollected the days of training as a GoMan Warrior. Along with his two brothers and two sisters, he learned the art of combat by their Grandfather, Steelcoat, the great GoMan Master. Ironcoat, the last surviving member of his family, clearly understood that his ultimate destiny was unfolding before his eyes.

The all-too familiar battle cry of the shar-pei, abruptly roused Ironcoat from his nap. His head rose like a submarine periscope, while his ears, now twin sonars, locked onto the commotion. Life in the pound was a perpetual struggle with a multitude of gangs vying for dominance. It was a canine world governed by “the law of the hound,” a constant survival of the fittest. You were either a capable fighter who could protect yourself, or you risked falling prey to harsh gangs who targeted the weak and vulnerable. Desperation caused many hounds to join gangs in search of protection.

The shar-pei's, also known as Chinese fighting dogs, were a group of Asian canines with a penchant for fighting. Led by a vicious female named Kira, they were fifteen dogs strong. Their wrinkly skin, served as a natural defense, allowing them to twist away when from an opponent's grip. And, like a suit of armor, this stiff, bristly pelt afforded protection against dangerous bites. This shar-pei gang was notorious for their unruly nature, deterring most hounds from crossing their path.

Again, the rallying cry of the shar-pei echoed. Looking about, Ironcoat saw ten members of this fierce gang surround Courage, with Kira at the helm. Suddenly, Kira snapped at Courage, drawing his defenses while another assailant attacked from behind, biting onto his rump. A low, primal sound of fear escaped from his lungs as Courage turned to confront the attacker, only to be bitten on his exposed side by Kira.

Seeing this from a distance, fear made Ironcoat's heart thunder and like the ragged V's of the wild geese in the sky overhead, his next actions were purely instinctual. Without a moment's hesitation, like a bolt of lightning, Ironcoat sprung straight towards

their leader. Moving so swiftly that his pads only momentarily touched the earth, Ironcoat galloped with a speed that only the fastest of greyhounds could rival.

Don Garbage looked on in astonishment as Ironcoat bolted right past him. He'd never seen that old Irish wolfhound exhibit anything beyond lounging and recounting tales of yore. Before Kira realized what hit her, she lay on her side with two broken ribs, struck perfectly by Ironcoat's bony skull. It was a tactical strike, knowing that the pain would incapacitate her. Ironcoat then turned to the shar-pei on his right and swiftly clamped down on the dog's wrinkly paw with his powerful jaw. He felt the bones crunch before the shar-pei let out a piercing howl. Feeling the third shar-pei leap towards him, Ironcoat expertly defended himself by rolling onto his back and catching him with his hind legs before catapulting the helpless dog end over end behind him. *Three down*, Ironcoat thought as he jumped back up to the ready.

Courage figured he was about to get whooped before Ironcoat stepped in to save his side. Innocently antagonizing a female shar-pei into a game of chase, he suddenly found himself surrounded by a pack of wrinkly-skinned hounds hungry for his flesh. Too stunned to react, Courage simply cowered in retreat from the melee around him.

Two more shar-peis charged Ironcoat with teeth bared. Catching the first shar-pei right below the ear with his oversized jaw, Ironcoat clamped down as hard as he could, then swung his rear towards the next attacker. Ironcoat's hind legs delivered a devastating horse-like kick to its chest, stopping the shar-pei as it fell to the floor with a thud. Ironcoat kept his teeth clenched on the first shar-pei for another moment, before tossing him aside like a rag doll, ready for the next challenge.

As Ironcoat advanced on his next victim, a large Rottweiler stepped forward blocking his path.

"Enough!" Don Barbecue bellowed, his commanding voice reverberating through the courtyard. Don Barbecue was an imposing Rottweiler an embodiment of pure muscle. Known as the pound's toughest canine, he carried a ferocious temper and wielded it without hesitation. Rottweilers, being German working dogs of high intelligence, were born brawlers and among the fiercest of breeds. Humans had bred them for combat since the Middle Ages, and their confident, alert temperament made them popular choices for police and guard duties. Don Barbecue led the largest gang of dogs in the pound, and when he barked... other dogs listened.

"No more fightin'!" he roared, ordering the shar-peis, to back off.

Once the crowd of dogs dispersed, Don Barbecue turned his attention to Courage who was licking his bloodied hindquarters behind Ironcoat's protective stance. He sniffed and inspected Courage before menacingly displaying his sharp fangs.

"You almost met your maker back there, youngster! It's a good thing you know Ironcoat. I was watching you; you should know not to flirt with a girl who's in a gang. That was just asking for trouble! I'm Don Barbecue, and this is my Jail!" he said with a snarl.

"I'm Courage...I had no idea she was in a gang," Courage replied. "I was only trying to make friends! Thank you, Ironcoat; you saved my hind!" Courage said, turning towards the wolfhound.

"No problem," Ironcoat responded. The combat had invigorated him, but he now

took a moment to temper his body. “I wouldn’t let harm come to you in here, my young Courage, however, we do need to toughen you up a bit,” Ironcoat added with a smirk on his muzzle.

Courage observed Don Barbecue’s imposing size for a moment, before inquiring, “Why are you called Don Barbecue?”

Looking back at Courage, the don remained stone-faced, holding his composure for a long moment until gradually parting his lips into a toothy smile, revealing large, white teeth which signified a more amiable nature. Standing nearly as tall as Courage, he looked him squarely in the eyes.

“I am the king of the barbecue!” Don Barbecue bragged. He nonchalantly lifted his right paw, inspecting it with a heavy-lidded gaze as if he was more concerned with its elaborate details than reciting this tale of no particular significance. “My Bloodhound, Tracker, can sniff out a barbecue anywhere in the city. That’s our specialty: barbecues. These human barbecues have everything you can imagine! Hotdogs, burgers, chickens, sausages, and even steaks—those are my favorites! There’s nothin’ in this world like a juicy steak.” Drool dripped from Don Barbecue’s muzzle as he talked of food.

“I’ve been livin’ off of barbecue’s most of my life, and over the years, I’ve perfected the operation,” he began. “I organize a solid plan of attack and lead the operation from the front to ensure everything goes along flawlessly. Let me tell you how it’s done you overgrown mut.

“First, we use Tracker’s exceptional snout to locate the best smellin’ barbecue in town. That’s the first key to a successful operation: a good-smellin’ barbecue. Once he gets a whiff of steak, I’m all in! Next, we have a look-see at the location and plan out our attack. We send in a single scout to assess their numbers and figure out our best angle of approach. Usually, I send in our smallest and friendliest-looking hound; we don’t want humans getting spooked and taking precautions before we even have a chance to attack. Then, we’re all ready to go, I sneak in as close as I can get by acting calm and friendly before running at full speed and smashing into the barbecue head-on like a four-legged bulldozer. Next, I quickly turn and growl at the surprised humans, usually scarin’ them so much that they just turn and run, leaving their meat behind for easy pickin’s. Swarmin’ in from nearby hiding spots, my hounds snatch up every piece of meat they can get their jaws on, except for the steaks; I get those! If the humans run away in fear, then we’ll eat right there on the spot. But if they stick around and fight us off, which often happens, we’ll take the meat and run. In that case, we’re in and out in a hurry. Once we’re far enough away, it’s feastin’ time! Ooowoooh!” he victoriously proclaimed.

“We’ve heisted a ton of barbecues without ever once gettin’ caught, but then we got careless. One day, we came upon a huge barbecue party down at City Park. I crashed two barbecues; we ran off and ate like pigs! Problem was, we ate so much food we were too full to go very far. Stupidly, we decided to crash out across the street from the park. As the don, that was my big mistake. It was my responsibility to make better decisions because the dog catcher caught us napping shortly afterward. Now, I’ve learned my lesson. If we ever get out of this place, I’ll always have a lookout stay awake any time we take a daytime snooze!

“The other dons and I have been plannin' an escape,” Don Barbecue continued. “Sergeant Tank, our military expert, has been preparin' the plan. He’s an ex-soldier; one of the smartest dogs around. When he’s finished plottin' our escape, we’re all outta here! We’re gonna need a lot of help though. You two wanna join in?”

Ironcoat answered for both of them before Courage could respond. “We’re behind you, just let us know what we need to do.”

Ironcoat then slowly turned and trotted towards his favorite patch of dirt with a happy bounce to his step. It had been awhile since he last rumbled, and Ironcoat was feeling quite impressed with the agility he still held in his old age. Hopefully, Courage had seen enough to know that this old dog deserved some respect.

Courage followed him trailing Ironcoat’s every step like a boy idolizing his father. “How did you learn to fight like that?” he asked.

Ironcoat remained quiet, savoring the attention from Courage as he scampered back to the fence line. Scraping the top layer of dirt from his favorite nook, he sniffed at the newly exposed soil, pushing it around with his nose to ensure it was clumped into the right spots before circling a few times in search of the perfect position. Finally resting his lengthy body on top of his mound of fresh dirt, a moan escaped from his lungs, and his tired joints creaked and popped—a side effect of his age. With an intense gaze peeking out from under his stringy, gray mane, he observed Courage resting next to him, eagerly anticipating a response.

By now, the wind had subsided and the unrelenting sun was directly overhead shining its full fury upon them, Ironcoat's grayish pelt shimmered across his body like an ethereal presence. He leaned forward, as if preparing to share a well-guarded secret, something only known to a select few.

“A hound who fights for something greater than himself may destroy a multitude of enemies with ease,” Ironcoat began, his voice a low rumble. “I fought for you, Courage. Your actions were innocent, meant to bring no harm. You are a kind dog. Your heart overflows with warmth and love. Such kindness can be seen as an opportunity by those who seek violence for power and fear. That’s what Kira’s gang was after—spreading evil.

“I am a master of the GoMan Arts; I practice peace and do not relish violence. However, I won’t hesitate or regret the damage I inflict on an aggressor. You must understand Courage, that I did only what was necessary—nothing more.”

“You have much to learn my young pup. First, remember this: never be the aggressor. We as hounds on the side of good, only fight defensively. We’re never the instigators of battle. We give every effort to prevent violence from taking root and spreading, yet when a fight is inevitable, we move with purpose, striking hard and fast. Every action must be visualized and planned to disable an opponent. Do you understand, my young prince?”

With ears raised like antennae and wide eyes peering from beneath his furry brows, Courage nodded in agreement, absorbing Ironcoat's wisdom.

“I trained alongside your father many years ago. He was a great warrior, stronger than I could ever be. We were taught to protect man and their companions at any cost, and to defend our fellow hounds just as fiercely. I don’t take pleasure in fighting other

dogs; they are our brethren. Canines have more significant threats than one another. But, that's enough knowledge for now; I need to rest and you must learn to have patience."

Ironcoat stretched his legs, absentmindedly scratched his nose, and yawned enormously before surveying the yard with a practiced eye. Moments later, sleep overtook the old wolfhound.

Courage had seen too much to relax, but felt safe lounging alongside Ironcoat. Sniffing the array of scents parading through his nose, he watched his peers wrestling and playing chase under the midday sun. In the distance, he noticed the shar-pei's tending to their wounds and observed Don Barbecue conversing with a group of important-looking hounds. One of them was a lean, smart-looking German shepherd. Another was Don Garbage whom he'd met earlier. Also in the circle he could see a muscular bulldog with a squashed, pudgy face that looked as if his nose had been compressed by a trash compactor. Barely visible among the larger dons was a tiny dog with hardly any hair. The German shepherd was sketching diagrams in the sand and using his nose to point at different sections of the courtyard. *Those must be the other dons planning their escape.*

After a while, a bell rang in the distance, signaling the end of recreation, and they were herded back inside.

Ironcoat, aware that he was about to fulfill his final and most important duty, felt a profound sense of contentment wash over him. His breathing rumbled smoothly, like a cat's purr, and a sly smile curved upon his lips as he watched over his young prodigy. Soon, Ironcoat would embark on his long-awaited journey into the afterlife where his family would be waiting. He was a happy dog, and his tail wagged back and forth brushing the cement like an old broom at work.



## CHAPTER 7

### ACE IN THE HOLE

**R**ecreation the next day was again under the relentless sun, yet the wind whispered through the courtyard cooling their pelts and carrying with it the unfamiliar scent of hope—an alien feeling to these prisoners. Don Barbecue gathered the dons together to finalize their escape plans. Don Garbage sat comfortably next to Ironcoat and Courage with his head held high—a stance that called for respect, as the hounds assembled.

Opposite him, sitting lopsided with a crooked back that ruffled his fur into a single direction, sat a stocky bulldog named Don Ristorante. He had the rounded limbs of a hearty eater, yet his heavy jaw and square-cut chin conveyed strength and formidability. Known as a scholar among the hounds, Don Ristorante knew of every restaurant in the city. He was a master at the art of begging, particularly at Italian restaurants where the generous owners often had a soft spot for the bulldog and his crew.

Bulldogs can trace their lineage back to the fighting dogs of ancient Greece who competed at the grand Coliseum in Athens. With a low center of gravity, these sturdy hounds excelled at attacking from below, giving them a natural advantage against taller adversaries. Respected throughout the canine world, Bulldogs have a proud history as ferocious fighters.

“My father, Rigatoni, taught me that there’s nothing as foolish as barging into a restaurant like a wild dog,” Don Ristorante often explained. “You need a plan and you have to be prepared.” He had two primary methods for acquiring food from restaurants. His favorite was the pathetic dog approach, where he’d appear helpless and hungry near a restaurant’s back door. Employees, moved by the sight of such a sad dog, often came to his rescue with an abundance of table scraps. Over the years, Don Ristorante became an expert at soliciting food from restaurateurs in this fashion.

Don Ristorante's second and more dangerous method of gathering food was to swipe it from delivery trucks. After determining the delivery schedules, organizing the heist became a little easier. Most deliveries, particularly meat trucks, which were their favorite treasure troves, took place in the mornings. Once the delivery men stepped inside with their first load, the heist would commence. If the unsuspecting delivery man left the truck’s back door open, it was an open invitation for the hungry hounds. In a flash every dog would spring from their hiding spots and swarm the truck as if it were an ice cream stand in the desert. Snatching up steaks, ground meats, sausages, pork chops, and turkey legs, they would have a canine feeding frenzy.

These heists were precise operations, and Don Ristorante was the mastermind behind them, ensuring that his gang remained well-fed.

Sitting beside Don Ristorante was Don Tamale, a Mexican Chihuahua, the tiniest breed of dog to walk the earth. This little dog was quite an unlikely figure to be a don, however, the hierarchy among dogs south of the border was based on wealth, rather than strength and size. Don Tamale proudly sported a gold collar, a symbol of his riches and authority.

Born in Mexico, Don Tamale was a true Chicano at heart. Raised in a hard-working family, he was trained as a guard dog for a large tamale plantation. Despite his small stature, “The Little Tamale,” as he was known back then, was a relentless barker and excelled at raising the alarm when faced with intruders. Guided by his family, he learned the values of respect and the significance of “Familia” from a young age. Despite his small size, Don Tamale had earned respect over the years and was the don over his own gang of vatos: Mexican hounds. Unfortunately, his wealth proved worthless in the dog pound.

Don Noodles, an impressive Chinese Chow, with a huge lion-like mane, was part of the assembly. Chinese chows, also known as the “Dogs of the Barbarians,” are formidable brawlers and have a reputation throughout the canine world for their ferocity. Don Noodles was raised in a Chinese restaurant in Chinatown, where he was specially trained to be a rat hunter charged with keeping vermin out of the kitchen. His days in the restaurant made him an expert in the taste of homemade Chinese cuisine, with noodles being his favorite. Abhorring the taste of dog food, the don often felt that his taste buds were more human than canine.

All Don Noodles would talk about was how much he missed his family's cooking. His skills as a rat hunter, combined with the fighting abilities inherited from his father, he quickly became a don over his fellow chows. He knew this escape plan was his best hope of returning back to the simple life of enjoying delicious noodles. The anticipation of freedom and the prospect of savoring his favorite dished had Don Noodles waiting patiently to hear from Sergeant Tank.

Kira, nursing her bruised ribs, sat next to Don Noodles. No matter their differences, all dogs were in on the escape and a hopeful banter engulfed between them all.

The friendly murmur of the don's died down as Sergeant Tank sauntered in with the confidence and precision of a trained military dog. A German shepherd, the sergeant exuded a self-assured presence and carried himself with a sense of purpose that was more human than canine. Quite a charismatic dog, he was both cunning and intelligent, with a well-muscled body that was just slightly longer than he was tall. He wore a camouflaged collar that matched his naturally cloaked pelt which encompassed a thick, deep chest and long muzzle. Sergeant Tank's almond-shaped, piercing eyes darted back and forth from one object to another, surveying the crowd, as he analyzed every detail with lightning-like glances.

German shepherds have earned a proud and distinguished military legacy throughout both the human and canine worlds. His duty now was to strategize their escape.

Standing at attention in the center of the courtyard with the dons gathered around him, Sergeant Tank momentarily focused his gaze upon each hound, silently conveying the importance of his words. fur, skin and bone to access their very souls.

"At ease everyone," he began. "I have spent months going over every inch of this compound. I have studied the movements of our captors, their shift changes, their daily rounds, the times they come to feed us, when they take us to recreation and bring us back inside, even when they turn the lights off at night and on again in the morning. Every function, every move they make is controlled by doors. Some of us have learned how to open these doors by biting onto their handles; however, it's the keys that hang us up. The main exit doors are always locked with keys. Unfortunately, even if we get our paws on a set of keys, we don't have the ability, to manipulate them like humans do. We can't go out the way we came in. But, thankfully, I have a better idea," he explained.

Looking about, he focused his attention upon the Rottweiler. "Don Barbecue, what do you do with your favorite bone?"

"Well, after eating every bit of meat possible, I bury it, for safekeeping," proudly replied the don without any hesitation.

"Exactly!" retorted Sergeant Tank, excitement coating his voice. "We're natural diggers and we'll use that advantage to escape!" In response, pandemonium exploded from the hounds like an erupting volcano, as they all imagined digging tunnels to freedom.

"Now, here's the plan," the sergeant continued once the hounds had settled down. "I've analyzed the ground below fence perimeter. There's a spot on the lowest end of the hill that looks to have some give, and the bottom of the fence is just touching the ground. That's our best place to dig a hole large enough for even the biggest hounds like Don Garbage to crawl through. First, we'll have ten diggers lined up. The first digger will scoop as much dirt as they can until their paws give out, then immediately be relieved by the next digger in line. By rotating fresh paws, we can tunnel our way out without interruption! While they're digging, we'll have a protection team watching their backs. These protectors will fight off any guards that dare come close until the hole is



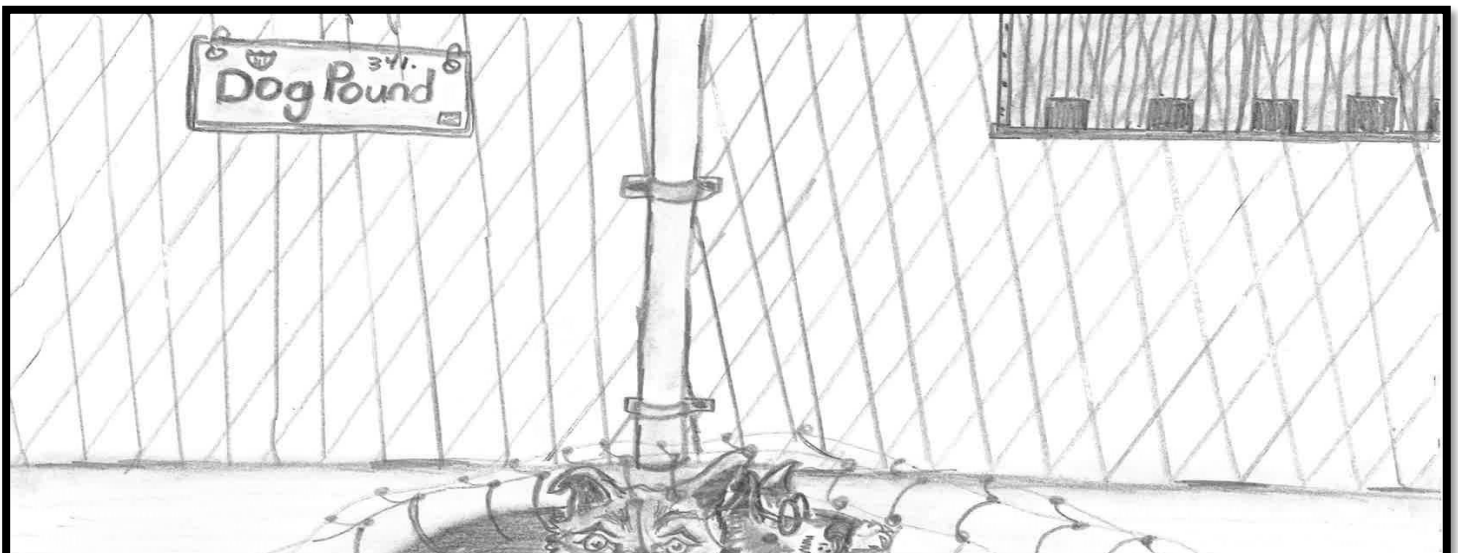
finished. Each one will be carefully picked for their ferociousness. Remember, anyone who bites a human and gets caught... he's on a one-way ticket to the gas chamber. Every one of us needs to make it out!

"To start the escape, we're going to create a diversion, and hopefully the guards won't catch on until it's too late. For the diversion, I have an ace in the hole. A hound who's notorious for his yowl." Turning towards the bloodhound in the rear of the crowd, Sergeant Tank paused for a moment as he flashed a toothy grin.

"Tracker...you will be assigned as our diversion," he barked. "Don Tamale, you and your vatos will provide him with protection during the operation," he remarked, looking over at the pint-sized don. "Don't let us down!"

Turning his attention to the bloodhound, he continued. "Tracker, you'll linger in the corner, opposite our diggers and once everyone is in position, your howl will be our signal to start. Make it good, we're all counting on you to distract the guards."

Spreading in whispers from hound to hound, every dog was soon informed of the plan; no one was to be left behind. This would be the great escape!



# CHAPTER 8

## FREEDOMS GATE

**T**racker, the bloodhound, felt honored to be chosen as the howler. Covered in brown fur with black shading along his forehead, this strange-looking hound had wrinkly skin on his face, brow, and along his neck, causing him to appear much older than he really was. Possessing the strongest nose of all the breeds, this bloodhound would catch a whiff of barbecues from miles away, a skill that was now driving him crazy. Tracker eagerly anticipated offering up his best effort for this escape. His freedom counted on it!

As night fell, the hounds dreamed of freedom in their own unique ways, but the common thread was the yearning to run free without the constraint of fences to bind them.

On the day of the escape, a light rain fell as the sun played hide-and-seek with an army of passing clouds. Tracker stood amidst this drizzle as small pellets of rain bounced from his pelt, yet he took little notice. A loud, mournful howl echoed through the courtyard from deep inside him, “Aaaaaarrroooooooooohh,” Tracker bellowed.

With this signal, the first digger, a large Akita began her work. The dirt moved easily underneath her massive paws, unbeknownst by any of the guards whose attention was drawn towards the bloodhound on the opposite side of the yard.

Bothered by Tracker’s incessant howling, the guards tried to put a stop to his clamor, yet their attempts to silence his yowl were met with fierce resistance from the vatos who quickly moved in. Proving to be vicious defenders, they glared their fangs

and barked contempt at the guards, managing to keep them at bay while Tracker kept up his relentless clamor.

With tunneling in progress behind them, Ironcoat and Courage, assigned as guard dogs, watched the bedlam as the naïve humans were oblivious to the escape attempt looming just under their noses.

Relishing their momentary advantage, Don Barbecue turned to Sergeant Tank and questioned, “How much longer Tank?”

“A few minutes left, sir!” Tank responded, before barking at the diggers to quicken their pace. He could see the opening grow larger as each new digger took their turn.

Watching the orchestrated confusion, Ironcoat turned to Courage, “When you leave here, find your true purpose and always remember, your nose always knows.”

“What do you mean Ironcoat?” Courage questioned. “I’m following you outta here!”

“This operation is an escape for every dog, not just for you and I,” Ironcoat replied, “but there needs to be a final hound to hold off the humans. I will take that honor. If I don’t make it out, seek out the Elder. He is the wisest of all GoMan Masters. Remember my young prince, when in doubt, your snout will point it out!” Ironcoat hollered as he heroically dashed off to help defend Tracker—a gallant warrior charging the enemy.

Instinctively Courage pursued, wanting to fight alongside Ironcoat, yet after only a few steps, timidity held him back. Remaining steadfast in his position as protector of the tunnel, he watched the old dog gallantly gallop towards Tracker’s aid.

Tracker, with help from Don Tamale and his vatos, were working hard to keep the humans engaged when Ironcoat joined in, carving circles around the guards with his speed and agility. These humans, being naturally slow, were fruitless in their attempts to catch the slippery hounds.

Opposite the pandemonium, Snacks, an overgrown Saint Bernard, diligently dug her way through the escape tunnel. Excavating large amounts of dirt with each scoop of her colossal front paws, she was determined to be the first dog out of the pound.

Born in London, England where she was raised by a wealthy, English family, Snacks was educated in fancy obedience schools where she evolved into a highly trained working dog. Saint Bernard’s are legends in the canine world for their immense size, powerful bodies, and an endless stamina only possessed by the rarest of breeds. Chosen as the final digger, she was assigned the task of breaking through to the outside world. Being a proud Saint Bernard, born from noble stock, Snacks knew she would not stop digging until she was free. “You never start a task without finishing it,” she always said. This was her opportunity to be courageous—she would not allow herself to fail, no matter the cost.

Sergeant Tank knew it was only a matter of time before their captors discovered the true purpose of their raucous. Surveying the escape tunnel just as Snacks poked her dirt-covered snout out of the ground, a huge smile erupted upon his muzzle, freedom at last!

Barreling her enormous body through the newly-excavated breach, Snacks victoriously crawled her way out of the ground. Scampering behind her, the first of the

escapees cautiously crept their way through the passageway like newborns entering into a new world. One by one, hounds crawled their way to freedom with Snacks, like a proud momma, rewarding her accomplices with a wet, sloppy kiss as they cleared the tunnel.

Dogs began trickling away from the pandemonium in the courtyard, diving straight for the tunnel. Soon, a crowd formed as more hounds eagerly awaited their turn, while the chaos kept the guards occupied.

Sergeant Tank remained calm, heedfully watching their captors every move. Within a few moments however, he noticed a few guards turn to observe the collection of hounds running freely on the wrong side of the fence. Finally perceiving the gravity of the situation, the alarm was quickly sounded and humans began marching onto the courtyard armed with clubs and dog nets. Seeing this, the sergeant knew the stakes had been raised. "Hurry! Every dog out!" he bellowed from his post guarding the tunnel.

Careening circles around the slow-moving guards, Ironcoat also recognized that they had caught on to the jailbreak, "Vatos, the gig is up. Head for the tunnel!" he screamed.

Looking about him as the number of remaining hounds in the courtyard dwindled, Sergeant Tank barked for everyone to get ready. "Look as ferocious as possible!" he ordered. "Don't let the human's approach!"

Roaring out his fiercest snarl, Courage followed his orders while Ironcoat and Tracker changed tactics and attacked the guards from the rear.

These humans, battle ready, marched for the fence line, intent on stopping the escape in progress. A mere twenty feet away stood ten ferocious hounds barking with fierceness, attempting to keep the guards at bay. Behind them, Ironcoat and Tracker were nipping at their heels while the last of the dogs were scrambling through the freshly dug tunnel. The guards hesitated, not willing to come face to face with such vicious hounds, especially those threatening to bite with skin-piercing canine fangs.

Sergeant Tank, recognizing the hesitation among the humans, seized the moment and ordered his team to begin their retreat. "This is our chance! Start making your way under!" he commanded.

One by one, the last of the hounds turned and squeezed their bulky frames underneath the chain-link fence. Seeing the last of the hounds fall into retreat, the humans seized the moment and charged forward. Barking in unison Sergeant Tank, Don Garbage, Don Barbecue, and Courage; the last of the protectors, stood their ground, forming a defiant canine wall.

Ironcoat and Tracker, their heads lowered and ears aimed backwards, barked furiously, at the rear guard, exposing their dagger-like teeth. Needing to cross the ranks and reach the safety of their dwindling pack, they keenly waited for the right moment.

Two nets were thrown into the air just as Don Garbage reached the safety of the tunnel. Backing against the fence line in a tight group, the three remaining hounds found themselves beneath the nets. However, Sergeant Tank remained calm, he was prepared for this.

"Relax!" he barked to Don Barbecue and Courage. "Keep them at bay; they're

still scared of our bite! The nets are only over us, not under us! We can still escape before they snare us! Barbecue go! It's your turn!"

Doing as he was told, the don crawled from under the net directly into the tunnel, scratching his way to freedom inch by inch. Opposite the fence line, an army of liberated dogs gathered to bark their encouragement towards the last of the prisoners like cheerleaders at a sporting event.

Ironcoat, seeing Courage cornered yet still defiant under the web of rope, threw all caution to the wind. Images of young Courage helplessly locked in a cell flashed before his eyes, igniting a fierce determination within him. Without hesitation, he charged the humans with Tracker close behind. Biting at the guard's calves with lightning speed, Ironcoat lost complete control of his actions. Humans mattered, and he would not kill; yet to Ironcoat, Courage's freedom was his only priority. Tracker followed on his tail, watching a master at work.

Sergeant Tank, positioned right over the hole, began slipping backwards into the tunnel, his fangs still exposed. "Come on, Courage! Follow me!" he bellowed.

In the midst of the chaos, Courage lost himself. Nets encircling him, humans charging, fellow hounds crawling under the fence, Ironcoat in a bloodthirsty frenzy; it was too much for the youthful Great Dane. His body trembled, his knees weakened. Shaking with fright, he froze like a statue.

Ironcoat continued his attack. Mindfully evading clubs swung at him from all directions, he was now in the thick of battle, keeping the guards occupied with his furor.

Tracker skillfully slipped through the small army of guards and tore the net off Courage with his powerful muzzle. "Move Courage!" Tracker screamed in his face, urging the young hound to find his strength.

Courage, trembling with fear, watched as the web of rope was pulled to the ground in front of him, as if time itself had slowed to a crawl. His heart raced, yet he was paralyzed, stuck in his stance like an ancient redwood amongst a windstorm, solid and unyielding.

In a final attempt to break his stupor, Tracker bit Courage on the rump as he barreled by, before diving headfirst into the hole as if he were sliding for home plate. Only fur and dust remained in his wake.

With fangs biting his rump, the sharp pain jarred Courage out of his fear-induced paralysis. Gaining his composure, he finally recognized the cacophony of barks and screams attacking his ears from across the fence line. Looking about, he observed Ironcoat ferociously battling with four guards in a confusion of clubs and fangs just a few yards away. Realizing that his window of opportunity was rapidly closing, Courage quickly jumped into the hole like a prairie dog fleeing from a predator. Scuttling his way through, Courage's large frame scraped along the bottom of the fence, tearing skin; yet with adrenaline coursing through him, he felt no pain.

Just as he reached daylight at the tunnel's exit, a powerful grip seized his legs, abruptly stopping his progress. Panicking, Courage yelped in fear. Clawing with his massive front paws, Courage dug deep into the freshly dug dirt attempting to gain traction, however the pull on his rear quarters was too great and his body being was dragged backwards. Resurfacing in the courtyard, a guard held his legs like he was a

rabbit caught stealing vegetables from the garden. Turning to bite at the guard, Courage couldn't get a clear reach and only flailed about, missing his mark. He was caught.

Ironcoat, amid the chaos of battle and clubs battering his body, had witnessed Courage's capture. *Get your hands off him!* He thought. Seething with anger at the sight, he turned his attention on the rabbit-catcher. Dodging a flurry of blows, he charged.

Courage, being dragged away by his hind legs, contorted his body in every possible way, yet couldn't get a taste of human flesh.

Suddenly, a horrifying scream pierced the air and Courage was dropped to the ground like discarded prey. Looking up as he lay in a twisted pile on the ground, Courage saw Ironcoat's jaws clenched tightly onto the guard's buttocks. Salvation had arrived.

Not wasting a moment, Courage regained his footing and made a mad dash for the rabbit hole once again. This time he dove straight in like an Olympic swimmer, his legs relentlessly digging for purchase until he shot out of the tunnel's exit like a canine cannonball.

Immediately greeted by his pals, Courage found himself in a whole new world, a world of freedom and comradery; a world of hope. Looking back across the chain link fence, he saw his hero, Ironcoat, a noble hound with long, flowing, silver hair, engaged in a battle that was already won; its goal accomplished.

Ironcoat momentarily paused and turned to look at Courage from across the fence line with blood dripping from his muzzle. He had committed a mortal sin, yet it was not shame that gleamed from his eyes, it was pride. "Go now my young prince!" he hollered

With victory at hand, the fight was over and Ironcoat simply rested his tired body on the dirt, awaiting the inevitable. Moments later he was engulfed in a flurry of nets and surrounded in a half-circle by vengeful guards. He no longer resisted.

Finally, the snare was pulled, enveloping a net around his body, Ironcoat lay on the ground, captured. A grand smile, tinted red from battle, erupted from his face as he said goodbye to Courage.

"Oooooowwwuuuuugggaaaarr!" Ironcoat howled; strong with a heavy pitch and as triumphant as any song he had ever sung before.

The lump in Courage's throat swelled, tears welled in his eyes, and his heart ached with sadness. With a long, mournful howl of his own, he bade farewell to his friend.

"Oooooowwwuuuuuaaaahhh!" *Goodbye my friend.*

Every dog then joined in the chorus. But this time, it was the sound of liberated dogs howling their gratitude to Ironcoat and saying farewell to the dog pound. Courage comprehended this as the cry of triumph; they were now free hounds, ready to meet the challenges of their uncertain future.

Never, in all of Dog History had there been such a well-orchestrated escape from the pound. However, with a gathering of dogs the loose, meandering beyond the fence-line like an army of ants crawling over a hill of sugar, their time was surely limited.

Running together in a canine stampede, they were a rampage of jubilant hounds heading into the unknown. Wherever they were headed, anywhere was better than a cage. Some dogs began to branch off from the pack, searching for familiar places or

remembered homes. Kira and her band of shar-pei's quickly split from the group, while Don Noodles and his rat-hunting crew headed for Chinatown and his family's restaurant. Don Tamale and his vatos headed south in anticipation of homemade tamales.

A group of hounds, including Don Barbecue, Don Garbage, Don Ristorante, Sergeant Tank, Tracker, Scrappy, Racer, and Snacks, decided to stick together and form their own crew. They had become good friends on the inside and figured their combined talents would ensure their survival on the lam. They called themselves, "The Howlers."



## CHAPTER 9

### CONNOISSEURS OF THIEVERY

**C**ourage didn't know the city. He didn't know the streets, the alleys, the places to avoid, or how to survive without dog food. He has lived a simple life and was always taken care of, even at the pound. Now, Courage was relying solely on his new friends. He was a free dog, roaming the streets with his pals with only one thing to be fearful of—the dog catcher.

Tracker and Don Garbage offered their services and quickly began hunting for the best garbage around. It didn't take long for Tracker to sniff out a local hamburger restaurant where the rear alleyway proved to be a gold mine. Don Garbage went right to work knocking over every trash can in sight, revealing half-eaten hamburgers, french-fries, and stale hamburger buns.

Stuffed with a full belly of ketchup and mustard flavored French fries, Courage realized that survival on the streets might not be as daunting as he feared now that he had discovered these hidden treasures known as trash cans.

After a brief search for a safe night's refuge, the Howlers found an empty lot to



sleep in. It had sparse patches of grass, was padded with fine dirt and hidden from the street by a row of thick bushes. They decided it would serve as a temporary home base until something better came along.

Their first evening resting under the night sky, these former captives happily spent the twilight discussing their plans for the next day.

With a full moon rising above the city lights, Don Ristorante talked about the different restaurants they could hit the next day. “There are restaurants of all types,” he explained, “Italian, Mexican, pizza parlors, seafood restaurants, delicatessens, and even the fancy restaurants that serve thick, juicy steaks!” Describing each restaurant in detail the hounds couldn’t help but salivate at the thought of their upcoming culinary adventures.

Sergeant Tank, with his military background, entertained the hounds with stories from his army days. Among his many adventures, he most enjoyed bragging about the different people he had bitten in the line of duty. The Sergeant had by far the largest human-bite count of any known hound. Slowly, the hounds fell asleep listening to his comical narrations of the good ol’ days.

Courage slept peacefully that night, free from the confinement of a cage and his mind was teeming with new thoughts and ideas, as if a great darkness had been lifted away. That night, he dreamed of running through the forest, joyously playing chase with the same Great Dane he had dreamed of before. Seeing a beast of an animal concealed in the foliage ahead, his heart skipped a beat. This animal was huge, with black hair and monstrosly frightening teeth that hung from its mouth like prehistoric fangs. Saliva dripped from these long fangs as it watched the approaching Great Danes, eyeing its’ next meal.

It was the eyes that brought remembrance to Courage. They glowed with the strength of fierce, yellow suns that together formed with a face of terror that he would never forget. The same ruthless cat who drew blood from him not too long ago. This time, it was targeting his companion.

Ahead of Courage, the other Dane had taken the lead while playfully glancing back, enticing Courage to catch up, unaware of the danger lurking ahead. Courage tried to bark, he tried to warn her, but no matter how hard he tried, his bark proved soundless. He watched helplessly as the menacing cat leapt forward, instigating its attack. Once again, he gave every attempt to warn her, yet fighting through a muted voice, his efforts were in vain.

Finally, at the last possible moment, just before this beast reached his companion, Courage conquered his voice and unleashed a series of monstrosly fierce barks that woke the whole crew. Relief overwhelmed him when he realized that it was just a nightmare. *But, what a beautiful dog*, he thought.

The morning was illuminated with an orange-yellow hue as the sun carried warmth in her embrace. “What a beautiful day to be free,” Snacks remarked from her nest in the dirt as she stretched out of her slumber. “Now that we’re awake, thanks to Courage, what shall we do?” she asked, looking amongst the drowsy hounds.

Discussing their plans for the day, their main priority was to remain vigilant.

Everyone knew the dog patrol would be on the lookout and no hound wanted to return to the dreaded pound. Don Ristorante suggested a nearby Italian restaurant known for its morning meat deliveries, and the pack agreed it would be an excellent choice for breakfast.

Courage then asked if anyone had heard of the Elder.

“The what?” They questioned in unison, looking at Courage as if he were crazy. Courage explained how Ironcoat had mentioned the Elder, yet the name was unfamiliar to the hounds who had never heard of such a hound.

Don Garbage, on the other hand, knew of a dog, “The smartest dog alive,” he bragged. “He’s an old, wise hound named Knowledge, who lives at Fox Dale Library. If this Elder does exist, I betcha Knowledge has heard of him! We can work our way towards the library this afternoon.”

“Keep an eye out for the dog catcher!” Don Barbecue reminded the group as they headed out for breakfast.

An hour later, with patterns of gold sunlight spreading across the city below, the Howlers reached their destination. “This restaurant is enormous!” Courage barked as they came within sight of the eatery. Don Ristorante, with a huge grin on his face, led them to the back alley in search of a good place to hide. Finding a truck parked just across the alleyway, they crawled underneath it to await their prey.

“We just hide here and wait for the food to arrive.” Don Ristorante explained, as they relaxed and eagerly awaited what the delivery might bring. The enticing aroma of Italian food wafted through the air, causing their imaginations to run wild as their stomachs growled with anticipation.

Soon, they were asleep again, until the sound of a delivery truck driving down the alley drew their attention. It was a large truck which Don Ristorante knew quite well. “We’re in luck,” he barked. “It’s a meat truck, thank goodness!”

The hounds patiently watched from their hiding place while the unsuspecting deliveryman backed up to the rear entrance and opened the back of his truck. Drooling as he waited, Courage couldn’t recall the last time he ate fresh meat. Eventually, the delivery man came out with boxes of meat loaded upon a trolley and slowly walked to the back door of the restaurant.

The wait seemed to last forever as growling stomachs and drooling muzzles permeated the group who watched every step the deliveryman took. The moment he disappeared into the restaurant, Don Ristorante crawled out from under the truck and rose to his feet. Following suit, the dogs climbed out after him and raced to the back of the truck. Finding the rear door closed, their hearts collectively dropped to the ground.

Don Ristorante, who’d been through more difficult capers than this, immediately began circling the truck in search of another way in.

“Courage!” he suddenly barked when he came around to the driver’s side.

Galloping over, Courage saw Don Ristorante pointing up with his snout at the partly opened window above.

“I’m going in there! Make me a ladder quick!” he commanded.

Understanding the don's intentions, Courage went to the driver's door and stood on his hind legs with his front paws reaching the window and his head held high.

Courage whined as the bulldog rudely climbed on top of his head, carelessly scratching at his face as he placed his rump mere inches from Courage's eyes.

"High as you can Courage!" the don ordered.

Fully stretching his massive frame, Courage raised his head up, lifting the bulldog who was now sitting upon his muzzle, toilet-like, as high as he could.

"Almost there!" bellowed Ristorante as he scratched at the window with his front paws attempting to gain a purchase.

Catching the top of the window, he raised himself up and squeezed his head inside. Pushing further inwards, he balanced evenly on the glass with his front and rear paws dangling helplessly in the air, becoming a canine teeter-totter while the hounds below laughed at his balancing act.

With his back paws running wildly in the air as if he was riding an invisible bicycle, his momentum finally carried him forward and Don Ristorante squeezed his way inside the truck, dropping to the seat below like a canine cat-burglar.

Moments later, he barreled head first out the rear door, ram-like as he opened their accessway.

Coming around to greet the don, the Howlers stampeded inside before stopping in their tracks, looking on in bewilderment.

The scene was an absolute paradise! The truck was packed with every kind of meat imaginable: open boxes of steaks, tenderloin, pork chops, chopped livers, and chickens lined the floor and up alongside the walls like a pyramid of food sent from heaven. Up higher, endless rows of sausages hung from the ceiling in every direction. Quickly sniffing out their prizes as if it were Christmas morning, the hounds eagerly feasted on the succulent meats, gorging themselves in a frenzy. Swallowing everything in sight, the hounds quickly gorged themselves, endlessly biting at the various meats. Then, just as quickly, with muzzles loaded full, Don Ristorante ordered the exit—he wanted to leave as fast as they had entered. "Let's go! Let's go!" he barked through a mouthful of sausage.

Courage however, overwhelmed with the delicious bounty, lost himself in the pure joy of eating and paid no heed to the don's orders. Never before had he eaten so well. Practically swallowing tenderloins in a single gulp, Courage devoured as much meat as caninely possible.

Diving into yet another box of steaks, Courage heard a shocking roar erupt from behind him. Instinctively, he knew the origins of that sound—man! Spinning around in a flash, with a half-eaten steak dangling from his mouth and tail tucked between his legs, Courage stared directly into the eyes of the outraged deliveryman.

"You dirty, stinkin' thief!" He heard the man roar in that all too familiar human language.

Caught red-handed, Courage glanced around and saw that his pals had already vanished. Dropping the pork chops, he retreated like a cornered rat and impulsively urinated on the floor.

Then, the delivery man charged forward, “I’m gonna kill you!” he screamed

Courage had never been so scared in his entire life! Cowering on the floor, he feebly attempted to fight by snapping at the air, though he had never bitten a human before.

In the blink of an eye, Courage found himself trapped in a stranglehold with heavy hands closing around his throat. Struggling to move, he could barely breathe; the delivery man was strangling the life out of him. The inside of the truck began to spin as dizziness overcame him. His legs like rubber wobbled with fragility under his massive weight. No longer able to discern sound, nor smell the air about him, his vision blurred. Finally, Courage gave up. Ceasing all resistance, he watched as his short life flashed before his eyes. Picture after picture filled his vision, starting from his earliest days with his mother. *It is nice to see you again*, he thought to himself.

Suddenly, the deliveryman screamed in anguish, releasing Courage from his deadly grip. Catching his breath, gaining his vision, Courage looked over to see Don Barbecue attached to the delivery man’s calf. Lying feebly on the ground in a puddle of his own urine, Courage watched Don Barbecue expertly handle the ill-fated human. In just moments, the delivery man was crawling atop opened boxes of meat, fending off the vicious Rottweiler with his every effort.

Courage, his senses now restored, seized his escape and swiftly made haste without a second thought of Don Barbecue, nor of uneaten meats.

Accomplishing his rescue, Don Barbecue grabbed one last piece of meat and followed after.

The two hoodlums ran straight for their friends who were gathered down the alley, just out of sight, impatiently waiting for news of Courage. As he rounded the corner, Courage was met with a round of cheers from his fellow hounds and a not-to-happy bulldog.

“Next time I give you an order on one of my missions, you better listen up or I’m leaving you behind! Got it?” Seethed Don Ristorante, anger emanating from his every word.

“Yes sir!” Courage smartly replied, guilt seeping from unsteady eyes. “I’ve never been so caught up in a moment before. I still can’t believe all that wonderful food was in one place just waiting to be eaten. I’ll do better next time, I promise!”

Moving close to Don Barbecue, Courage licked his muzzle in appreciation. “You saved my life! Thank you so much Don Barbecue. I owe you big time!”

“No problem little fella, I enjoy scaring humans every now and then. I wasn’t going to hurt him any worse though; I just needed him to think I would. But if you’re going to be a part of our pack, you gotta follow orders! Understand?”

“Gotcha!” Courage answered.

After thanking Don Ristorante for their full bellies, the gang headed back to their lot for a mid-morning nap.

Scampering back, Courage realized his pals were willing to stick by him and had his back in rough situations. He found a place where he belonged and was proud to be

a member of the Howler. An unyielding smile creased his muzzle as Courage held his head high and moved with confidence as he moved with the pack.

Reaching their new home, a lot uninhabitable by man, yet utopia for a pack of hounds, they rested in the soft dirt hidden by azalea bushes that protected them like strict parents keeping grievous neighbors at bay. The street beyond was noisy and hectic yet the lot remained peaceful and calm as the dogs slipped into midday siesta's

Hours later, with the sun still pouring its glory from the western sky, the Howlers were well-rested and Scrappy, the boxer, voiced his readiness for a trip to the park. Scrappy, an energetic hound, could run nonstop for hours and he was always eager for a good game of chase. When he ran, his agility caused him to jump about, making him appear like a jackrabbit bouncing from place to place. Scrappy, always good-spirited, wagged his entire body from side to side with pleasure when he was happy. Scrappy heard stories from other dogs in the pound about the utopia of Canine Park where dogs could run free without fear of the dog patrol. Mostly, he wanted a bath and Canine Lake sounded like a perfect place to wash off the dirt and grime from life on the streets.

The Howlers were off again, this time with Scrappy leading the way. They stuck to the alleys and avoided major intersections in their efforts to avoid the dog catcher.

Like a faint whisper offering promises of things to come, the sounds of dog play in the distance urged them forward. When the park came into view, Scrappy initiated a race, quickly taking the lead and with their competitive nature, all the dogs followed suit. Most of the hounds had similar speed. Even Don Ristorante, the Bulldog, with his short, stubby legs, managed to keep pace. Courage galloped along like a horse, his long strides placing him at the front of the pack. Overtaking Scrappy, until someone zipped by with lightning speed.

After nonchalantly cruising with the group, Racer decided it was time to take the lead. For him, to lose a race, any race, was an insult to his breed. He was a greyhound, the fastest breed of dog to ever walk this earth. Built for speed, his deep chest provided for larger lungs, that fueled his veins with extra oxygen giving him enhanced speed and more stamina than any other breed of hound. Bestowed with canine aerodynamics, he possessed a sleek, narrow head with small ears that folded backwards, jet-like and a wire-thin frame consisting of lean, quick-twitch muscles and light, lengthy bones that accompanied with an arched back enabled him to contract and stretch with maximum range, providing him with the utmost canine velocity. Spotted white and brown fur covered his body; brown circles like sunglasses encompassed his eyes.

Greyhounds were hugely popular in ancient times and were the first breed of dogs selectively bred by humans as sight hounds. Sight hounds were named for their ability to find wild game by sight, then use their immense speed to capture them, rather than predominantly using their powerful sense of smell as most hounds did. There are few animals that can outrun a greyhound.

Sprinting ahead of the pack with a double-suspension gallop, Racer dove victoriously into Canine Lake. It was a wonderful victory, except in this race there was no master to make proud nor stadium full of fans cheering him onwards. Racer's days at the racetrack were long behind him, but those great memories would last forever. Catching up from behind, the rest of the Howlers jumped in after him.

Canine Park was a haven for dogs and their owners, a canine playground encircling a central lake where hounds could run free on endless acres without fences to bind them. The park was frequented by dogs of privilege who possessed homes, human families, self-respect and it reflected their demeanor, a stark contrast to the life Courage and his pals led in the pound. Here, fights were uncommon and joyous hounds were kind to one another. To them, struggle and hunger was simply a song they heard at the veterinarians from other hounds or a melody whose lyrics had not yet inscribed itself into their book of memories.

The sight of these happy, friendly dogs caused Courage to pause his play and reflect on his own family. Thinking back to the care he received as a pup in a happy, loving home, he found appreciation for the upbringing he received. Amidst the pleasant chaos of joy and comradery unfolding before him, Courage's attention was captured by the sight of striking beauty. Turning to take a better look, he noticed a magnificent coat of fur flowing in the wind like a graceful dance.

"I've never seen such a pretty girl!" Courage said to himself, captivated by the ethereal beauty that captured his attention.

Hearing his words, this female dog turned towards him, sniffing the air in his direction. She possessed the aura of an aristocrat as she stared, unbending and wise, appraising him with her eyes. She was an Afghan hound with perfectly groomed, silky fur dangling downwards from her lengthy frame like feathers on a peacock. Her body was tall and lean, almond in color with a shade of dark brown resting upon her head like a crown. Intermittently, this almond fur had turned blonde, sun-kissed by the sun. Around her neck, she sported a pink collar that sparkled with jewels.

Failing to temper the vociferousness of what he'd uttered, embarrassment washed over Courage when he realized the Afghan clearly heard his comments.

After a lengthy pause, the Afghan nonchalantly raised a paw, licked it thoroughly, then turned to smile at Courage, flirting. A moment later, she obediently pranced off with her head held high in the air; her human was calling. Heading through the park, she turned towards Courage, taking one last look before trotting away.

Courage slowly scampered after the hound in a trance-like state, accidentally tumbling right over Snacks in the process, who'd been watching from nearby.

"Couldn't take your eyes off of the beauty queen, could you, klutz?" barked Snacks. "Don't let her get away! We'll be right here waiting for you."

With those words of encouragement, Courage ran off in chase, as if he were a cat chasing a mouse. "Poor hound, he's got no idea what he's getting into." Snacks remarked, as she watched Courage prance off happily unaware of the troubles that lay ahead.

Originally from Afghanistan, Afghan hounds were primarily bred to protect sheep and cattle from predators. They've also been used by royal families to hunt leopards and gazelles who are among the fastest of wild animals. Walking with elegance and grace, the Afghan had a lengthy tail that curled upwards at the end, forming a magnificent circular ring. She watched Courage approach and smelled his presence, but did her best to remain aloof.

"Pardon me," Courage barked when he finally came abreast of her. "I couldn't

help but notice how beautiful you are, which is quite strange because I was under the impression that this park was only for us mangy mutts.”

After a short, intentional pause, she kept her pace, yet turned to look his way with a flirtatious smirk. “You’re funny,” she replied, a proud, English accent flowing smoothly from her muzzle. It was a voice unlike any he’d ever heard before. Her drawl was rich as syrup and sweet like frosting on a vanilla cupcake, his favorite of the human foods.

“Funny looking!” she said, her smirk now a smile. “That was a nice tumble you took over that ol’ saint, have you just learned to walk?”

“Walking obviously isn’t m specialty,” Courage joked, keeping pace with her stride. “I’m Courage, what’s your name?”

“I’m Apple, my friends call me Apple Pie. I come here every day around this time, so maybe I’ll see again. Don’t forget to watch where you’re going!” She snickered, as she was pulled across the street by her master.

Courage stood on the edge of the street, watching until she was out of sight. *I’ll see you tomorrow, Apple Pie*, Courage thought before happily, scampering back to his crew.

“How’d it go?” Snacks asked, seeing Courage approach with a spring in his step and a monkey-like grin smeared across his face.

“I’m in loooooove!” Was all he could say.

A gust of wind suddenly stormed across the park like an ocean wave flattening the grass as it whispered along. Tracker, just as a sailor hears a siren’s call, raised his wrinkled snout into the air, inhaling at the breeze from every direction. Then, like a compass seeking magnetic north, he found his bearings and aimed his nose unwaveringly into the distance.

“Hounds, it’s lunch time and I smell a barbecue!” Tracker barked exuberantly. With his nose, now a canine vacuum, held high in the air, he confidently marched away knowing his pals would follow obediently on his heels.

Blocks away, Tracker located the source of his expedition. Observing smoke rise from the backyard of a colonial style, red brick house, Don Barbecue knew Tracker had once again succeeded in finding a barbecue. Spotting the gate to the backyard, Courage, the tallest among them, was chosen to peek over the fence.

Stretching on his hind legs to glance over the fence, Courage found himself staring directly onto a smoky grill, unnoticed by anyone, the scent of meat so real he could already taste it. “It looks like hot dogs and hamburgers!” he jubilantly barked to the hounds once he was back on four legs, his mouth now salivating from the sight. “And I only see a few people back there at the moment.”

“Just like I thought!” bragged Tracker. Bloodhounds always had precise noses.

“Okay boys, this is my operation,” commanded Don Barbecue, gathering the hounds together. “I’ll be the first one in; Garbage, Ristorante and Courage, you three follow behind. Scaring the humans, we’ll force them back inside. Then I’ll knock over the food and we grab whatever’s available. Remember, watch out for the hot coals and everybody gets a piece of meat! Keep in mind, we need to be in and out quickly. After

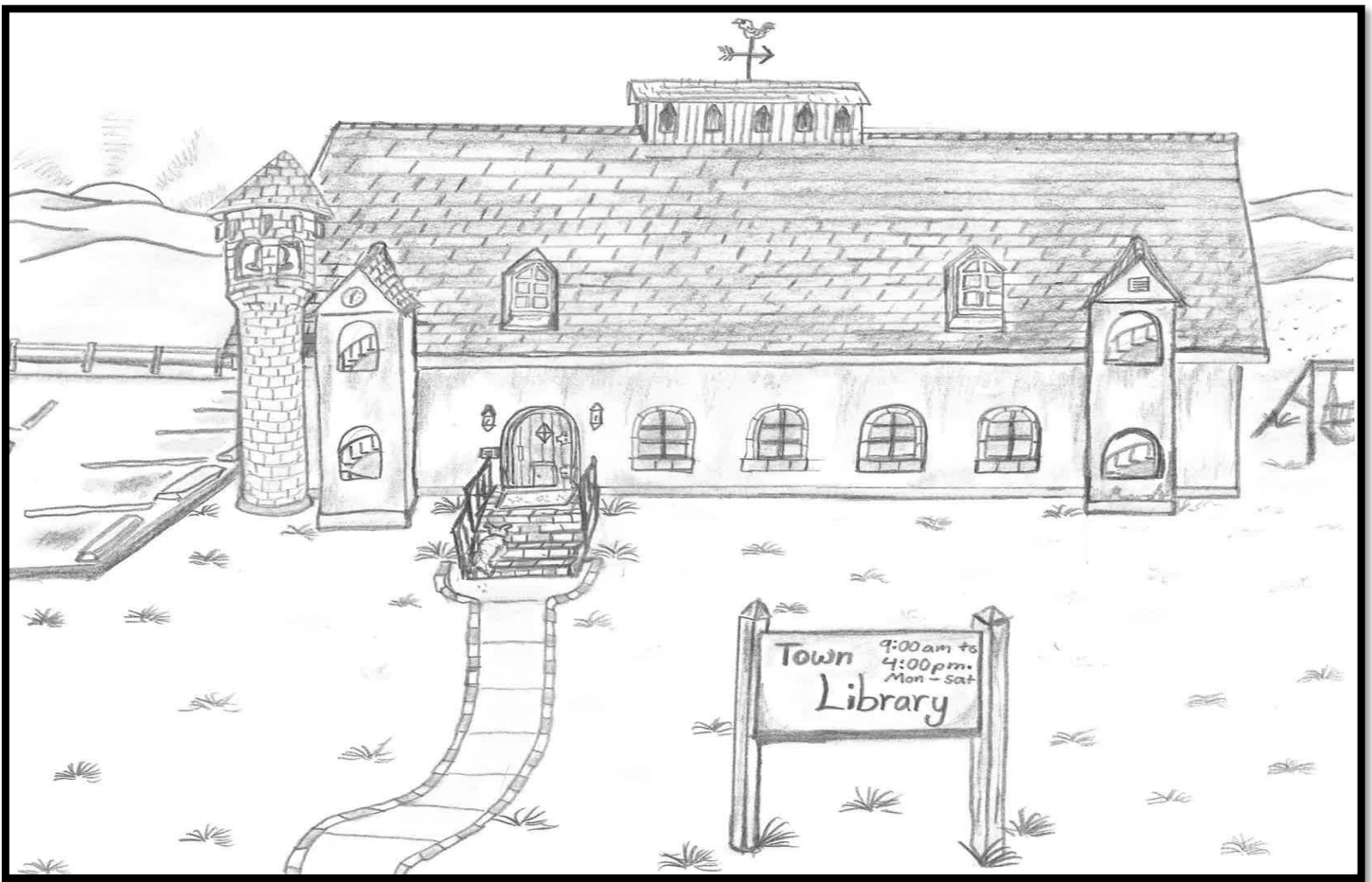
we eat, we're gettin' out of this neighborhood. The dog catcher will definitely be called in after us!"

Courage was impressed with how easy the operation went, just as Don Barbecue planned. The humans were caught off guard by the sudden appearance of the vicious hounds and immediately ran inside to safety. However, halfway through the operation, Courage began to feel guilty about what they were doing... he turned and remarked to Don Barbecue that it wasn't right to steal.

"They have plenty," he replied, pointing with his snout to the stacks of frozen meats piled alongside the overturned barbecue still waiting to be cooked. "Besides, we have to survive. Life on the streets is not about morals and integrity my boy. Sometimes we have to steal to survive! You either accept it and move on, or you don't make it out here!"

Looking back at the frightened humans huddled inside their house, Courage felt life on the streets wasn't for him; he missed being home with his family. *Where's my future headed?* He wondered.





## CHAPTER 10

### FAIRY TALES AND ANCESTORS

**T**he hound we're going to visit, is a legend around these parts," Don Ristorante explained as they prepared to visit the library. "Raised in the library, as the protector of books, he found a way to read the human language! His name is Knowledge and he's a genius. There isn't a question he can't answer!" bragged the don.

Located in the center of town, it was a long journey to reach the library. Avoiding the dog patrol, the Howlers stuck to the safety of the alleyways; like wolves in the wild, they were free to roam the city streets, yet smart enough to avoid attention.

Each alleyway held a multitude of attractions to explore, from the scent of strangers, trashcans to pilfer, alley cats to chase, and territories to mark. Dogs would often approach from their fenced yards, barking with envy as the pack confidently strolled by, heads held high. Oftentimes the gang would stop to flirt with the prettier dogs, or fight with an angry ruffian through a hole in his perimeter. The alley cats however, were the most fun to chase until they escaped to the safety of an unreachable treetop. Eventually, their bellies were filled with random morsels from the ubiquitous alleyway trash cans. Roaming the streets with little care or worry was a luxury for the

Howlers who enjoyed every minute like tourists on a safari as foreign smiles took residence upon their muzzles.

Finally reaching Fox Dale Library, it appeared as an elegant beast looming in the distance, mysterious and beautiful. Constructed in the image of a church cathedral, it had two high-rising towers standing dominantly on opposite ends as if they were giants holding a roof for a jump rope between them. The front lawn, freshly mowed, was littered with a variety of sun-tanners chatting together or engulfed in their books.

“Everyone head around back, Knowledge has his own entrance,” Don Ristorante ordered.

Encompassed by windows, the rear of the library had a brick staircase rising up to a large, wooden door. Carved into the center of this magnificent, oak door was a small, doggy door. “Just hang out, I’ll check if Knowledge is in,” barked the don, before gingerly making his way into the library.

Knowing him well, Don Ristorante expected to find Knowledge reading a novel. Cautiously entering the rear sunroom, the don was engulfed by warm gleams of sunlight winking through the windowsill houseplants. The floor, with thick, shag carpeting, soothed his paws as he silently moved towards the largest, most worn-out couch on the far wall. Just as he had presumed, Knowledge was fast asleep, snoring on his favorite cushion.

Knowledge, a border collie, had a black pelt with white stripes along his face and chest. His graying beard and wire framed eyeglasses resting lazily upon his nose gave him the appearance of a canine professor. The border collies of today are descended from the border regions of England and Scotland. First raised as sheepdogs, over the centuries they evolved to become the most intelligent of hounds. Lodged between his front paws, a mystery novel was responsible for putting him to sleep.

Raised in the library, Knowledge knew of no other life than to be surrounded by books. From puppyhood, he was a part of story time sessions where the librarian read fairy tales to groups of children with Knowledge sitting by her side. This reading time was a cherished memory for him where he would listen to her every word while watching the pages of her books flip by.

At first, the squiggly symbols lined along each page made no sense to Knowledge. However, after hearing the same stories and looking at the same pages over and over again, these strange markings began to gain meaning until eventually he was able to match them up with the different phrases the librarian spoke. It was in this manner that he first learned how to decipher the written word—a task no other dog has ever accomplished.

After gaining a mastery of these fairy tales, Knowledge then graduated to reading nursery rhymes. Before long, he had moved on to mystery novels until finally discovering encyclopedias where he learned all about the ways of the world. Through the ensuing years, this genius of a dog read any book he could get his paws on, becoming so consumed with his new passion that he would stay up all night reading in secrecy, unbothered by man, then catch up on lost sleep during the day.

“Wake up you old geezer!” Don Ristorante barked.

Startled from his slumber, Knowledge quickly jerked awake, dropping his book

onto the floor. He was a medium-sized dog with a narrow face and an air of rustic nobility about him. Standing up on the couch, shaking himself awake, Knowledge moved quickly to greet his old buddy, revitalized from his nap, or from the sudden appearance of an old friend. Trotting with a lovely smile that gave out warmth and eagerness, he greeted Don Barbecue with a frenzy of licks and sniffs, then found his attention drawn to a particular scent emanating from the don's muzzle as if it were a slow leak on a tire. The aroma had a tinge of familiarity to it that brought him back to a time of pilfering trash bins and chasing alley cats with the don on his ventures away from the library.

"It's great to see you old buddy!" he barked, the scent of the don's last dumpster dive still lingering in Knowledge's nostrils. "It's been a long time, I heard you were arrested again! How was the dog pound?"

"Unpleasant as usual, but haven't you heard?" Don Ristorante asked before bragging. "We escaped! And set every dog free, all but one that is. I'm sure you'll read about it in the newspapers. The city is filled with hounds!" he boasted.

"Wonderful work!" Knowledge remarked. "Humans have no idea how smart we can be, they just think we're dumb dogs! Please tell me all about it. I'm sure other captives can benefit from your story. No one likes to be held in that dungeon!"

Don Ristorante explained that he came here on behalf of his new friend, Courage, who was searching for a mysterious hound called, "The Elder." Knowledge's eyes lit up with curiosity when he heard mention of the Elder, a name which was often mentioned in recent lore.

"The Elder you say? I've heard of him. I think his story is written somewhere in my newer books, it'll take a while to dig'em up," Knowledge explained. "Come back after closing and I'll let you all in."

Having accomplished his task, the don retreated back outside to join his comrades who were nowhere to be seen. Sniffing the afternoon air for signs of danger, he sensed no immediate threats, yet heard a faint bark from one of his intrepid pals in the distance. Using his ears like radar, he scampered off towards a distant grouping of oak trees.

Behind the library, a gathering of oak trees reached high into the sky with their mighty trunks. Bearing immense branches that intertwined with one another, these trees imitated giant children holding hands in a game of red-rover. This jungle of outstretched arms was home to endless generations of squirrels.

Approaching the pathway, the don caught sight of his fellow hounds running from tree to tree, in a fruitless effort to catch the devilish ghouls that squawked raucously from above. These squirrels incessantly barked reprimands in a foreign language as if they were disappointed parents ranting soliloquies at unrepentant children. A favorite pastime for all dogs, squirrel hunting would be an Olympic sport if canines could vote. Don Ristorante joined the raucous and the Howlers happily spent their afternoon chasing these little beasts, who ranted ceaselessly from the safety of their elevated perches, yet none were ever caught.

When the sun began hiding behind the distant mountains, the pack headed back to the library. With rainbows of light shining outwards from its' stained-glass windows, the library glowed pumpkin-like.

Don Ristorante entered the rear sun room with the hounds filing in behind. Knowledge was nowhere in sight so they each sniffed out a comfortable spot along the couches, but left Knowledge's cushion alone by Don Ristorante's order. Don Garbage, the heaviest hound, engaged a decliner with his massive girth—each motion induced vigorous complaints from the well-used springs, and before long he was snoring like a mower in high grass.

A little while later, Knowledge scampered in and a smile quickly grew upon his muzzle seeing his new guests.

After meeting each of the hounds, Knowledge turned to Courage. "So, you knew Ironcoat?" he questioned, appraising the Dane with inquisitive eyes.

Courage nodded with affirmation. "But only for a little while," he replied.

"I found Ironcoat's family in my history books," Knowledge explained. "Did you know that his ancestor, Steelcoat, was a famous wolf-hunter from Ireland, who fought in the revolution against the cats? He descended from a family of renowned wolfhounds.

"Everyone gather around for a moment, let me give you a little history lesson," Knowledge ordered. After everyone was situated nearby, he began. "It was Ironcoat's ancestor, Sir Steelcoat, who helped Prince Valor, a heroic Great Dane, escape from the slave camps when the prince was just a young puppy... this was the beginning of a life-long friendship."

"What in the devil are you talking about?" barked Don Ristorante with an agitated grumble to his voice. "I remember Ironcoat. He was a crazy old dog! Everyone knew of those stupid fairy tales he told. Don't tell me you believe in those crazy stories too!"

"Fairy tales! My dear lad, these are no mere fairy tales! What do you think it is that I do all day? Sleep?" Retorted Knowledge, with hostility glaring from angry eyes.

Without waiting for an answer, he remarked. "This is Fox Dale Library! I have the largest collection of canine history ever put together. You mangy hounds of the street have no idea of our past. Do you even want to know?" Knowledge questioned angrily.

Hearing no reply, he continued. Listen up you dirty street hounds. I'll tell you an amazing story about a war that's been going on for thousands of years. Then we'll go upstairs to my office and I'll read to you from one of my sacred books. Believe me, these are no mere fairy tales!

"Grab yourselves comfortable seats and listen up you hounds of the street, this will take a little while for me to explain." Barked Knowledge as he held center stage amongst the dogs.

"A long time ago, there was a young prince named Valor, who was the last surviving member of a once-proud clan of Great Dane's. He was enslaved in the canine work camps of Bubastis, the feline stronghold. Bubasta, their feline goddess and fiercest of all our enemies, controlled this city with an iron grip, forcing our fellow canines' slaves to build a great pyramid in her honor.

"Anyway, a wolfhound warrior named Steelcoat, who is a great ancestor to Ironcoat, the old wolfhound you all knew from the pound, snuck his way into the city and orchestrated the young Dane's escape; just as Ironcoat was essential to young Courage's escape from the pound. Hiding by day and traveling at night, these two made

their way to the hidden monasteries of Tibet in search of our most sacred hounds, the Tibetan Spaniels.

“The spaniels of Tibet dedicated their lives to the pursuit of a higher power that could be wielded in battle. And from the stories I’ve heard and the many historical reading I’ve seen, I believe they found it. These spaniels are known in the canine realm as reincarnated souls of the most devout monks of man; their holiest brethren who live among the highest mountains in the land.”

Stopping for a moment to catch his breath, Knowledge looked amongst the hounds. Still fully engrossed in his narrative, they impatiently waited for him to continue.

“As loveable companions and protectors of these monks, Tibetan Spaniels were known as the guardians of man, a phrase that was shortened to GoMan. These GoMan hounds believed in the congruence between man and dog, for the survival of both. A term we now call symbiosis. Yet, these spaniels were in dire need of protection from the evil forces of the wild feline that were invading the mountains.

These ancient felines were led by lions, the most formidable of all beasts. Lions were notorious for their evil temperament and savagery on the battlefield, driving fear into any canine that dare oppose them.

“During the, ‘Time of the Cat,’ when canine clans were under threat from the barbaric forces of the wild feline, one clan of mastiff proved to be experts in battle against them. These mastiffs had mastered a fighting technique called, ‘The Arts of Tooth and Paw,’ a fighting style derived from the savagery of the hound’s canine teeth and the ferociousness a hound’s paw carries when called to battle.

“Recruited to Tibet as guardians of these spaniels, the two breeds formed a unique society of GoMan Master who practiced a new craft, ‘The GoMan Arts of Tooth and Paw Fighting.’ This new fighting technique and the GoMan Masters who wielded it started the, ‘Revolution of the Hound,’ which lead to the ultimate defeat of he feline army in the Great War.

“When peace was finally gained throughout our lands, the spirituality of the Tibetan Spaniels eventually morphed the GoMan Arts from an attacking technique into a defensive fighting style used today to protect man and hounds from the continued aggression of the wild feline. If not for the GoMan Masters, cats would still rule the animal world!” He barked with ferocity.

This quickly brought growls from the hounds who were intently listening to Knowledge’s every word.

“Come with me to my library, I will read to you from the Book of the Dog. Dog script is a very old language, yet I have translated every page and I know you’ll enjoy hearing more about our canine history”

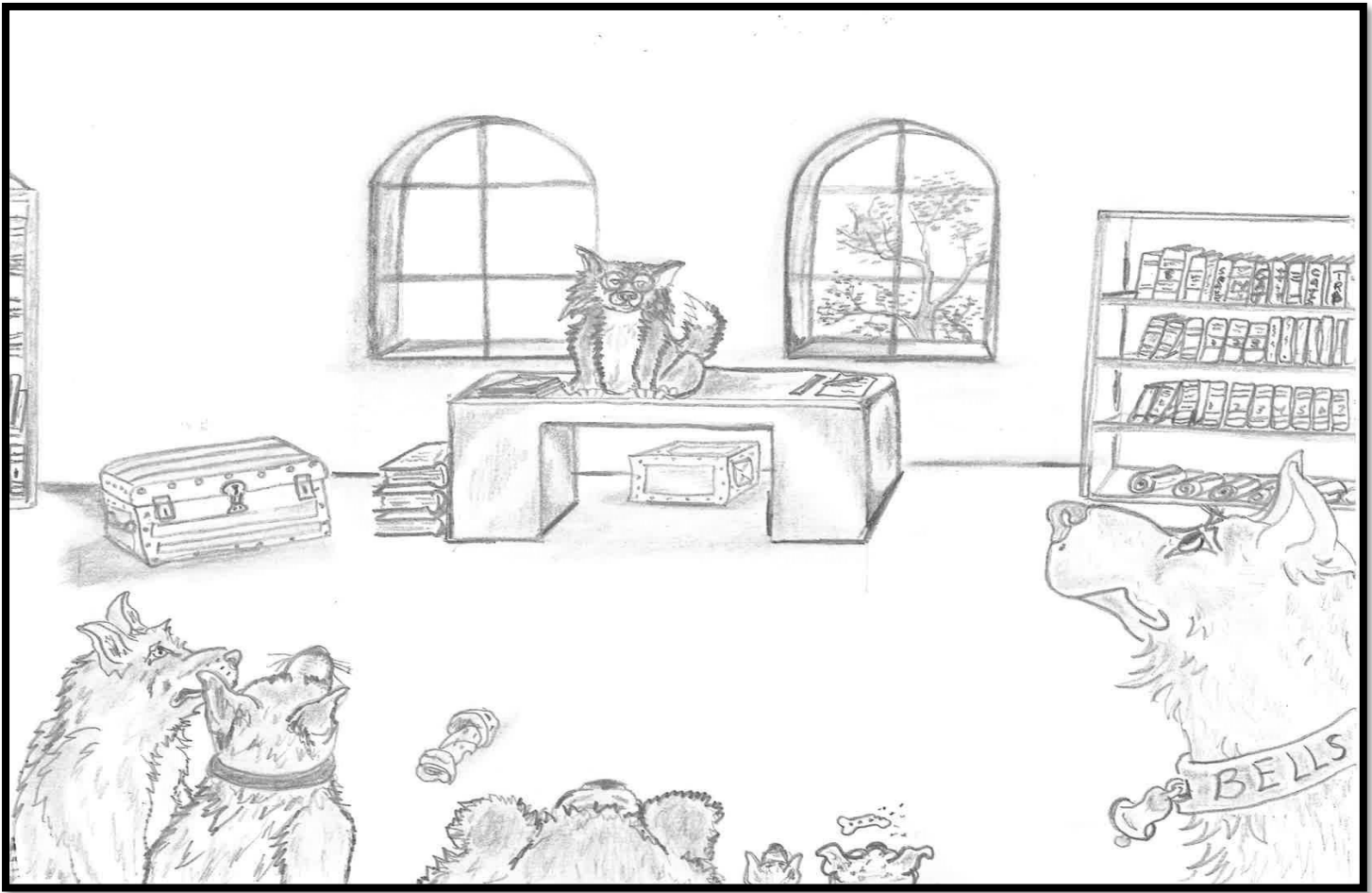
Sauntering into the atrium, the hounds were amazed by the enormity of the library. The ceiling was arched, and as the upper level came into view, a lengthy balcony could be seen running from one end to the other. All about, thousands of books were neatly aligned on antique wooden bookshelves.

The Howlers followed, with eyes wide, as Knowledge led them up a spiral

staircase. Reaching the second level, they entered a small reading room with a few couches, but no books.

Leading the pack, Knowledge marched confidently towards the far wall as if he were blind, paying no heed to the obstruction before him. Stopping just as he came upon this barrier, Knowledge nudged forward a piece of the wall with his nose. That's when the confounded hounds finally noticed a perfectly concealed doggy door.

“How wonderful!” Courage barked, being the first to curiously follow the old border collie into the mysterious room.



## CHAPTER 11

### WATCHERS OF MAN

**K**nowledge led the Howlers into a secret chamber, nestled in a hidden part of the attic with two large windows that overlooked the courtyard. Books and scrolls adorned the shelves along the exterior walls and more were stacked neatly on the ground next to a large, wooden desk. Cushions lined the floor in orderly rows, setup like a canine classroom. Knowledge patiently waited for the hounds to pile in, letting them look around and explore the room. This was his pride and joy, a hidden library holding the history of their kind. It had taken Knowledge many years to clear out the space, build the shelves and create the secret entrance.

“This is my personal library,” Knowledge began. “I’ve worked hard recording every canine event I’ve heard or come across over the many years of my life, preserving our history.

“Courage, you asked about the Elder,” Knowledge continued. “To tell you of the Elder, I must first begin with our canine history. The Tibetan spaniels have chronicled our history in the sacred Book of the Paw. I am now the keeper of the book,” he explained to them. “I will just read sections of our past, otherwise the full story would

take too long.

Knowledge opened up a large wooden chest, reached in, and carefully closed his muzzle around a leather book entwined on the end with braided fur. He handled this book carefully, as if it were a fragile egg, one wrong move away from shattering. Climbing onto his desk, he carefully opened its pages, selected a particular verse, and started to read.

“The date is 5 B.C. (Before the Cat); Our fiercest enemy, the wild feline, has become very strong. For many years they have been planning our demise. Our armies are strong, yet the feline has proven to be a ruthless adversary. We have heard rumors of secret camps hidden in the mountains where lions, jaguars, cougars, panthers and tigers—their fiercest warriors, have been training for battle. We fear the strength of the cat...

“The date is 1 B.C. We have been battling the feline armies for years. Our champion Great Dane, King Valrey, has led his forces bravely, but the cats have shown their ferocity. The king has now sent his brood into hiding; we fear the end is near.

“The date is 40 D.C. (During the Cat), Prince Valor, the last remaining descendent of King Valrey, is enslaved in the giant city of Bubastis. However, the great Tigris, Bubani, has been systematically killing every Great Dane she finds in an effort to wipe out the king’s bloodline. As the young Prince Valor grows in size, his heritage becomes more evident; his life is in jeopardy. The prince’s faithful followers have been planning an escape.”

Pausing from his reading, Knowledge looked up to see nine pairs of eyes staring back at him in wonder. A few jaws were even dangling open in disbelief as he continued to read.

“The date is 90 D.C. The cats have enslaved our fellow canines for nearly a century. We have become their hunters and their gatherers; canines are mere slaves with no rights in society. We prepare their food, work their farms, and are traded amongst them like cattle.

“Mankind, those we call the ‘No-furs,’ live in fear of the felines who have become insidious rulers. They are treated like gods by the no-furs who are forced to build massive pyramids for the feline royalty. Recently, these no-furs began constructing a grand pyramid for Bast, the feline Goddess of family and fertility. This mammoth project is centered in the great slave city of Bubastis, in Lower Egypt. It is a sacred temple where noble cats are to be mummified and entombed upon their death.

“The date is 95 D.C.,” Knowledge reads. “We have heard rumors of a great canine army forming in the north lands. Led by Prince Valor, the Great Dane who escaped from the slave camps many years ago. We patiently await his return.

“The date is 99 D.C. The revolution is at hand. Tomorrow, the great GoMan army is attacking the feline forces at Bubastis. The cats have grown too confident in their control over us. They have ruled this land for far too long. These large cats are fierce fighters, but we have heard stories of the great GoMan Warriors and their superior fighting abilities.

Knowledge continued his narration.



“Today we fought our last battle. We have overwhelmed the cats! Led by Prince Valor, and commanded by Sabercoat, our GoMan warriors fought with fierceness. Unfortunately, the defeat of the great cat leader, Bubab, has come at a high price. Sabercoat and the great Bubab were engaged in a ferocious fight as they fell from the highest balcony of the pyramid.

“In memory of Sabercoat, who sacrificed his life during our final battle with the cats, we will now begin a new calendar year. This New Year will be known as 1 A.D. (After the revolution of the Dog), and will forever mark the day we overthrew the felines. Time will move forward from this date.

“1 A.D. Having achieved victory over the felines, all dogs are now free from enslavement. The last of these wicked creatures have escaped into the wilderness. From this day forward, canines will live as free beings!”

Knowledge stopped for a moment, letting his words register with the hounds. Looking about, he saw that they were still staring wide-eyed, waiting for him to continue.

“It is hereby proclaimed that the duty of the GoMan is to watch over our fellow hounds, and to protect them from all dangerous creatures. GoMan Master’s will pass along their knowledge to their apprentices, named GoMan Warriors. These extraordinary hounds will seek an untapped power as GoMan Warriors, their nose will never fail in leading them to the Temple of Four Paws: their training grounds.

“Canines must always remain leery about the treachery of the feline, an evil cat of many forms.”

Knowledge finally closed the book, happy to have taught some history to these street hounds. Looking amongst his new pupils who were still enthralled by his words, he continued.

“As you have heard, it has been our heritage for thousands of years to be protectors of these no-furs. Some lucky hounds, the descendants of an ancient bloodline, carry within them hidden strength that offers them untapped power. These dogs are natural leaders; dogs that lead by example, filling others with a spirit of emulation that harvests the finest qualities from those around them. This Elder you mentioned, he is known to be one of these descendants. I will tell you about this Elder, but first, to offer inspiration, I would like to read to you one of my favorite stories. This is a tale of triumph, about a little dog that overcame large obstacles.”

Again, Knowledge cautiously grabbed the book within his mouth, returning it to its proper place in the wooden cabinet. Then, he searched around, grabbed another book, and brought it back over to his desk. Climbing on top once again, he sat on his favorite pillow and began flipping through the pages until finding the particular section he was looking for.

“This story begins in a faraway country called England,” he began, offering his best English accent to the hounds. “Long ago, there lived a little dog named Otto, who weighed no more than seven pounds. Otto was a pug, small of stature with a flat nose. Otto lived a luxurious life in the palace of the king, as a pet to the king’s son, the Prince of Orange. This beloved pet was even given his own motto by the young prince, ‘Multum a canis in parvo,’ which is Latin for ‘a lot of dog in a small place.’ This little dog was only a house pet, but nonetheless, he was a protector of man... just as any dog should

be!” he barked with enthusiasm.

“Late one night, when the prince was deep in slumber, a Spanish brigade snuck ashore preparing to attack the palace. Unfortunately for this brigade, they weren’t prepared for this ever-watchful Pug. With his keen canine hearing Otto barked relentlessly at the approaching enemy and his incessant clamor finally drew the attention of the palace guards.

“By doing his duty as a hound, and as a loyal protector of his master, Otto single handedly prevented the surprise attack by the Spaniards, their hated rival. For his efforts, this tiny dog was given the title of ‘Master Hound of the Prince’s Guard.’ When his master was later crowned King of England, Otto was permitted to stand alongside him as a hound of nobility.

“As you have just heard, any dog can become a hero and get his name in the books of history. Protecting man always has been and always will be our common goal,” barked the old scholar. Then he emphatically looked from dog to dog, stressing the importance of his next words. “Seek out your destiny, hounds of the street! Your future awaits your actions!” he barked.

“This Elder you seek, young Courage, I have heard tales of his existence. If these tales are to be believed, they speak of him residing in a place called the City of Hounds.” Knowledge explained. “Few creatures know where this Hidden City is located. I have no maps or directions to give you and only rumors speak of its location, but I have heard that you must ascend the highest of mountains if you seek its location. It is said that only the snout of a true GoMan descendant has the ability to find this city and the great temple that lies within.

“If Ironcoat told you to seek out the Elder, then perhaps there is a special reason for your search,” he remarked, staring at Courage, appraising him. “What do you know of your parents?” Knowledge asked.

Embarrassed from the sudden attention, Courage shyly dropped his eyes towards the floor to avoid the gaze of the pack. Which focused like lasers upon him while they whispered back and forth amongst each other. Courage was at a loss for words. “I... I,” he fumbled. “I’ve been told some crazy stories about my father.”

“Young Scarface, there is much for you to discover,” barked Knowledge with a big grin playfully dancing across his muzzle. “But for now, it’s late and I’m exhausted from a long day of working with the human pups, they require a lot of attention that wears down an old hound like me. Let’s make our way back downstairs. You’re all welcome to stay the night, my friends of the street, but you must sleep in the back room. Be sure to keep quiet walking back, my master would surely freak out if he saw so many hounds in here.”

With soft of couches to sleep on, a pleasant change from their vacant lot of dirt and shrubs, obscure snoring soon presented itself as if there were conducting a canine symphony. This hubbub kept Courage from sleep. Listening to each hound’s specific snore, he became familiar with their individual rhythms, a snore expert. This melody of sounds usually lulled him into a deep slumber like a canine lullaby, yet on this night, thoughts of this mysterious Hidden City kept sleep at bay.

Eventually, Courage’s mind wandered towards his new friend, Apple. The

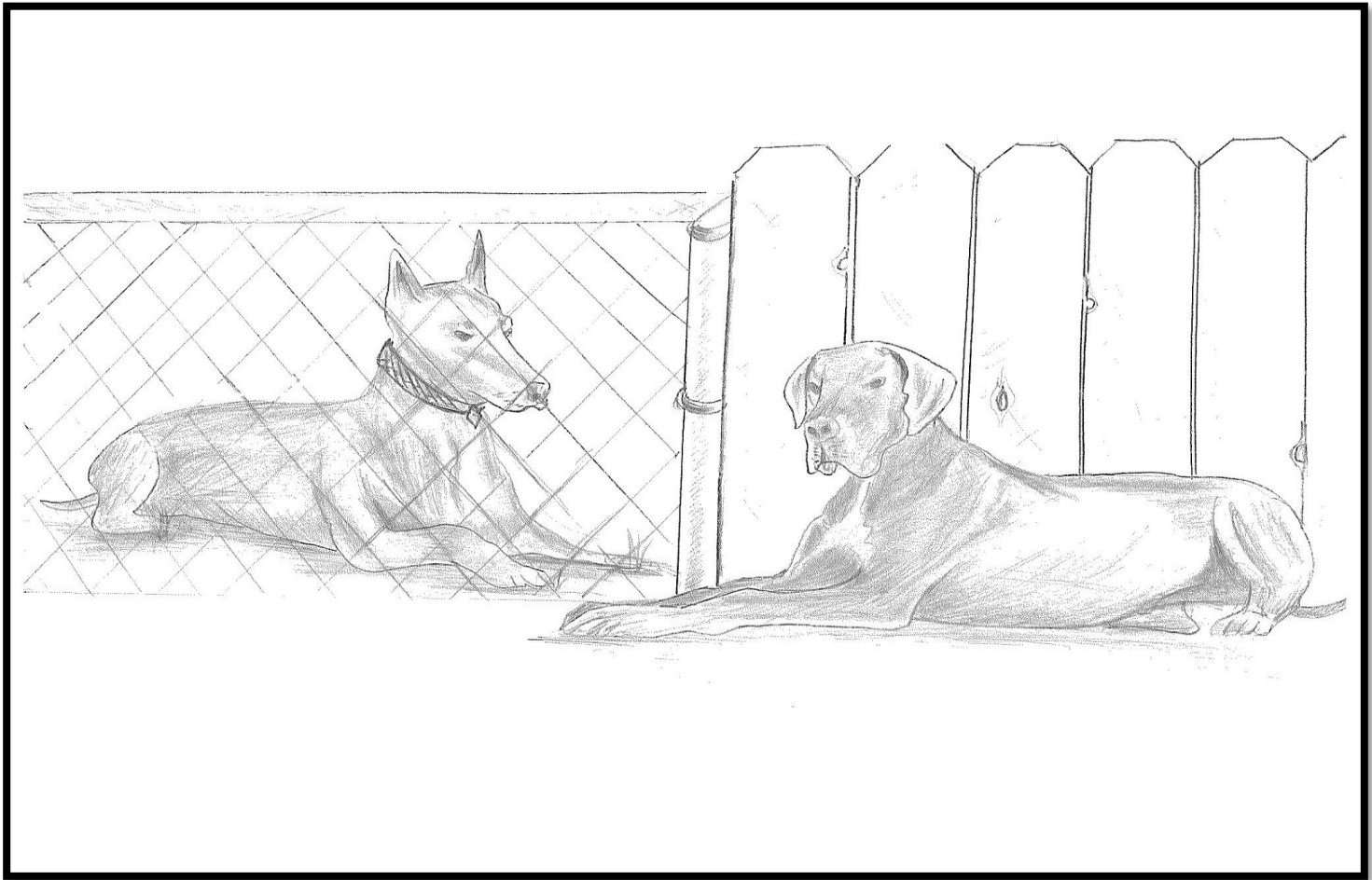
beautiful afghan was a dog worth fighting for; he had to make sure he was at Canine Park before noon!

Breaking dawn, the sun rose from its nightly den, pointing fingers of warmth at the slumbering hounds who woke with empty bellies. Don Garbage, true to his name, recalled eyeballing a collection of trash cans hidden behind a restaurant on the way through town the day before. A true trash diver at heart, he was always taking mental notes of where to catch a meal. Using the alleyways, Don Garbage led the Howlers to their destination: an all-night diner with a large breakfast crowd. Trash was piled high from the previous night's patrons and all three trash cans looked ripe for the picking.

“Watch the master at work!” Don Garbage barked before barreling headfirst into the nearest trash can. Just as he hoped, it was packed with half eaten meals—leftover hash browns, sausages, ham, pancakes, bacon, and sandwiches littered the ground. It was a canine gold mine!

“There’s a ton of leftovers here,” he barked before knocking over the final two cans and diving into a pile of pancakes that had fallen out.

By the time the Howlers had finished their scavenging, trash was scattered all about as if a canine tornado had winded its way through the alley. Afterwards, the hounds lazily scurried to their vacant lot to rest their full bellies.



## CHAPTER 12

### CHASING APPLE

**A** ripple of sunlight streaming through a break in the morning clouds shimmered on the hounds, warming their furry pelts. With no plans for the day, Courage's only desire was to see his new friend, Apple, so he persuaded the Howlers to head for Canine Park.

After navigating a league through back alleyways, the park finally came into sight. But, as they approached, Snacks noticed a problem. "It's the dog catcher!" she barked, motioning across the street with her nose. Sure enough, the sly dog catcher had strategically parked just across from Canine Park, eagerly awaiting any misguided hounds that crossed its boundaries.

"Run for it!" Don Barbecue barked without hesitation, commanding the pack to follow his lead. They were a block away and rapidly approaching when the dog catcher first took notice. The astonishment in his eyes was unmistakable. Quickly climbing out of his truck and reaching into the back, he grabbed a net before turning to face the oncoming hounds with a look of hunger in his eyes.

“Everybody slow down behind me, I'll take care of ‘em!” Racer yelled while speeding ahead. Slowing their pace, the dogs looked on with bewilderment as Racer sprinted directly at the dog catcher.

“He’s crazy!” barked Courage, watching from the safety of the pack.

Racer wasn’t merely running wild; he had a plan. Nearing the dog catcher, he slowed his pace in preparation. *What a monster this man must be*, Racer thought as he approached. The dog catcher, who through Racer’s eyes was the epitome of evil, had a large belly dangling from his stomach that poured over a belt hidden somewhere beneath and a ghoulish smile plastered upon his face. Without hesitation, he launched his net into the air, straight for the greyhound.

Racer immediately shifted into high gear, leaping forward with lightning speed, narrowly running underneath the net as it scraped just over his fur. It dropped to the ground behind him, covering only dust from the greyhound’s wake. The Howlers followed safely in his wake, barking wildly in defiance at the dog catcher who missed his mark.

Once they trampled the green grass of Canine Park, the hounds were confident in their safety. However, when the sun sets below the horizon, all rules were off. Scrappy had been informed of the nightly curfew by other dogs in the pound that had been caught under the dog catcher’s net. “Relax as long as you like!” he barked to the gang. “He can’t harm us until nightfall.”

By noon, patterns of gold dappled the open grounds as the sun broke through the clouds above, shining its glory on those below. The hounds found a spot near the lake, where they gathered under the shade of a large spruce tree. Like an army in a foreign land, they assessed the environment. With his head now a periscope, Courage constantly searched every section of the park, looking for his Apple Pie.

She noticed him first—it wasn’t hard to miss that oversized Great Dane head perched up antennae-like. Once she was unleashed, Apple ran straight in his direction. Courage saw her coming and quickly galloped to meet her. Gleefully colliding into each other, they shared their first embrace, rolling around the grass like wrestlers.

They engaged in games of chase, keep away, and tug-of-war—embracing the most cherished canine pastimes. Eventually, they rested in the lush grass, exchanging stories effortlessly. Courage painted vivid pictures of his youth and regaled Apple with tales of daring escapades with the Howlers on the city streets, adding a touch of glamour to the homeless hounds’ adventures.

As Apple took her turn to share, Courage found himself captivated by the sound of her voice and the way her mouth curled up into a smile when she spoke, yet her story wasn’t as great.

“The only good thing I can say about my master is that he takes me here once a day,” she grumbled. “But I think he comes here just to flirt with the ladies. I’m his ‘Trophy Dog.’ Mostly, I spend my days alone in the backyard, enduring cold winters, hot summers, and I have no clue what the inside of a house even looks like! Half the time he even forgets to put water in my bowl!” she whined.

“What’s the point of being a good dog if you can’t spend time with your master? He doesn’t beat me or tie me up to a chain like other dreadful masters I’ve heard about,

but my whole life has been spent in that boring backyard talking to others through the fence. I just wish there was something more to my life!” she complained.

Entranced in conversation, time slipped away and Apple’s master eventually came calling for her. Bidding farewell, they planned to meet again the next day. However, Courage harbored a different plan. Anticipating Apple’s daily routine of loneliness, he decided upon a surprise visit. Patiently waiting as Apple was led across the street Courage then began his pursuit.

First ensuring the absence of the dog catcher, Courage tactfully maneuvered through the streets, discreetly following in Apple’s wake until she reached her home. Apple’s backyard, shielded by a six-foot privacy fence, concealed a charming ranch-style home. Approaching cautiously, Courage was startled by vehement barking from the neighbor’s yard—a stern-looking Doberman with a German accent confronted him, asserting his territorial dominance.

“Ay! Get avey from here, you vagrant!” A tough-looking hound angrily snapped at Courage with a German accent. With his snout raised high, forehead puckered into a squinting scowl, and shoulders hunched menacingly forward, a wrathful Doberman pinscher scowled at Courage from behind the neighbor’s chain-link fence. This Doberman had alert, black eyes and ears cropped up like roving antennae. With short, coarse brown hair, a dark-brown nose, and wire thin muscles framed from head to toe, it looked as if he were carved from solid granite by a master builder.

“We don’t need any trouble makers casing our neighborhood!” The Doberman grumbled.

“I was just hoping to surprise Apple with a visit.” Courage innocently replied, sniffing the air to take in the scent of the Doberman before gingerly approaching the chain-link fence that separated the two dogs.

“I have known Apple all her life!” the Doberman barked from his side of the fence. “Mine fraulein has had enough vagrants sniffing around here, ve don’t need anymore! I see that you valk alone, vitout the mark of man on your neck. So, your either un runaway or un vagrant; und this is mein street. I vatch over every house und every dog here. I have vatched over Apple since she vas just un little pup. Mein name is Krause Von Schnitzel, you may call me Von Schnitzel und vat is your name?” the Doberman asked.

“I’m Courage,” he began, “could you tell me how I might get into her yard to say hello?”

Von Schnitzel rested his muscular frame against the fence. “Ja, I know how to get over da fence, but vat can you give me in return for this vonderful information?” he barked, not willing to help Courage for free.

Courage laid down next to him, the wire fence a small barrier between the two, pondering the question for a moment.

“Bones!” he yelped, as a solution flooded his mind. “I can get you chicken bones; I know a great spot. How about some tasty chicken bones?”

“Nein! I vant rib bones, only rib bones vill do. You get me some ribs and I’ll tell you how to get into da yard and I’ll let you come by vitout vaking da whole neighborhood vit mein barking. Deal?”

“You got yourself a deal,” replied Courage before scampering back towards the park with a happy smirk brooding across his muzzle—he now had a plan.

Courage found the Howlers at the edge of the lake, where a gentle wind was blowing ripples across the water. Feet deep in the now mucky waters of the shoreline, the hounds were entertaining themselves by playing chase and keep away.

Tired from an afternoon of play, they eventually encamped on a high bur of thick grass overlooking the surrounding park and relaxed under the midday sun. As talk of dinner came up, Courage told the pack of his need to find some ribs.

“I know of a great place,” Don Garbage remarked with a crooked grin awkwardly smearing his face. “The best ribs in town, but we have to go after dark, the garbage will be piling up by then. I’ve been there so many times I can find it blindfolded,” he bragged. They agreed to embark once darkness had fully engulfed the city.

Horns honking in the distance, a reminder of the bustling city, awoke Courage from his evening nap. Shadows from the nearby trees ran unchallenged across the grass like invading soldiers as daylight was overcome by dusk. His first conscious thoughts were of barbecued ribs. Remembering the sweet, juicy taste of home-cooked ribs brought Courage fond memories of home-cooked ribs. He craved the tinted flavor of barbecue and those bones that crushed so easily in his mouth. His mammary glands began salivating at the mere thought of such delicious food! He was now eager for dinner.

Courage lifted his head to the darkening sky and reached from deep within his lungs to emit a low howl into the evening air, awakening the sleeping hounds. With the last gray of day becoming black of night, they swiftly exited the park, led by Don Garbage navigating through the town.

Following the don, Courage pondered how best to bring the promised ribs to Von Schnitzel and even Apple. Knowing he could only carry a few in his mouth he might end up swallowing them during his journey, Courage needed a way to carry all the ribs at once.

“A bag!” he barked out loud. “I need to carry the ribs in a bag.” Pleased with his own brilliance, Courage ran alongside his pals, smiling at the prospect.

The scent of grilled meat carrying on the evening breeze triggered an ancient calling from deep within. Mouths salivated at the mere thought of barbecued ribs, the most coveted prize among the dog world.

Stopping the Howlers as they approached to strategize their attack, Don Garbage emphasized the need for stealth. Dogs scavenging through the trash were seen as vile hoodlums by restaurant owners who were well-practiced at phoning the dog catcher.

“No barking, keep low, and everyone keep an eye out!” he ordered.

Sealed off from the front of the restaurant, the alley was a great spot for garbage hunting, however, Don Garbage quickly noticed a change. “They must have upgraded,” he grumbled. “I don’t think these larger cans can be knocked over.”

The unmistakable aroma of leftover ribs floated cloud-like just above their noses, creating a fire of hunger residing their empty bellies. Salivating as he spoke, Don Garbage huddled the hounds. “All right,” he declared, “we’ve got a chance if we do this as a team. Let’s give it a try. Everybody give me some paws. On the count of three, we all ram the can, aim as high as you can!”

Together they rammed forward, hitting the bin hard. It swayed, but remained standing.

“One more time, give it everything you got!” the don commanded.

Once again, they rammed the bin with all their might, finally knocking it over. Feasting on every bone they could find, the Howlers scoured through every inch of the overturned bin, sharing in a feeding frenzy. Then, as a team, they knocked over the two remaining trash cans, discovering ample ribs for every dog.

Digging his dirty snout all throughout the can, Courage searched for a suitable container. Finally discovering a small trash bag within, he upturned the bag, emptying its contents and began to put his plan in motion. Collecting a pile of ribs, enough for both Von Schnitzel and Apple, Courage meticulously placed each one into his new carrying bag with a wide grin covering his muzzle.

Seeing Courage acting strangely, his buddies teased him. “Is that your doggy bag?” they joked. No dog took food home, but Courage often felt more human than hounds. Proud of his ingenuity, a wide grin spread across his muzzle.

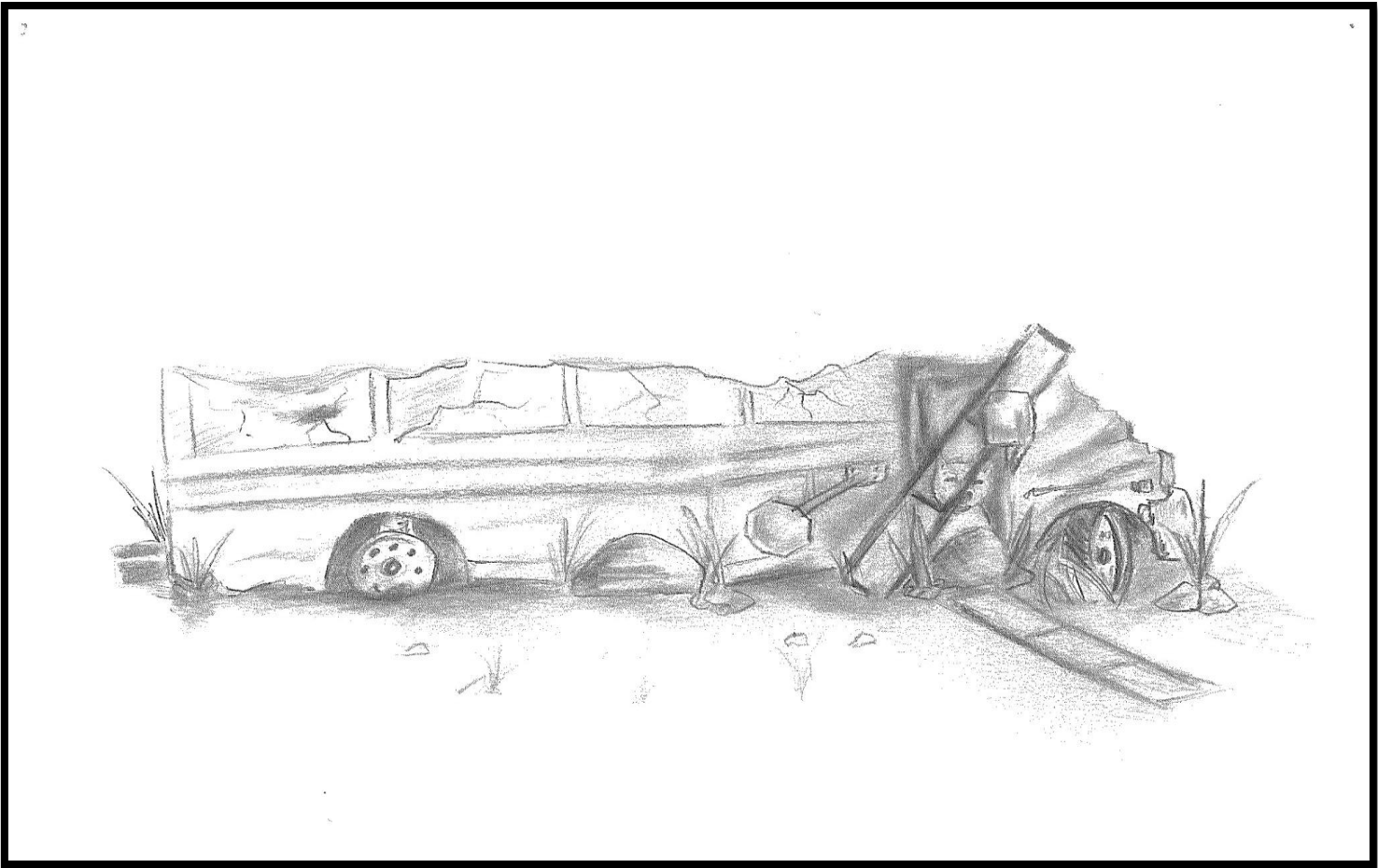
After getting their fill of tasty rib bones, the Howlers took their time heading home. Home for these comrades was now a vacant lot consisting of loose dirt and a soft patch of grass hidden from the street by a cluster of azalea bushes. They didn’t need luxury, only a safe place to conceal them from the constant hubbub of the city around them.

Upon reaching their new home, the hounds rested their full bellies and promptly fell asleep under the city lights’ dim glow

Keen at protecting his treasure, Courage used the bag as a meat pillow, guarding the ribs as he slept. However, in the middle of the night, he had a terrible dream where his mates attacked him for his valuable ribs. Waking in panic, he realized it was just a nightmare.

Anxious to protect his ribs, he quietly dug a hole and buried them in loose dirt. Satisfied with the safety of his buried treasure, Courage found peace and fell asleep once again.





## CHAPTER 13

### JUNKYARD DOG

**T**hey awoke past sunrise, enjoying the luxury of a carefree morning to discover the pale, yellowish-orange light of the morning sun slanting through the neighbors wood-picket fence, infiltrating their vacant lot like a silent thief stealing the morning's chill. After arguing over the first meal of the day the Howlers decided to visit Don Noodles in the hopes of scrounging up something they had never tasted before: Chinese food. Don Noodles often bragged about his family's restaurant and their overflowing bowls of delicious noodles. The time had come to confirm the truth of these tales.

Heading towards Chinatown, one of busiest sections of the city, was to be a lengthy journey for the Howlers. Situated on the eastern side of town, it was a considerable distance from their lot. The path ahead of them was mostly through an industrial and warehouse district with a few treacherous junkyards to navigate. Fortunately, today was a rare day of freedom; the dog catcher seldom ventured into this rougher part of town, which held few of the tempting alleyway dumpsters that usually attracted stray hounds.

The day's journey was a pleasant trip, and the Howlers gleefully made their way without a care in the world. Frolicking through the warehouse district, the hounds passed endless buildings of all shapes and sizes. These enormous warehouses were bustling with the constant movement of large trucks and the humans were too engrossed in their daily routines to care about a pack of dog's nonchalantly trotting through the district.

Finally clearing the warehouse district, they neared the junkyards. Looming in the distance, towering walls of smashed vehicles were stacked upon one another ten vehicles high, forming castle-like barriers that protected the inhabitants within, or perhaps kept vagabonds out. Tires, metal, and every piece of automobile imaginable were strewn all about these vehicular walls.

Traveling along, as a rough wind increased its bite, an eerie sound whistled amongst the crushed automobiles reminiscent of an evil witch proffering a dire warning to the intruders. Opposite the gargantuan walls, junkyard dogs could be heard barking and snarling at each other in a terrible, unrelenting raucous. Throughout the canine world, these brutes were rumored to be the meanest of all. The viciousness emanating from beyond these metal walls brought fear to the hounds as they tried to navigate through this part of town unnoticed.

Don Ristorante, as usual, found himself lagging behind. His little legs only allowing him to cover small distances with each stride. Passing along the immense outer walls, he marveled at the spectacle of these crushed monstrosities, stacked upon one another like massive Legos in a giant's playroom. The bulldog contemplated what life was like for the mysterious hounds that protected these junkyards with unrivaled ferocity.

Rounding the next corner, the don found himself all alone as the pack had moved ahead at a quicker pace, showing little regard for their lone straggler. Enjoying this rare solitude, Don Ristorante paused to marvel at the twisted metal wreckage before him, a sight unlike anything he had ever seen before.

Focusing on the mangled wreckage of what once served as a fully-functioning school bus, the don's furry face wrinkled in concentration as he pondered how many children it must have carried in its lifetime—a figure beyond his comprehension. Staring intently at this wreck of a bus, Don Ristorante imagined the multitude of funny tales it would share if it were to open its front fenders mouth-like and speak of the human-smelling, dog-loving children it transported during its many years of service.

Movement at the corner of his eye caught the don's attention. Shifting his gaze towards the source of the motion, don Ristorante peered into the darkness of what were once the bus's entry doors. Concealed within the shadows, he observed a pair of unblinking eyes staring back at him. Stepping closer to give the owner of these eyes a better look, he encountered a mangy-looking hound with sad, vigilant eyes intently watching his every move.

“Hey there little fellow, going for a bus ride?” joked the don.

Retreating deeper into the mashed bus, the dog's lips quivered into a menacing smile as a deep resonance escaped from the back of its throat—a growl of warning. The quiet fierceness of the sound conveyed a clear message: “Don't even think about it!”

However, the don did pause to think. No stranger to enemies and their threats of violence, he knew he was facing a very volatile situation. No dog likes to be cornered.

Immediately wagging his tail in a transparent display of friendliness, Don Ristorante adjusted the many wrinkles on his oversized face and offered the most cheerful smile he could muster. With this silly grin plastered upon his face like a canine portrait, he remained still, showing the puppy he meant no harm. Slowly and cautiously, he squeezed his way into the mangled bus and found the courage to sit his rump near the entrance, across from the young hound whose warning growl had diminished to a dull rumble.

That's when he first noticed the striking contrast in the young dog's physique. His undernourished belly suggested starvation and his bare ribs were so exposed that the don could count each one if he were inclined to do so. Yet, enormous muscles protruded from the rest of his body as if he were born a weightlifter. His face, neck, shoulders, and back appeared sculpted from solid muscle and bone, no fat was evident. Covered in dirt and grime like a pig in a farm, his thick pelt that looked as if it had been washed with engine grease. Despite his rugged exterior, his innocent, baby-blue eyes displayed his youth. However, as he growled yet again, the don noticed fierce teeth daring him to take another step closer—not a behavior one would expect from a mere pup.

Only ten months old and already larger than Don Ristorante, this young hound was a pit bull, a breed known for its tenacity and intelligence, and considered by many to be the toughest canines to roam the earth. He was an American junkyard dog—a breed the American Kennel Club never imagined, and can be described as a “city wolf.” This pit bull, a junkyard dog, a modern-day wolf of the city, had proven himself as a remarkable survivor in a perilous world.

Seated within the remnants of the old yellow school bus, the don engaged the young pit bull in friendly conversation. He knew that growing up in a junkyard was a harsh existence and couldn't help but feel a rush of sympathy for this unfortunate hound.

“I've been traveling with some really great pals, and together, we've formed a pack. We've been eating pretty well, and I can promise you a full stomach and even some adventures,” bragged the don. “Would you like to join us?” he asked. “If you come with me, I can promise you'll never have to spend another night in this dreadful junkyard again!”

It took some encouragement, but the puppy was eventually persuaded by the don's smooth talking and decided to travel along with the bulldog and meet the Howlers.

“What's your name?” the don inquired as they slowly eased their way out of the school bus.

“Name,” replied the pit bull with a timid voice, “I don't have a name. I'm just a junkyard dog.”

“Well then, that's just what I'll call you. You'll be Junkyard Dog or how about J.D. for short? How does that sound to you?”

“J.D. sounds fine to me. It's the first name I've ever had,” he remarked as the two new friends strolled away from the only home J.D. had ever known.

Don Ristorante had found himself a little buddy to watch over, just as his father had watched over him many years ago. The bulldog had always longed to be a father. Perhaps now, he could teach all the valuable lessons he had learned on the streets to this young pup, he thought to himself.

Suddenly, Racer came zooming by, yanking the don out of his thoughts. Racer was moving so fast that he barely managed to avoid colliding with the two companions. After finally putting on the breaks and turning around, Racer could see the sad little dump truck of a dog gazing back at him.

“Where the heck have you been?” asked Racer, addressing at the bulldog.

“I just ran into this little guy,” barked the don. “I was hoping he could join us. Junkyard Dog, this is Racer; he’s the fastest dog on this earth.”

“It’s nice to meet you Junkyard Dog,” replied Racer. “I see no problem with you tagging along. I’m sure you’ll have a great time traveling with our pack.”

And off they went, one more dog added to the pack. A few hours later, the Howlers approached Chinatown. They could tell they were on track as the foreign aroma began playing tricks with their keen senses of smell, infiltrating the air like a dank fog.

Courage tried to imagine what Chinese food tasted like. His family seldom fed him people food, aside from the table scraps the children snuck to him. *I hope it tastes like hamburgers*, he thought. No dog in the Howlers had ever tasted Chinese food, and they know they were in for a spicy treat.

Don Barbecue recalled Don Noodles telling him that his restaurant was located on Main Street and had a large dragon statue on the roof. “Well, old Noodles was right; it’s easy to find,” barked the Rottweiler as the Howlers came upon the enormous, Red Dragon restaurant.

The restaurant appeared to be quite busy, so the hounds decided to retreat to the alley where they could remain out of sight until locating Don Noodles. Scrappy, the most harmless-looking of the dogs, was chosen to sneak inside. Nosing his way through the back door, his snout was instantly greeted by the overpowering aroma of Chinese food. Taking notice of him, a chef smiled at the friendly boxer and called up to the front of the restaurant, where Don Noodles came running. Laying eyes on Scrappy, the don powered into him with a friendly tackle.

“It’s good to see you, old buddy,” Don Noodles exclaimed as they playfully rolled together on the ground, reuniting like the best of friends. “I hope you came with an empty stomach!”

“Actually, we all brought empty stomachs!” barked Scrappy before darting out the back door, with Don Noodles in pursuit.

The chow was astonished to see his old friends and the heroes of the dog pound. They regaled Don Noodles with stories of their recent adventures since the great escape, and when food was mentioned, the don barked incessantly towards the rear door.

In response, a chef emerged from the back door and his face instantly registered surprise upon spotting the pack of dogs gathered in the back. However, he quickly deduced their hunger just by seeing their drooling expressions.

A few minutes later, the same chef reappeared carrying a massive pot of Chinese noodles followed by a small trash can filled with leftovers. Beginning their feast, with Don Noodles beaming proudly, the Howlers enjoyed their first taste of Chinese food. The food was spicy, yet the dogs ate with gusto. After dinner, they relaxed behind the restaurant,

much too full to do anything. The hounds agreed Chinese food was pretty good, but nothing like ribs!

After recovering from their gluttony, the Howlers began a tour of China Town's alleys like tourists in a foreign city.

While venturing through a desolate alleyway, they came upon a familiar-looking shar-pei with a ruff of hair enveloping its head like a lion in the wild. Standing defiantly in the middle of the alley, this street hound stood without fear, enticing them to come forward.

With a sniffing of snouts and a prickling of ears, the hounds carefully approached. Leading the pack, shock rippled through Don Barbecue's body and the hairs on his back bristled as he recognized the unmistakable features of this shar-pei. He immediately barked a warning, "It's Kira! Be careful hounds, she's never alone."

"This is the wrong part of town for the Howlers! Have you come to settle your debt with me, Courage?" Kira barked, focusing her gaze directly on the Great Dane.

Courage looked up, startled by her words. A little too scared to speak out.

"We're just touring China Town," answered Don Barbecue with his fiercest expression sketched angrily across his snout as he positioned himself between them.

"I have unfinished business with Courage, so step aside!" Kira Snarled, her face hard and cruel, her eyes cold and dark with her eyebrows slanted menacingly inward, and her voice dripping with ferocity.

"If you want him, you'll have to go through us!" Don Barbecue retorted, his muscles tense as aggressively approached Kira, his upper lip lifting threateningly to expose his canines. Then, out of nowhere, they found themselves suddenly surrounded by a pack of shar-peis. Fifteen dogs of the same breed encircled the Howlers. It was an ambush, and the shar-pei's were eager for a fight. Having encircled the Howlers, the shar-pei's glared their fangs, clenched their jaws, and they breathed heavily through flared nostrils, poised for attack.

In response, with eyes wild, raised hackles and canines exposed in antagonizing snarls, the hounds of the Howlers stood their ground. Puffing themselves up like roosters, adrenaline coursed through their veins as each hound prepared for the impending brawl.

Two gangs of dogs fiercely stood their ground, their tension like dry gunpowder, being the only barrier between them, it awaited one little spark to ignite an instant explosion

Then, with her ears lowered and teeth snapping, Kira ignited the fuse by thrusting her body forward in one fluid movement—she pounced with the speed of a cat, quick and agile.

Instinctively, without conscious thought, Courage swiftly parried to his right just in time. Kira's fangs missed their mark as she slashed at his shoulder. In response, a surge of furry consumed Courage, causing him to snap relentlessly at Kira with his oversized jaw, momentarily keeping her at bay.

What followed was an intense flurry of motion as the two packs clashed into an explosive mix of fangs and flying fur that whirled about the alleyway. This brawl became a desperate battle, with neither side yielding. Guttural, savage cries rose from the melee, like laughter of the insane, as the canines engaged in combat. Each member of the Howlers faced off against a shar-pei, except for Don Barbecue, Don Garbage, and Sergeant Tank

who found themselves outnumbered, facing two shar-pei's. However, the Howlers were experienced fighters and managed to hold their own against these larger odds.

J.D. was the first to get the best of his adversary. Initially, he played the role of a frightened puppy, a well-practiced act. By keeping his body low to the ground, spreading all four paws wide and pressing them firmly into the dirt, he gave off the appearance of a cowering dog. Yet, this stance provided him with a more stable footing.

Feeling assured of victory over this cowering puppy, his opponent charged forward. Just before contact, J.D. moved to meet this attacker and caught the shar-pei's front leg in his jaw as they collided. The shar-pei, still thinking he had the upper hand, clamped his mouth around the back of J.D.'s neck, only to taste a mouthful of pure muscle. Constricting hard on the front leg, J.D. felt bone and muscle tenderize under the sharpness of his canine incisors. In mere seconds the fight was won, and his bloodied opponent stumbled backwards in agony. J.D. then quickly turned to help his nearest ally.

Don Ristorante was getting overpowered by his opponent when J.D. approached from behind and clamped down on the shar-pei's hind leg, cracking bone within his vice-like jaw. Instantly yelping in pain, the shar-pei quickly ran away in anguish.

Meanwhile, Courage endured a relentless assault from his old nemesis, Kira. His bloody muzzle was clogging his nostrils, making it difficult for him to breathe, yet he was still standing. Just as Kira poised to seize Courage's throat, she was smashed into by a dump truck named Junkyard Dog. The force of his muscular head colliding with Kira sent her airborne like a canine acrobat awkwardly attempting her first cartwheel.

Regaining her bearings, Kira shook her head, attempting to clear the fog that clouded her thoughts, only to be struck again by the very same dump truck. Before she could recover, J.D. seized the opportunity, pinning her down with his powerful body.

"Call off your hounds!" He ordered, looking down at Kira with an unyielding gaze that displayed his seething anger, yet her pride would not budge. Getting no response from the struggling shar-pei, he bit her right ear, taking off a chunk of skin in the process. This time Kira yelped in pain, causing her fellow dogs to take notice.

"Back off! Or the next one's at her throat!" J.D. barked, with warm, metallic-tasting blood trickling from his mouth onto her face as he prepared to place her in his grip of death from which no dog could escape.

The Shar-pei's hesitated in the absence of clear leadership, yet they were still loath to back down. Then, with sudden quickness, J.D. gripped Kira's neck within his massive jaw and began a slow, constricting squeeze.

A feeble screech from their leader, prompted her fellow shar-peis to collectively retreat. Seeing Kira laying helplessly underneath the powerful jaws of J.D., moments away from certain death, each shar-pei took a step back, removing themselves from their opponent.

With Kira's neck in his grip of death, J.D. held strong until the shar-peis completely backed away from his pals. Then, loosening his hold, he cautiously withdrew from Kira, offering her freedom once again. The Pitbull then licked his lips and with a tongue coated in fresh blood, he issued a final warning. "Next time I won't be so nice."

As the defeated shar-peis slinked back into the shadows, the Howlers, bloodied and bruised, gathered together. “Thanks for saving me back there!” barked Don Ristorante as he nudged close to J.D., examining him for wounds. “You’re a tough little dude. How’d you learn to fight like that?” he asked

“That’s all we do at home. I learned early on; you gotta fight to survive,” J.D. explained to the bulldog.

Assessing their injuries, the hounds discussed their first scrap. “How’s it feel to get into your first fight?” Don Barbecue asked as he looked over Courage’s gashes and bites.

“I was sure getting clobbered, but at least I survived!” he answered sarcastically while licking his wounds.

It was now late in the day and the last glimmer of fading light was barely visible above the city buildings as the hounds began their long trek back home. With a few sore muscles and cuts to lick, they leisurely circled their way around the junkyards, being sure to avoid them in the dark of night.

Finally, reaching their vacant lot, the Howlers settled down for the night. Sleeping on top of his hidden treasure, Courage fell right to sleep. Tomorrow, he would see Apple again. Throughout the night, thoughts of her filled his dreams like a soothing lullaby.



## CHAPTER 14

### A BODYGUARDS LOVE

**L**ike the breathing of a great slumbering giant, a lone, rumbling tune echoed back and forth from the neighboring picket fences as if they were in the bottom of a deep valley. Erupting from deep within Don Garbage's chest, the unyielding snoring from this great bear of a dog was hypnotic to the weary hounds, and stood as a constant reminder of his overbearing presence. The sound remained undisturbed as the eastern sky turned from black to blue then to orange—until finally interrupted by the strengthening sunlight tapping an awakening tune upon his eyelids.

With dawn breaking, Don Garbage was the first to open his eyes. The sudden calmness, now foreign to the Howlers served to rouse the other dogs from their slumber. Gathering together they scampered up and down the nearby alleyways rummaging through trash cans for breakfast before deciding to head for canine park in anticipation of a morning swim.

*What a great morning for a bath!* Thought Scrappy before diving straight into the refreshing waters of Canine Lake. The rest of the pack followed, turning the once peaceful lake into a canine water park.



J.D., however, would have nothing to do with Canine Lake. “What are you guys, crazy?” He barked, watching the hounds run amok in the water. Not once in his short life had J.D. been swimming, nor had a bath for that matter. His dirt-encrusted pelt emitted a sour smell like a rotten apple, of which he was blissfully unaware.

“You seriously need a bath,” quipped Don Ristorante. “I didn’t want to say anything yesterday, but you really stink!”

J.D. stood with his paws in the water, drinking in his fill, refusing to venture further. “You’re nuts if you think I’m going in there,” he replied with a disgusted look upon his face.

Just as he finished his sentence, the dump truck was crashed into by a garbage truck: Don Garbage had snuck up from behind and plowed right into him, knocking J.D. into the water. A dog melee ensued and J.D., overwhelmed by the Howlers, had his first bath.

The hounds enjoyed the afternoon at Canine Park, reveling in their newfound freedom and reflecting on their days of reckless abandon. Beholden to no man and liberated from cages and dread, they now yearned for adventure.

Courage seized upon the moment, “Help me,” he pleaded, grabbing the attention of the pack. “I need your help, all of you. Ironcoat told me to seek out the Elder, but I can’t do it alone and I have no idea where to begin.”

And so, their quest began. With their paws immersed in the waters of Canine Lake, each hound made an oath to Courage; to help him search out this mythical Elder, a hound no dog had ever heard of. Their next stop would be another visit with Knowledge hoping he would have an idea of where to begin.

Wanting to invite Apple on their journey, Courage dug up his treasure—the bag of ribs, and headed off for a surprise visit. Navigating Apple’s neighborhood, Courage spotted the vigilant Doberman tracking his every move. This time, however, Von Schnitzel didn’t bark a warning at the approaching Great Dane.

Courage reached the fence and presented the bag to Von Schnitzel who was lazily resting on a well-worn patch of grass. “Barbecued ribs, just as I promised!” Courage declared as he placed the bag by the fence. Extracting one rib at a time, Courage passed them through the chain links to the eager Doberman who, overwhelmed by the tantalizing aroma, could hardly contain his excitement. It had been years since Von Schnitzel had savored such delicious ribs.

In between bites, his mouth full of meat and bones, von Schnitzel mumbled his gratitude. “Dank you so much Courage. I knew you’d come back! Apple is in da backyard as ve speak, her owner’s von’t be home for hours.” Chewing on another bone, he offered instructions. “Da best vay to jump over the fence is through da alley. First, climb onto da dumpster—it’s always closed. Then jump into da yard from there. Dat’s da easiest vay I can think of, but you’ll need to find your own vay out.”

“Thanks, Von Schnitzel!” Courage enthusiastically responded, as he grabbed the rib bag and headed around to the back. From the alleyway, he found the dumpster and carefully climbed on top. Then he bravely leaped over the fence, entering a completely new world.

Landing on a soft patch of green grass, Courage was impressed with the meticulous landscaping. A large waterfall made from rocks and boulders, led into a small pond, serving as a centerpiece of the yard. A large doghouse, adorned with hay stood imposingly before the opposite fence like a child's playhouse.

Resting comfortably under the shade of a nearby tree, lay the beautiful Afghan hound. Running to greet her intruder, Apple's attention was immediately drawn to the bag.

"For you, my Queen," Courage proudly barked as he bowed and presented her with the gift.

The tantalizing aroma of the savory meat wafted through the air, making it hard for Apple to confirm her excitement. She couldn't stop licking Courage's face while her body swayed back and forth as if she was aligned on opposing counterweights. "What an amazing surprise! It's wonderful to see you again. How in the world did you figure out where I lived?" she asked.

"Don't be mad, but I followed you home yesterday" Courage admitted, looking a bit concerned about her reaction.

"Mad? Not at all, my dear prince," Apple replied with a warm smile. "But how did you get past von Schnitzel? He's my faithful guardian."

"I knew the password; Von Schnitzel and I have become friends," Courage explained, relieved to see Apple's welcoming response.

Smiling at him, warm and grateful with a touch of flirtation, Apple bent down to inspect her gift, and Courage relaxed under the shade of her favorite tree. He was content just being within her presence.

Apple devoured every last bit of the meaty ribs, and afterward, the playfully chased each other around the yard like two school children at recess. They wrestled together, rolling and tumbling until they were both a slobbery mess. When they had exhausted their playful energy, Courage share his recent adventure's with Apple, starting with how he met his new friends and their ingenious escape plan led by Sergeant Tank. Courage then bragged about living the life of a free dog without a master to bind him and of all the good food they've enjoyed while venturing through the city. He described their vacant lot and how enjoyable it was to sleep under the stars without a fence to confine them. Courage told her about the library and the ancient tales Knowledge shared about the never-ending war between dogs and cats. He also discussed his quest to find the Elder and their upcoming journey into the forest. Finally, he asked her to come with him and join the Howlers on their adventure.

"Come with me," he pleaded, his eyes filled with anticipation. "We'll have a great adventure! How about it, would you like to come along?"

Apple took a moment, to reflect on his proposition. She thought of how dull her life had become and how much she craved a life of adventure—a natural desire for all dogs. She also thought of how intrigued she was by this handsome Great Dane who appeared in her life like a valiant knight on a quest for glory. She considered the years stretching ahead if she remained in that very backyard, unchanged. It was at that moment when Apple made her decision.

"Yes Courage, I will go with you!" she heard herself saying out loud.

“If da fraline is going, I’m going, too!” Came a voice from over the fence. “I must make sure nutting happens to Apple.” Von Schnitzel barked, sticking his nose through a hole in the cedar fence that separated the two yards.

“Krause,” Apple retorted. “I can’t let you go; I don’t want you to run away from your wonderful home. Besides, I’ll be safe with Courage protecting me!”

“You couldn’t stop me from coming along even if you tried!” he insisted. “Besides, I made un promise to your parents a long time ago. You see Apple, I’m your guardian. I have un responsibility to vatch over you und protect you vit mine life.

“I vas un orphan once, I was alone and abandoned in this very alley. Your folks found me, dey helped to raise me, und taught me dat ve are all needed, even ven ve think ve’re vorthless. Every dug has un purpose in life, especially if we allow ourselves to love und be loved. A dug who loves is da most precious thing in da world.

“Dat’s vat your parents taught me, Fur Face und because of dem, I am a better dog today. I love you vit all my heart, like a little sister.

“I also respect Herr Courage und I respect him. He keeps his word. I’ll travel vit you to da ends of da earth. Besides, every dog needs un adventure, no?”

“Very well said!” Courage chimed in with a snicker. “Fur Face huh? Sounds like Schnitzel’s given you a nickname! Let’s get moving; I have some friends for you both to meet,” he barked with enthusiasm.

With Apple leading the way, they jumped onto her doghouse then leaped over the front fence where they found Von Schnitzel waiting for them. Running off towards Canine Park, Apple paused at the end of the street to take one last look at the only home she had ever known. “Goodbye sweet home,” she barked, nostalgia engulfing her emotions.

With endless games of chase, tag, and keep-away to be played, the Howlers was enjoying a wonderful time at the park. When Courage, Apple, and Von Schnitzel crossed onto the grass, Snacks eagerly greeted them.

“I see you brought some friends,” she remarked with a friendly smile. “This must be the beautiful Apple you’ve been talking about. It’s a pleasure to meet you. And who’s your friend?”

“I’m Krause Von Schnitzel, you may call me Von Schnitzel. I’m here to make sure nutting happens to Apple on dis grand journey of yours!”

“He’s my bodyguard,” explained Apple, interjecting with a chuckle. Courage then introduced Apple and Von Schnitzel to the Howlers, which just grew two dogs larger.

Before setting off for the library, the hounds agreed they needed to find dinner first.

“I know of a great Italian restaurant,” declared Don Ristorante. “Their trash cans are always full, and they have fantastic sausages! Sometimes the cooks even hand out some goodies, how about it hounds?”

With an eruption of barking cheers, it was agreed upon and the Howlers were now going out for Italian dinner.

Navigating the alleyways, they reached Little Italy just before sunset, and Don Ristorante led the way to his favorite restaurant. The Howlers carefully made their way to the back of the restaurant, where they spotted a set of sweet-smelling trash cans.

“Don Garbage, you take care of the trash cans. Keep as quiet as you can; we don’t want to upset the owner,” Don Ristorante ordered. “I’m going to the kitchen to see if I can beg for a few of those delicious sausages!”

Don Garbage knocked over the trash bins as gently as he could. Swarming in behind, the dogs began their feast.

Being raised in a strict home, Apple had never eaten from the trash before and she was unsure how to approach the monstrosity of dirty, half-eaten foods in front of her.

Courage the gentlemanly dog, tried his best to make it easier on her. With his massive Great Dane snout, he selected the tastiest foods and delivered them to her, piece by piece. She was impressed with the unique flavors it offered, much different than her usual dog food. Italian food in particular, was a delightful treat for her canine taste buds.

“Don Ristorante is a genius!” Snacks barked through a mouthful of pasta while her pals stuffed themselves with various leftover dishes.

Moments later, Don Ristorante proudly emerged from the restaurant’s rear doorway with sausage links dangling from his mouth. He confidently strolled up to Apple, showing off his ingenuity before presenting her with one of his prize sausages. “For you Madame, he best sausage in the city!” he boasted.

Despite being stuffed with flavorful pasta, she still found room for an Italian sausage. “Thank you,” she replied after scarfing it down and licking his snout with gratitude. “I can see why you enjoy life on the streets so much.”

After a short-lived attempt at cleaning up their mess, the Howlers embarked on their trek to Fox Dale Library.



## CHAPTER 15

### THIRTEEN ON A QUEST

**T**he night was a blanket of darkness, shrouding the library in an eerie silence. Overhead, a half-moon peeked out from behind the low scuttling clouds that invaded the night sky. These clouds, iridescent by nature, announced their presence by reflecting the city lights with a glittering shade of silver.

Below, Fox Dale Library shone timidly, with light from a few select windows radiating outward through colorfully decorated stained glass windows. The library seemed alive, glowing from within, much like lit pumpkin on Halloween night.

Huddled together behind the library, the Howlers relaxed in the comfortably thick grass while Don Ristorante made his way through the doggy door. Knowledge was nowhere to be found, so the don patiently jumped from couch to couch, sniffing and scratching at each cushion, testing for comfortability, until finally settling on a well-used sofa in the corner just below a large, elaborately decorated stained-glass window. His snoring soon engulfed the room, keeping the others awake.

With his mouth lazily hanging open as if he could not get enough air, Don Ristorante was awoken by a wet nose nudging him in the side. “Looks like another stinkin’

vagrant's sleeping on my couch!” Knowledge playfully scolded, with a heavy bark to awaken the sleeping hounds. “Just kiddin' ol' buddy. It's nice to see you again; did you come for more history lessons?”

“Actually, I brought the pack with me, and we're heading off for the forest in the morning.” Don Ristorante explained. I was hoping we could crash here for the night—that is, of course, if you don't mind our company too much. I was hoping you might have some good maps to get us going in the right direction.”

Knowledge contemplated for a moment, “I can probably help you out. Bring the gang in and I'll see what I can find,” he said before heading back into the library.

By the time Knowledge returned with a large map cradled in his mouth, the hounds had each settled into spots on the comfortable couches or on the padded floor. “I see the Howlers has grown bigger and prettier,” he remarked with a friendly smirk, noticing Apple and Von Schnitzel resting on a nearby couch.

“This is my girlfriend, Apple and her bodyguard, Krause Von Schnitzel. They've decided to join us on our journey!” Courage explained with pride as the two dogs rose from their places to greet Knowledge.

“It's a pleasure to meet you both,” Knowledge responded as he approached closer to sniff their scents. That's when he caught a whiff of that irresistible aroma once again. His nose, now a canine baseball glove, instinctively attempted to catch the unfamiliar odor as it pitched past him. It took Knowledge a moment to isolate the smell, study its potency, and contemplate the origin. Like a catcher at home plate, he then caught hold of the fragrance so acutely that he could taste it—it was the foreign scent of unabated freedom, of Italian food, of pasta, and *yes, yes that's it, sausage!* He had caught a whiff of it earlier when he discovered Don Ristorante napping on his favorite couch. Now it was unmistakably painted upon Apple's muzzle like the color of honor, if such a thing could be deciphered into a specific hue.

*These are free dogs, he reminded himself. Bound to no man. How do they fill their days? What wondrous foods they must hunt. Or would scavenge be a more correct term?* Knowledge pondered.

Pulling from his internal speculation, Knowledge gathered himself, cleared his mind and throat with an audible ‘harrumph’ and spoke to the group of hounds. “Everyone gather around; this is a map of the forest that should help you on your travels,” Knowledge declared, spreading the map on the library floor.

Knowledge had heard many rumors about the Elder over the years and had a good idea where the Hidden City and the mystical temple might be located. After dissecting every possible location on the map, he helped the Howlers plan their best route through the forests and deep into the mountains.

“You've got to be careful and make sure to watch each other's backs,” he cautioned. “There've been a lot of reports in the daily paper of animals attacking hikers,” Knowledge warned while he folded the map and tucked it onto a shelf for safe keeping. “Lately, these attacks have grown more frequent. Mountain cats have even been spotted at the entrance to Goblin's Forest. Just be careful and never stray away from the pack!”

With the hounds of the Howlers slowly drifting off to sleep, Don Ristorante and Knowledge stayed up together studying maps of the terrain while reminiscing about the

old days and their longstanding friendship. These two were best of friends who'd known each other most of their lives.

"Why don't you come with us?" Don Ristorante suggested. "It'll be just like old times. We could use your help, old buddy; you're the smartest dog there is."

Knowledge hesitated, remaining in thought for a few moments. His old bones and long-lived routines made him apprehensive about chance. "I'm not sure my legs could handle such a journey. I've lived here in this library for so long, Donny." Knowledge was the only dog who ever dared to call Don Ristorante, Donny. "However, it does sound like a good adventure. Let me sleep on it."

"We'd be honored to have you with us," whispered the don before he drifting into a deep slumber.

Knowledge however, couldn't fall asleep so easily. The lure of adventure, the camaraderie of the hounds, the smell of freedom, and even the thrill of the unknown was enticing to him. Looking at the hounds sleeping alongside each other like a canine jigsaw puzzle pangs of jealousy consumed his thoughts.

*Surely, they're dreaming of tomorrow's adventure*, he thought, a smile creasing his lips. *They all look so happy*. That's when he decided to join the Howlers on their journey, wherever it might lead.

solidifying his decision brought calmness to Knowledge, allowing him to finally relax; sleep quickly followed.

A bullying wind ran amok outside, slapping at the windows, causing the hounds to wake as darkness gave way to the gloomy side of dawn. With the first light of day breaking through the windows, Courage took a moment to address the pack. "Today marks the beginning of our journey and I'm honored to have each one of you travel by my side. Our destination is the Hidden City and together, we'll face whatever challenges come our way.

"Knowledge has decided to join us, so let's all make sure to watch each other's backs. Let's make Ironcoat proud and show the world what the Howlers are made of." He barked.

The Howlers now comprised of thirteen members: Courage, Don Garbage, Don Ristorante, Don Barbecue, Sergeant Tank, Tracker, Racer, Scrappy, Snacks, J.D., Apple, Krause Von Schnitzel and Knowledge. These companions were now preparing to undertake an adventure of a lifetime, following the quest of one dog, Courage, in search of the legendary Elder.

Remembering the words Ironcoat told him not too long ago; Courage knew there was a greater purpose to his life—he was destined to accomplish something great. More importantly, he had twelve good friends who believed in him and were willing to follow him anywhere. He was now learning about something special that he had not known before, a unique feeling, a sense of belonging that was called the camaraderie of pals.

# PASSAGE II

## IDENTITY

*Up through lands dark and tall  
The Howlers travel, thirteen in all.*

*Across the meadows vast and wide  
Eager hounds' journey with unyielding pride.*

*Beneath shimmering stars and clouds at play  
Over rocks and rivers, they find their way.*

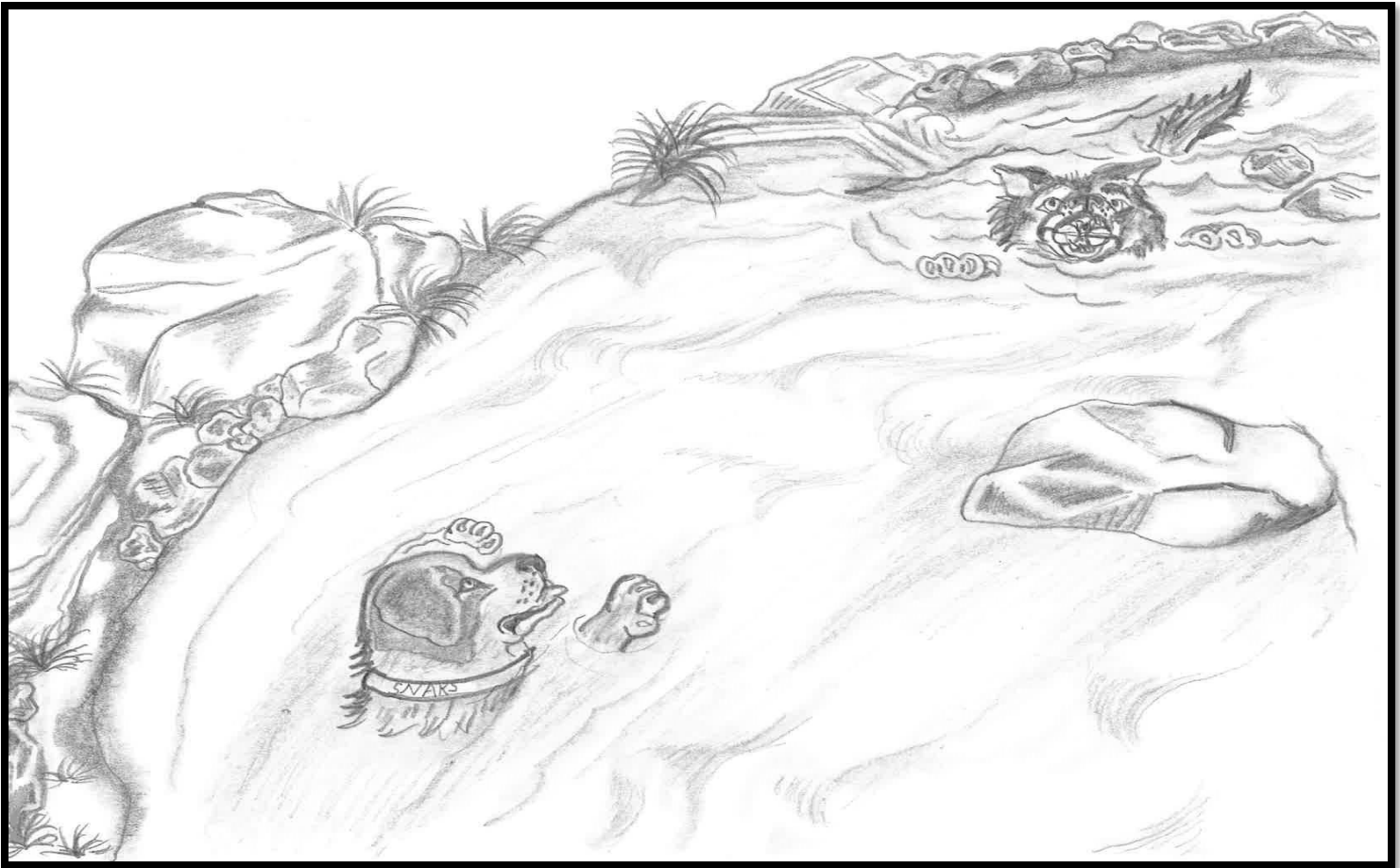
*Deep in the mountains, far away from man  
Is where they encounter the Ridgeback clan.*

*Seeking the Elder, wisest in the land  
Rhody comes along, offering a helping hand.*

*Courage follows his nose up a mountain so bleak  
Where the beautiful Butterfly awaits, atop Eagle's Peak.*

*Together they journey to the fabled Hidden City  
Where the Howlers discover its primitive beauty.*





## CHAPTER 16

### HERO IN THE RIVER

**T**he day arrived bright and dry with a cool breeze that caressed their fur pelts as the Howlers ventured into the lower hills just outside of town. Aromas from the many bushes, flowers, and wild grasses combined with the scents of a menagerie of animals tickled upon their noses—the hounds were awakening to the beauty of the wild.

With a multitude of sights and smells frolicking upon Courage's senses, it was the harmony of the birds that he captivated him. Safely perched above him like loquacious children, these winged creatures happily engaged in conversed in a melodic language that was magic to his ears, flooding his heart with joyful emotions.

Courage couldn't help but feel his life had been shallow—unworthy of recognition or perhaps missing an essential key yet now he sensed that it held something of infinite value. He stole a glance back at the elegant Afghan hound following him, and in that moment, he realized that she was the missing piece that had transformed the equation of his life. His existence was no longer just simple, but had become rich and significant, filled with the promise of adventure and the warm embrace of love.

Roaming over gentle hills on their first day, the dogs were too entranced by the wild to travel with speed or venture too far. Enamored with the peaceful surroundings, such a drastic change from Raventon's dangerous streets and unfriendly alleyways, their tails wagged in combined unison, an angry army of fly swatters in motion. That night, the Howlers found a comfortable patch of grass to rest on, perched on an overlook that gazed upon the city below. In the distance, the lights glimmered as one, like a child's night light in a darkened room, reminding them of the warmth and protection they were leaving behind. This radiant glow of civilization's last outpost seemed to chase the stars from the night sky.

Soon, the crescent moon joined them by casting its silvery glow upon the city, as the pack settled down for the night. Knowledge, an excellent storyteller, then took the opportunity to tell his favorite fairy tale. He told the story of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, and inflected his voice with changes of accents and drawls for each character. The hounds listened raptly to his every word, their minds transported to a foreign realm. Told by a true believer of fairy tales, it was a story that filled them with dreams of distant, magical lands.

"No matter what troubles you encounter in life," Knowledge told them after recounting the tale. "Obstacles can be overcome if you have the desire and the will to succeed. But first, you must carry strength and confidence within yourself to conquer hardship, no matter how difficult your path may be!"

Hearing Knowledge's words of wisdom, the hounds slowly drifted off to sleep, collectively pondering their individual futures.

Courage and Apple nestled closely, a comfortable silence fraught with meaning naturally extended between them. Sneaking a sideways glance, he found himself gazing at the delicate disarray of blondish fur that framed her muzzle. Each strand was like an unruly sea spray crashing upon the unyielding lighthouse of her long, pointed nose.

Apple's eyes were closed as she lay trustingly against him, feeding from the warmth of his body. Courage cherished the moment. With her by his side, he felt the weight of destiny upon him, as if the universe had conspired to bring them together.

Closing his eyes, Courage remained acutely aware of her presence, the way her body returned his heat, enveloping him like a warm blanket on a cold night and the unmistakable smell of her breath when she exhaled. Courage's body seemed light as a feather, yet his heart felt heavy as stone.

Von Schnitzel was nearby, a steadfast guardian, but at that moment, Courage was the sentinel, guarding Apple against the dangers of the forest. Deep in contemplation, Courage's mind drifted to the recent past, to another danger of the forest; an adventure in the woods that started out innocently enough but turned out horribly wrong. He recalled that terrifying black Panther who came upon him like a vengeful storm spewing hatred as a skunk sprays its stink. That feline face was forever chiseled into the hard rock of memory that weighed down his mind.

While lost in this haunting memory, an intermittent yet persistent tune drifted into Courage's ears, rising above the soothing snores of Don Ristorante, drawing his attention. Sniffing the cool night breeze, the familiar scent of rain permeated the air. The earthy odor

of wet grass, now damp with a slight sheen of water surrounded their encampment, yet he remained warm and dry; his canine fur proved a valuable raincoat.

The anonymous melody sounded again—a haunting hoot-hoot echoed from above, only to dissipate into the silence of the forest. It was a soothing sound, as if a friendly voice were calling out, “Hello... Hello...” No hound stirred, except for Courage, who raised his head to the trees, his ears like radar triangulating the source of the sound to a cluster of spruce trees residing nearby.

Courage remained still, his keen sense searching the shadowy tree line for any signs of life or threats lurking in the darkness. His gaze fixed on a lower branch of a tree, where he spotted a large bird hungrily peering down as if it were debating upon which hound to eat amongst a thirteen-dog buffet. The hoot-hoot continued once again and Courage felt like the chosen meal, a hound fillet for this feathery beast.

The bird suddenly plummeted from the trees, its wings fully outstretched as it floated gracefully across the clearing, riding the nocturnal wind with absolute silence. Initially frightened, Courage quickly calmed as the bird flew away from the sleeping hounds and simply relished the moment, watching this silent flight in selfish awe. Around him, nothing else moved, as the world held its breath for the first warm touches of sunlight.

With the arrival of dawn, Sergeant Tank was already up and about. He roused Courage with a playful nip to his rump and a low, intimidating growl. “Morning Scarface,” he whispered with a sly grin, “It’s time to hunt for breakfast. Get off yer butt and follow me!” the war-hardened German shepherd was eager to showcase his skills to the inexperienced troops.

Courage quickly shook off his drowsiness and followed the Sergeant; mirroring the soldier’s every move, mimicking his sniffs and movements. Courage was determined to learn from this canine of war, a hound trained by humans to seek out enemies in hostile terrain. If anyone could navigate the hills in search of breakfast, it was Sergeant Tank. If there was food to be found, he would unearth it.

Shadowing the German shepherd as if he were a baby duck swimming after its parent, Courage found himself in the middle of a monstrous berry patch. “I guess you found breakfast,” he barked with amusement.

Grunting in response, Tank’s head was already buried deep inside a berry bush. Trying his first wild berry, Courage was impressed with the ripe taste of the fruit. After a few minutes of picking out and eating berries one at a time, they decided to share their discovery with the rest of the pack. Courage snapped off a branch loaded with berries to take back to Apple.

Returning to their camp, Sergeant Tank roused his troops with a morning chorus of howls, his version of reveille. Then, the drill instructor began his work. “Get up you lazy hounds!” he barked with thunder rolling off his tongue. “We’ve got work to do! The early bird gets the worm, the second mouse gets the cheese. We found breakfast just up the way. Get a move on!”

Surprisingly, no hound complained about the morning hoopla. They were all too excited for the day’s adventure to begin.

Courage presented the berries to Apple. “A present for you my lady. Give ‘em a try, they’re pretty good.”

“I see you’ve had a few,” she smirked, staring at his red cheeks and gums. “You’ve got leftovers all over your face.”

Eating every berry they could find, the hounds were please with their first breakfast in the forest. “Remember, these berries are eaten by bears all the time. We need to get out of here before they come and attack us,” barked an overacting Knowledge with a mouthful of berries; looking like a dog that was just busted for breaking into the cookie jar.

After devouring all the available berries in the patch, they hastily made their exit, fleeing as though pursued by an imaginary wild bear that was surely preparing to pounce upon the thieving hounds. They continued their march along the foothills, with Goblin’s Lair National Forest now in sight. The highest peak of the mountain range stood tall on the distant horizon, serving as their guiding star. Putting their noses to the air, the Howlers marched onwards. Unsure of where they were headed, they somehow hoped to find their way.

Climbing over the last of the hills, the Howlers encountered their first obstacle. On the map, Knowledge had assumed it was just a mere stream, weak and tiny. However, the reality proved far different. Ahead of them an unfriendly river hissed like a cat, warning of imminent peril.

Tiptoeing dangerously close to the river's edge, Apple stood respectfully, bowing in reverence; a trivial form giving homage to the mighty beast before her. Dipping her delicate paw, Apple tested the water. “It’s freezing! How are we going to cross this?” she cried, her eyes wide with concern.

Following the river, they journeyed upstream for miles in search of a safe crossing but the watery behemoth offered them no easy path.

When they began testing the river for a weakness in the current, Knowledge was hit with the realization that he would have to swim across; panic, like a rising cake in the oven, quickly grew within him. He knew how to swim, all dogs were natural swimmers; but Knowledge was a fragile hound, thin in bone and advanced in years. He was prepared for an adventure in the woods, yet he had not anticipated crossing treacherous river currents. He was also concerned about the difficulty of carrying his glasses across, which he was blind without. Knowledge had no choice but to carry them in his mouth while traversing the riverway.

Courage, however, provided a solution to Knowledge’s predicament when he spotted a potential crossing point. Three large boulders jutting out halfway across the river formed a partial bridge, from there it was a smaller gap to the other side. Eager to impress Apple with his bravado, Courage was the first to attempt the feat.

Without hesitation, Courage galloped forward like a valiant knight and jumped from rock to rock frog-like, before lunging from the last boulder. Splashing awkwardly onto the river, he disappeared into the rapids before popping out head first and swimming effortlessly to the opposite side. Shaking off the water, he barked triumphantly, urging the rest of the pack to follow.

One by one, the hounds made their way across the make-shift bridge, each testing their bravery. Snacks however, in an effort to prove her toughness, chose to bypass the boulders and wade along the river’s edge where she was gripped by a cold shock, numbing her body. However, the girthy Saint Bernard continued on without hesitation, paddling her

way across the full extension of the river where the pull of the current forced her downstream.

Struggling against the relentless flow of the river, panic momentarily attacked until her paws found purchase on the rocks below. Gripping rock and sand with her massive, webbed claws, Snacks marched through the shallows until scrambling up the embankment on the opposite side. Content with her feat, she shook the icy water from her drenched fur and triumphantly rested on a patch of dry grass, waiting for the rest of the hounds to cross.

Knowledge cowered in the rear of the pack, watching with trepidation as Snacks battled with the current. His heart dropped every time her head bobbed in and out of the rapids. However, his fear was not for Snacks because he knew her to be a dog of remarkable strength. His fear was for himself. Surveying the current ahead, Knowledge knew this was to be no easy task for an older hound like himself.

Seeing the last of his pals make the jump from the final boulder and swim across to safety, Knowledge soon found himself alone on the wrong side of the river. He had no choice but to forge ahead. Gently clutching his glasses within his mouth, Knowledge cautiously hopped from rock to rock, his leaps measured and tentative. Upon reaching the final boulder, he stared across the treacherous water, a wellspring of anxiety brewing within him.

The current appeared formidable to the elderly Border collie. Pausing, not willing to take the final leap, he looked towards his pals who were cheering him on from the opposite bank. Rallying his courage as if he was a football player entering a game, Knowledge closed his eyes and dropped from the boulder. Fearful of losing his glasses which were tucked smartly in his mouth, he did not jump.

Knowledge's head was the first to bounce out of the water as he struggled to right himself. Instinctively, he thrashed about in the chilly water causing his head to rise, affording him the opportunity to breathe. Calling upon every muscle he possessed to work in unison, Knowledge desperately paddled across the waterway, but the current proved too much for his frail legs and he was swept away like a log on the water.

The Howlers, terrified of losing Knowledge, followed anxiously along the shoreline desperately seeking an opportunity to grab him.

Instinctively, without concern for herself, Snacks jumped back in from her position downstream. Known for their rescue abilities, Saint Bernard's had a reputation for selflessness and bravery. She moved without hesitation to rescue the Border collie.

Her strong, oversized paws, guided her into Knowledge's path. Snacks could see him helplessly flailing about within the thralls of the surging current; his small body no match against the strength of the river. Paddling hard, Snacks bumped right into Knowledge and together they drifted downstream side-by-side.

"Climb on my back!" Snacks yelled with a soothing calmness. "I'll get us to shore, just hold on tight!"

Fearing for his life, Knowledge clung to her back with fragile paws, the cold water numbing his limbs. Snacks valiantly battle this relentless current while her only focus was to get Knowledge to safety. Her colossal head dipped beneath the water's surface with every stroke, yet she paddled relentlessly, driven by her single-minded goal.

Hearing the cries of encouragement from the nearby Howlers, Snacks knew she was nearing the safety of the shoreline. Mere seconds felt like hours in this epic battle of drenched fur and whitewater rapids, yet Snacks never faltered. She was confident knowing that every stroke took her closer to the shoreline. Finally, her massive paws slammed into a thick, muddy gunk, causing her heart to skip a beat with relief before she carefully climbed onto dry land, Knowledge still clinging monkey-like to her back.

Once safely on the embankment, Knowledge jumped down and swiftly placed his glasses on his face before licking Snacks with gratitude, his eyes glistening with happiness. “Thank you so much old girl, you saved my life!”

Snacks simply collapsed to the ground, surrendering to the exhaustion that overwhelmed her body while the hounds surrounded her, barking praises for her heroics.

Having enough adventure for one day, the Howlers found a comfortable stretch of grass nearby to sleep on for the night. The ground was covered with plump, thick grass, as yellow as lemons and as dark as indigo, providing a luxurious natural mattress beneath them. Moss, ferns, and delicate wildflowers graced the ground, making it appear untouched by human hands. The city, now a mere firefly of light in the distance, faded into the blackness of night, barely visible from their serene campsite.

The hounds gathered closely, the soothing hum of the nearby river filling their ears with a gentle lullaby. They shared stories of past adventures and, as they listened to Knowledge’s recitation of his favorite tale, they were transported to a world of magic and enchantment, far removed from the wilderness around them. “There once lived a princess named Snow White who was the fairest in all the land...” Knowledge’s storytelling voice cast a spell over them, binding the hounds in a world of wonder and imagination.



## CHAPTER 17

### GUARDIANS OF THE FOREST

**T**heir glossy pelts gleamed in the early morning light. Packed tightly together, the hounds were interlocked and nuzzled against one another in a massive canine game of twister. Like cows seeking shelter in a winter storm, they huddled together to shield themselves from the drizzling rain that invaded the woods overnight. By morning, however, the rain had dissipated, and the sun, a sleepy child risen from its crib, cried with an angry, orange hue as the one remaining cloud smiled down upon it like a happy father.

Courage was pulled from his sleep by the rat-a-tat of a woodpecker, the most raucous of birds, while a morning breeze dried his fur and set the forest leaves aflutter. The fresh scents of morning flowers wafted through the air, a heavenly aroma to his nose, while the sounds of the wild played like music in his ears. Looking about, his pals were already awake and eager for another day's travels.

After marching for a mere league, the Howlers encountered an insurmountable barrier of thick, massive trees towering over a fence-like series of densely packed shrubs that extended from left to right for as far as their eyes could see. These trees, dark, broad and gnarled, stood closely together. Their tops stretching upwards for what seemed fifty

paces and stretched outwards so far that their branches intermingled as if they had grown from infancy holding hands. The thick, crooked trunks of these forest giants reared angrily from the shrub-infused terrain, creating a formidable wall of dense greenery that seemed to mock the wayward hounds, challenging them with its sheer size—as if saying, “Dare you try to pass!”

Goosebumps formed under their fur and doubt bore into their collective consciousness. Staring at the medieval castle-like wall of wooden monstrosities, they felt insignificant, as if no city-raised hound could comprehend its vastness in a lifetime of imagination. They had stumbled upon Goblin's Lair National Forest.

With no apparent doorway marking the entrance, the Howlers approached wearily, searching for a safe pathway inward. Goblin's Forest was a foreign kingdom teeming with life; birds posted as watchful sentries sounded the alarm of invaders in their whistling tongue from the secure refuge of treetops; squirrels scampered amongst the trees, claws noisily scratching at the bark, impersonating enemy archers discussing strategy; fast-moving insects mimicked poisonous arrows, attempting to pierce canine skin; and watchful eyes scowled from hidden shadows acting as observant nobility directing the peasant masses.

A treacherous wind carried their scent to the towering forest giants, prompting the trees to shake their green branches in response, mimicking restless knights readying for battle. This forest, a mythical kingdom full of ancient life and treachery, was not to be taken lightly—danger lurked at every turn of the trail.

Under no one's command, as animals of free mind and spirit, this was the first obstacle to test the mettle of the Howlers. Looking amongst each other for any hints of fear, each hound paused, searching within themselves, deciding whether to flee as an individual, or stay as a group. Not one dog ran. Intently surveying the wall of greenery ahead, a few previously hidden passages through the brush became apparent. These narrow pathways, low to the ground, were designed for smaller creatures to enter.

Sergeant Tank quickly understood its design. “This is an army barrier,” he announced. “It can stop an army in its tracks. Everyone keep quiet, I'd hate to announce our presence the moment we enter.”

They were all tense and jumpy, unsure of themselves as they peered about. Looks of dread consumed their faces until Sergeant Tank took charge. “Well boys, it's now or never. Follow me if you dare,” he declared before choosing a shadowy path beneath the trees and cautiously stepping forward.

Behind him, hounds filed in one after another, their eyes darting nervously as they watched for threats or signs of movement. The path was smooth as a freshly mowed lawn and clear of thorn bushes and debris, being well-traveled by those who called this place home.

Emerging from the tunnel-like entrance, the Howlers found themselves immersed in a dense forest teeming with life. Gathering together, they paused to assess their surroundings.

Above them, scattering about like children at recess, rambunctious squirrels were voicing their disapproval of the canine intruders. Too tempting for Scrappy to resist, he quickly jumped after the nearest tree climber.



In response, a hidden army of these squirrels swiftly raced to the treetops for safety, barking back in defiance, the alarm was sounded.

In reaction to the commotion, birds sang of invaders before taking flight, casting a shadow in the sky as they retreated deeper into the woods.

“Well that was smooth Scrappy!” Barked Sergeant Tank, his words not fully exhibiting the anger he felt. “We might just as well have rung a stinkin' doorbell!”

With their presence announced, an eerie calmness consumed the air; as if the forest itself held its' breath. The crunch of twigs beneath their paws being the only sound to break the silence.

Suddenly, a red-tailed hawk, screamed a warning as it looped wide circles on a thermal high above. Then, Courage heard the unmistakable sound of a bark in the distance which was swiftly acknowledged by another. Someone knew they were approaching...

Leading the pack, Don Barbecue was the first to spot a mysterious hound defiantly blocking the path ahead like a stone statue, strong and proud.

“Who goes there?” The stranger questioned. The hound was an unexpected enigma who sat comfortably on the pathway nonchalantly licking his front paw as if he didn't have a care in the world.

This muscular dog had a short, reddish-tan pelt with a thick line of fur that appeared in reverse along the center of his back like the upturned blade of a broadsword. This ridge of hair was a distinct mark found in only one breed of dog: a Rhodesian ridgeback.

Hearing no immediate reply, the hound dramatically raised himself on all four paws and lifted his nose to the air, taking in the city-smell of the Howlers. His furry eyebrows slanted inwards while his ears bent backwards behind his head and his black-rimmed lips curled into a wolfish grin. “You are entering the land of the Hottentot Tribe. State your business or prepare for the consequences!” The hound barked, a strong rumble escaping his throat like distant thunder warning of impending doom.

Don Barbecue, stepped forward to greet this mysterious canine. “We only wish to travel through this land and mean you no harm. We're seeking a great temple rumored to lay hidden beyond this forest.” Don Garbage explained.

“The great temple!” The ridgeback retorted, his voice fierce, his stance imposing. “Those who seek the temple are no ordinary hounds. What is it that you seek at this temple?”

“We seek the Elder!” announced Courage as he gallantly stepped alongside Don Barbecue.

Pausing momentarily as if in contemplation, the ridgeback then arched his back and a deep hound-dog howl erupted from his lungs, echoing through the woods.

“Oooooowwwwoooooouuuuhhhh,” he howled. Moments later, a pack of dogs, surrounded the Howlers in a fighting formation, poised to attack.

“Get ready,” Don Barbecue whispered, stating the obvious, fire brewing under his skin. Don Garbage stepped forward to stand beside Courage and Don Barbecue, presenting a tenacious threesome of large, muscular hounds who were not to be given ill-regard by

any creature. Acting as a spearhead, they were a buffer—a protective barrier for those behind them.

“What is the purpose of your visit with the Elder?” The ridgeback questioned.

“I seek only to learn the Arts of the GoMan Warrior!” Courage stated, a deep strength resounding from his bark.

A light breeze graced Courage’s shoulders as his senses registered a shift in the air. Then suddenly, like a lion displaying its fangs, the ridgeback smiled, his canines glowing with warmth. “You travelers are free to cross our lands.

“It is our duty to guard the forest. Our feline enemies roam bravely throughout these lands.” He announced with a growl before shrugging his shoulders in a feeble attempt to brush off his worries.

The scars Courage bore burned with an angry heat at the mention of wild cats, it was a constant reminder that would never fade.

“Our scouts have spotted their camps high in the hills and their army grows larger with every changing season. We’re eager to attack, yet our forces are quite meager in comparison; we would surely be slaughtered.

“Living here in peace for many generations, our clan has become the heartbeat of the forest—we protect these lands with our very lives. My name is Rhody; this is my clan!” he barked with pride.

“I have heard many rumors of the Hound City and the GoMan Elder who lives within, yet I’ve no idea where this city exists. Come join us and share in our food,” Rhody demanded.

Following Rhody, they soon entered into a lush, secluded valley. Traveling down the hillside between two mountains, the visitors were continually greeted by Rhodesian hounds who appeared from a multitude of small huts dispersed throughout the valley. Made from trees and branches stacked together, these huts were naturally camouflaged and barely visible against the brush.

Reaching the center of the valley, the Howlers were led to a large fire pit straddled alongside a peaceful stream where logs were hissing and cracking under the flames of a massive fire. Glowing cinders could be seen rising in the smoke then floating away like newborn fireflies while cooks milled about preparing dinner. An aroma of sweetly cooked fish swiftly pelted their noses as they neared.

Rhody sat atop a felled oak tree at the head of the firepit and invited the hounds to make themselves comfortable. The reddish glow of the fire cast a warm light upon Rhody’s muzzle which served to emphasize his pleasure of having guests at the fireside. A dinner of sweet-smelling salmon was served and new friendships were formed. As darkness engulfed the valley, the glow of the fire draped the surrounding trees with a dancing light that cleverly scared away mythical brutes who dwelled in the obscure shadows of the night.

When a lull in conversation crept its way through the crowd, Knowledge took advantage of the silence to tell another one of his stories. This one was called, “The Legend of the Briard.”

“A long time ago, during the fourteenth century A.D., a time known as ‘After Dog,’ “there once lived a hound of noble heritage named Brizen, who grew up in a little-known

French town. Brizen, a rare breed of dog called a Briard, was incredibly devoted to his master, Sir Aubrey Montdidier, as are collared dogs are.

Late one night when Brizen was out chasing fowl as he often did—for it was his greatest passion, when a burglar entered their estate and Brizen's master was killed by the intruder. After discovering his master's dead body, guilt weighed heavily on the hound because he was out chasing fowl when he should have been protecting his master. In his grief, Brizen would not leave his master's side and faithfully stood guard until his body was finally buried in the ground.

“However, unbeknownst to the intruder, his scent lingered in the house for days and Brizen, sitting by his master's side, memorized every aspect of this particular odor.

“Soon after the burial of his master, Brizen embarked on a quest for vengeance. He memorized the scent of the intruder and tracked him all the way across town to a filthy home amongst the dredges of society. This man, whose name was Macaire, stole a horse and fled towards the castle with Brizen in pursuit. Upon reaching the castle walls with Brizen ferociously nipping at his feet, Macaire admitted his crime and pleaded to the king's mercy for help from this beastly dog that was dead set on revenge.

“The king, looking to resolve the situation with all the fairness that this killer deserved, ordered that a battle should take place between the man and the dog.

“Word of this pending battle quickly spread and soon a crowd had formed to bear witness to this event. That afternoon, amidst the fairgrounds, the battle commenced and Brizen attacked Macaire from every possible direction, offering no quarter as he relentlessly bit and chewed at the man until he was laying just before death's doorstep. But, in the end, Brizen could not kill this pitiful man and ultimately chose to let the killer live. Macaire was then imprisoned by the king where he lived out the remainder of his life in disgrace.

“Brizen, was crowned Sir Brizen D'Aubrey in honor of his master, and became a loyal companion to the king himself who was overwhelmed by the loyalty this dog showed. Brizen then lived a long and fruitful life at the Royal House of the king.”

“Where he ate barbecued ribs every day!” barked Courage.

The warriors of Hottentot Valley enjoyed hearing a wonderful tale from such a far-off place. Watching the moon skate across the starry sky, Sergeant Tank and Rhody stayed up discussing the future of their respective clans. Finding warm nooks around the fire, the rest of the Howlers slept peacefully through the night, with random snoring intermittently assaulting the tranquility if for no other reason than to reassure one another of their furry companionship.

The day started cloudy and damp, but a cool morning breeze cleared the air and stirred the last of the dwindling smoke from the fire's embers. Rhody was the first to rouse the sleeping pack. “Apples for everyone!” he barked, after waking them with an eager morning howl.

Deep in the valley there was a collection of apple trees where the tribe gathered their apples, a fruit not one Howler had eaten before.

“Not too bad,” Courage remarked after devouring his first apple.

After breakfast, Rhody made an announcement, “The Howlers are undertaking a quest that I sense is vital for all dogs. If we can contact our fellow canines in this Hidden City, perhaps we can form a stronger alliance against our enemy. I’ve accepted the invitation offered to me by Sergeant Tank, and I will be honored to travel with the Howlers.” Offering goodbyes to his clan, Rhody promised to return.

During the days that followed, days of clear sky and good weather, the Howlers now with Rhody in their mix, covered many leagues. Knowledge had a good idea of which direction they were headed; however, Courage had caught the faintest whisper of a scent. Courage recalled Ironcoat’s words, *When in doubt, your snout will point it out*. By putting every ounce of energy into his canine intuition and now vibrant sense of smell, he was doing just that. Like a compass directing him onwards, his nose pulled him straight towards the highest peak in the distance, while the pack followed, trusting his instincts. He knew the temple was out there, he could sense it! He just wasn’t quite sure where.

At the day's end, as the distant sun settled behind the forest trees, the pack reached the base of Eagle’s Peak where the weary hounds made camp next to a small stream by the slopes above. They quenched their thirst from the stream and each hound tried their best at fishing, however, no dog was quick enough to catch a fish except for Rhody. Like a magician performing his simplest trick, the Rhodesian Chieftain effortlessly plucked trout from the water as if he was repeatedly conjuring rabbits from his magic hat. Having no fire, they enjoyed dinner of raw fish without complaints.

After dinner, dusk yielded to darkness the hounds gathered closely for warmth, and Knowledge eagerly shared another story with the hounds. “Let me tell you the story of Stormcat,” he began. “Stormcat was a young fawn, that’s a horse for those of you who don’t know. He grew up in the southern racetracks of Kentucky, where his father, a retired champion racer, watched over him. Despite being born into a proud racing family of thoroughbred racers, Stormcat, smaller in stature than his older siblings, found himself stuck in the role of a pace horse for the faster runners.

“Being a pace horse was a source of shame for young Stormcat. These horses raced daily against quicker competitors, were given fewer days of rest and were required to race twice a week. The pace horse's duty was to sprint out of the gate and maintain their speed, encouraging the superior runners to overtake the lead when they tired—boosting the confidence of the superior runners.

“Despite the bullying he faced from the faster racers, Stormcat gave his best effort every morning on the track. With each race, he became a stronger sprinter, gradually narrowing the margin of losses. Then, one day, Stormcat didn’t lose at the end of the race. He channeled the memories of being a pace horse as a fiery determination to win. From that day; forward, in every race, Stormcat became an unbeatable force, never forgetting the long journey he had undertaken.

“That year, he outraced his father, a champion racer, and won the Kentucky Derby, the largest horse race of the year. After this triumph, Stormcat retired to live a life of luxury as a former champion.

“This story just goes to show you that any animal can thrive in this world. You just need to give your very best effort every day, and good things will come your way!”

Affectionately rubbing behind Apple's ear, sniffing her scent, Courage cuddled close while the two absorbed Knowledge's every word. Journeying through the wild on this grand adventure, their love deepened with every step.

Von Schnitzel was always a stone's throw away, never letting Apple out of his sight. For Courage, it was reassuring to know his girlfriend was always being protected.

Soon, most of the hounds were piled on top of one another, sharing comfort and warmth as they slept. With the nearly full moon casting its glow, Courage, still awake stared restlessly at the needle-tip star lights while mindlessly deciphering one dog's snoring from another. Mostly, Courage's attention was drawn to his still-tingling nose which had directed their focus upwards since their approach to the nearby mountain.

In the morning, as a fiery red dawn emerged from the face of the far horizon, a purple-bluish black eye of rain punched towards them. Courage, noticing the impending storm, quickly led the Howlers nose-first up the towering mountain in an attempt to outrace the thunderstorm. Their once simple journey now became treacherous, each step requiring more strength than the last. Yet, step by step, they traveled upwards into higher elevations, reaching a point where only barren rock and dirt remained—no trees survived at such a high elevation.

At this lofty height, the advancing storm clouds became level with the Howlers and attacked at their rear like a formidable foe. Eagle's Peak, named for an eagle-like rock formation dominating the mountain's summit, was now a short distance away. Courage's nose relentlessly guided him them forward as a cold rain angrily bombarded them as if the hounds were a tiny parade of furry vehicles being overwhelmed by a relentless car wash.

Nearing the top of Eagle's Peak, gusts of cold wind assaulted their fur, biting at their wet skin like an army of invisible ants. What began as a simple task, had evolved into a perilous mission and reaching the mountain's pinnacle became a test of their endurance—each dog comprehended the magnitude of the challenge.

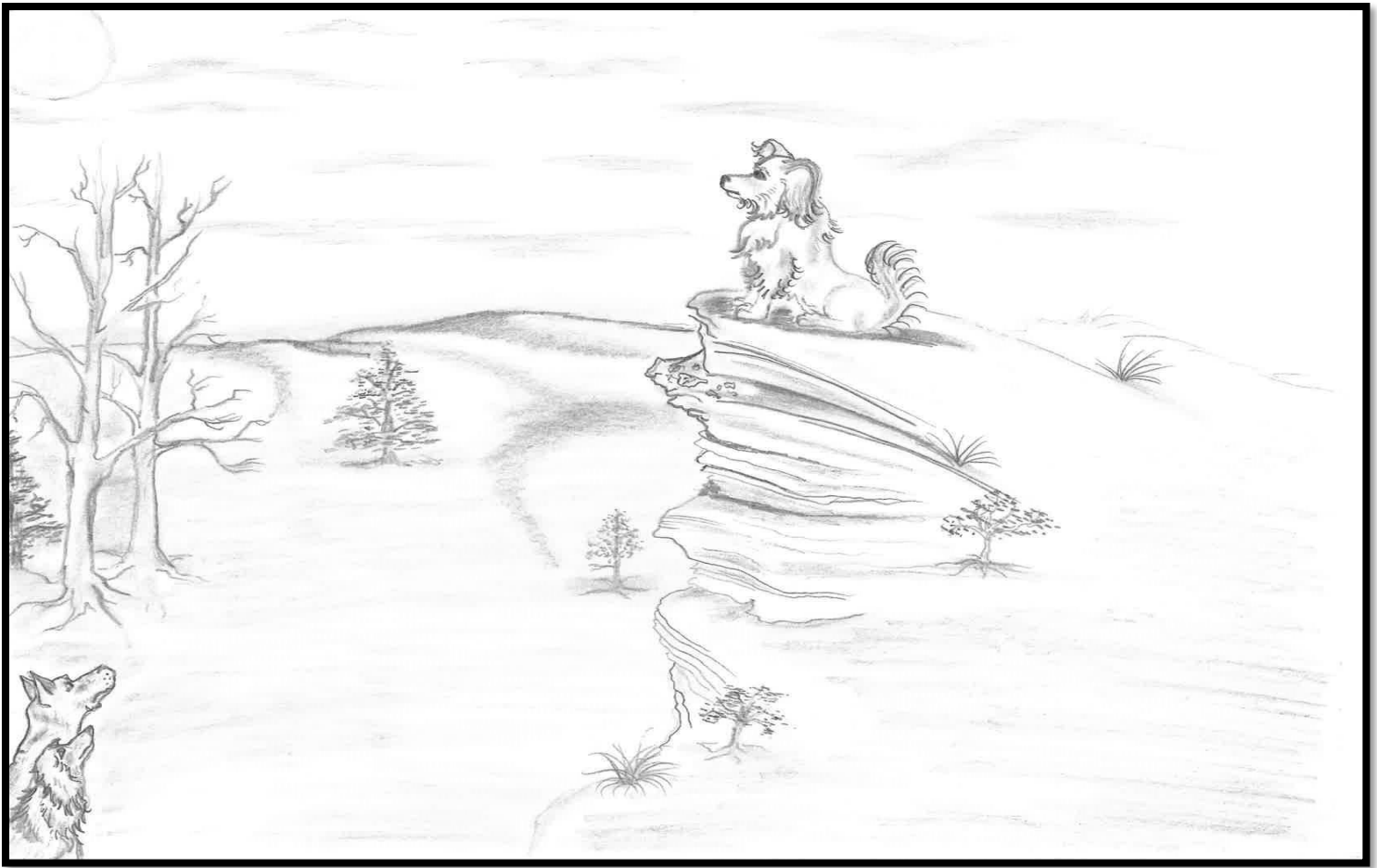
Within the Howlers, there was no clear authority, no alpha dog, or hierarchy; they were a group of equals relying on each other for their collective survival. They were a team, with some dogs being slow and unsteady, others quick and sure-footed, some gray-headed and tired, and others were young and spring-stepped. Yet, all were eager and hopeful, working together not competition, but marching collectively as a pack.

Don Ristorante, the bulldog, with his stumpy legs pumping, tongue lolling, and jowls swinging, suffered the most through the climb. Beside him, Knowledge hiked at a slower pace, offering words of encouragement to push them along. Working as a group, all fourteen dogs scampered upwards.

Snacks moved over to support Don Ristorante and began pushing him forward with the strength of her muzzle upon his hind quarters. Courage, noticing Knowledge's lagging pace, joined in to help, nudging him forward with his lengthy muzzle, practically lifting Knowledge's rear end off the ground with each forceful movement.

The cold, hammering rain, the steepening slope and the thin the air at the high elevation attacked their canine spirits, yet the hounds persisted. Finally reaching the summit of Eagle's Peak, the Howlers celebrated their achievement like football players reaching the end zone together. Climbing above the tempest, they entered into a peaceful world of blue skies. In defiance of the vanquished foe, the victorious dogs barked and

howled into the greyish cloudburst still raging below them. Licking snouts in joy, they rubbed against each other's bodies in their own version of canine high-fives, these newfound pals reveled in their combined triumph over their opponent.



## CHAPTER 18

### MISCHEIVOUS BUTTERFLY

**P**erched peacefully, bold and vigilant, atop the highest rock of Eagle's Peak like a canine statue to the Gods of Canis, sat a happy-faced toy spaniel. Courage, the first to notice her, stood in awe, with a trusting gaze, sensing no need to warn the pack. Apple, following his stare also took notice of this mysterious dog. Soon, all the hounds were captivated with the spaniel as an eerie silence engulfed the pack as if a predator had cast its gaze upon them.

This stunningly beautiful toy spaniel had petite legs supporting a body no larger than a football. Two large ears, resembling the wings of a butterfly, framed a small head that made her appear capable of taking flight at any moment. Nonchalantly rubbing her freshly-licked front paw across her nose, she stole glances at Courage, with a clever, theatrical demeanor.

In a distinctive French accent, she barked, "About time you made it young Courage! My name is Papillion, it's French for butterfly. I've spent my day guiding you towards me. I was sent by the Elder to bring you to our city. We always knew you would find your way here. But first, introductions."

Papillion, holding her head high, momentarily closed her eyes, reaching out with her mind to absorb the energy emanating from the Howlers. Upon opening her eyes, she

locked gazes with each member of the pack, naming them individually. “Scrappy, the Playful; Snacks, the Hero; Ristorante, the Sneaky; Tank, the Strategist; Tracker, the Howler; Knowledge, the Wise; Rhody, the Chief; Von Schnitzel, the Bodyguard; Apple, the Elegant; Racer, the Swift; Barbecue, the Plunderer; Garbage, the Powerful; and J.D., the Dump Truck. It is wonderful to meet you all.”

Placing her full focus upon Courage, Papillion took in a gulp of air and lowered her snout down to the ground in a slow, respectful bow. “Long life to you, young Courage, the Scarface,” she proclaimed, before pausing her motions, awaiting a response from the Great Dane.

Courage, unsure of the appropriate response, simply bowed his head in a fumbling imitation of her gesture.

“I am proud to be the second GoMan Master to meet you, young Prince. I am sorry about Sir Ironcoat, the Noble Knight, he lived a glorious life. And because of his sacrifice you have made it here, my young prince of hounds. Now you must follow me!”

Papillion quickly jumped from the mountain’s zenith and scampered down the backside of the rocky slope. Her tiny shadow stretched out before her as she skillfully glided her body down the mountain.

The Howlers followed in her wake, the ravaging storm weakened by the mountaintop now a distant memory. “She looks like a butterfly,” Courage remarked to Apple with a snicker as he followed Papillion.

Sensing Courage’s thoughts, Papillion slowed her actions, waiting for Courage to catch up. “With practice, you will discover the many advantages of the GoMan Arts,” she imparted. “You’ll learn to run effortlessly, fight fiercely, and communicate without speaking a single word; all by freeing your mind and trusting your instincts. You have much to learn, my young Scarface.”

The afternoon turned into a cold, dreary evening as the Howlers, now under Papillion’s guidance, descended the mountain. Their breathing, laborious in the higher altitudes, became easier the further downwards they traveled, while their breath, like ghostly souls escaping into the night, caught hold of the frosty air and floated away to the unknown. By the time they reached the base of the mountain, the darkness had enveloped them, and Papillion found a cozy spot along an open field of grass next to a soft stream, to camp for the night.

Huddled closely together to gather warmth, the hounds boasted to Papillion about their travels and before long, Knowledge was intent on telling another story.

“This is the story of the Keeshond,” he began. “At the onset of the French Revolution, the patriotic fighters found themselves without a mascot. These patriots were led by an adventurous man named Kees DeGyselar who had adopted a hound during his travels in the Arctic Circle the previous year. This canine, accustomed to the cold, boasted a thick pelt of rough, white fur.

“During their first battle of the war, the Battle of Torgay, this loyal dog charged into the fray alongside his master. Throughout the ensuing chaos, he valiantly defended his master from the enemy soldiers. After the fierce battle, he was discovered laying protectively over his fallen master grievously wounded from numerous injuries. Rushed to the hospital, the hound eventually recovered from his wounds. His bravery became



legendary among the soldiers, and he was bestowed the title of mascot to the patriotic fighters, earning the name of Keeshond, meaning the hound of Kees, in honor of his late master. As the patriots emerged victorious and established the nation of France, tales of the heroic Keeshond resonated throughout the land. Revered and celebrated by the whole nation, toasts were raised in his honor wherever he ventured. Supplied with the best of foods, he lived out his days in contentment as a cherished memory for generations of French.

After the story, Courage turned to Papillion and asked, “Would you tell us about the Elder?” he asked.

Papillion rose from her resting place to jump upon a tall rock, her silhouette framed against the forest’s edge. Her authoritative presence commanded the attention of the assembled hounds. “Gather around and I’ll tell you about the Elder,” she declared.

“First, it is essential to understand the significance of the Pharaoh hound, the oldest known breed in our canine history. Paintings on ancient cave walls show these hounds hunting gazelles dating back to 4,000 B.C.—that’s four thousand years ‘Before the Cat,’ a time when cats ruled our world,” she growled expressing the anger she felt.

“Over the centuries, Pharaoh hounds evolved into skilled hunters, revered by humans and esteemed by royalty. They were prized possessions of the finest kings of ancient Egypt, standing as vigilant guardians in their courts. Upon the passing of these monarchs, depictions of Pharaoh hounds were etched on to tomb walls, believed to accompany the nobility in the afterlife. The Egyptians revered these hounds, granting them an honored status akin to royalty, ensuring their journey to the afterlife was one of dignity and respect.

“The Elder, is the oldest and wisest hound in our tribe. He is our leader and has resided over our hidden city for as long as anyone can remember. His intellect has given many innovations that help to run our city so efficiently today.

“As a GoMan Master, the Elder dedicated his life to studying the GoMan Arts of Tooth and Paw—an ancient, powerful force that guides a canine through battle against the most lethal of adversaries. This GoMan legacy was formed thousands of years ago when the Tibetan hounds were battling our greatest enemy, the wild feline.

“It was Ironcoat’s duty to bring you to the Elder my young Courage. We have long anticipated your arrival. There is peril ahead; we must prepare ourselves. The felines are gathering together again and becoming a stronger force. It is our duty to stop them!

Staring at Courage with unwavering eyes, Papillion concluded, “The time for action lies ahead, yet rest peacefully for now. There’s ample time for training, especially you, young Scarface.” The Elder will guide and prepare you. He has foreseen your significance in our struggle against the feline menace that scourges our lands.

With these parting words, Papillion jumped off of her perch and kneaded a thick bed of grass before settling down. “Goodnight everyone, ensure you rest well, for tomorrow holds new adventures.” She barked before attempting asleep.

Despite Papillion’s parting words, Courage had an overwhelming sense that all was well within his tiny world. All around him were his best of friends huddled together under a luminous summer night in the midst of a grand adventure, hearts aglow with hopes and dreams. A glorious knight who defeats an enemy might say afterward that fortune was on

his side. This night, as Courage peacefully fell asleep, a rare felling enveloped him—a sense that fortune had chosen to smile upon him.

While the Howlers slept, Don Ristorante snored angrily in the darkness, a constant reminder that he had not disappeared into the cloak of darkness. Responding in kind, a beastly wind growled across the land, carrying woeful shrieks through the shadows.

Contently sleeping amongst this harmony of sounds, Courage was dreaming about the same Great Dane, yet, this time she was engaged in battle against an enormous mountain lion. Every muscle in his body strained as he tried to help, yet he was once again frozen in place. Enduring this nightmare, he watched in horror as this fellow Great Dane fought the feline all alone. Shrieking like a banshee, Courage instinctively howled into the night. “Ooooooowwwwwoooooo!” he roared.

This howl stirred the hounds, scaring Apple in the process, who licked his face reassuringly, quickly reminding him mother-like, that it was just a dream. Moments later, from somewhere far off in the distance a long, sharp cry echoed in response from across the land. Someone was acknowledging him, perhaps they heard his cry... or even felt his pain.

Resisting the impulse to run wildly into the darkness in search of the answering cry, Courage remained nestled protectively next to Apple, his head raised high and ears erect—a canine antennae listening for another reply. Apple’s comforting touch and soft fur draped over him brought peace to the restless emotions running through him.

As dawn broke, promising warmth, the enticing aroma of cooked meat wafting by his muzzle, playing a vicious game with his sense of smell. Looking about, he saw Papillion’s happy face cooking over a campfire like a chef at a restaurant, the fire sending up smoky fingers to scratch against the pale morning clouds. The Howlers had gathered eagerly around, their bellies growling in anticipation. Don Ristorante, the connoisseur of food, sat patiently nearby, eyes intently watching her every move as silvery drool dripped noodle-like from his mouth.

“Nice of you to finally join us Courage,” grumbled Papillion as the reddening sun began its’ early climb. “I did a little fishing and grabbed one for each of you; it’s easy once you get the hang of it,” she bragged.

Courage watched with disbelief. *How can such a little dog catch all these fish.*

After breakfast, Papillion led the way through a narrow path dividing the riverbank from the wilderness. In the distance rose the shadowed shape of a mountain, its giant shoulders shrugging upwards from the forest floor.

Finally approaching the next mountain, she was ready to divulge their destination. “We are headed to my native land.” She told the pack. “I was born in the Hidden City. This mountain paradise is our most valued treasure and needs to be treated as such. Canines have lived there for hundreds of years and have never once been discovered by man or cat. This city is a training ground for our most cunning trackers, our swiftest runners, and our fiercest fighters. Inside this city lies the Temple of Four Paws which is where we keep the historical records of our canine race, our most valuable possessions. I can only imagine what trouble would brew if man ever found our city and learned of how smart we actually are!”

Entering the woods at the base of the next mountain the hillsides were blanketed with trees. On a far ridge, an eagle could be seen floating on the downdraft in search of prey. The hounds soon found themselves surrounded by an abundance of aspen, blue spruce, fir and pine trees. A woodpecker was heard off in the distance pecking into one of these towering trunks in search of a tasty meal. More birds could be heard high up in the branches peacefully singing together as if they were in a church choir practicing their Sunday morning recital. These beautiful sights and sounds mixed together in an untamed harmony that seemed to greet the Howlers with open arms, welcoming the canines into its midst. This forest held the guise of a mythical realm, the kind that only appeared in a Truepaw dream.

Parading through the forest, now fifteen dogs strong, Papillion realized these newcomers would soon be entering the protection of the barking trees. She decided to keep quiet, hoping to give the hounds a little surprise.

The local trees, known as “Barking Trees” have managed to keep cats out of this section of the forest for centuries. Twenty different barking tree outposts were littered throughout this region, helping to keep a strong vigil on the land.

These barking trees are a simple, canine-created concept. They were first designed to take advantage of the feline’s great fear of all things big and loud. The canines built their outposts by using decaying, yet still sturdy, blue spruce trees. At an older age, after a lifetime’s existence, the center of these trees are slowly eaten through by termites who crave the juicy centers much like humans crave the center of an artichoke. Once eaten through, these vertical shafts become well-traversed passageways for squirrels. With the center of these trees hollowed out, the exterior bark and wood still manage to hold the nimble trees together.

By hallowing out a small space at the base of these trees, like a mouse hole in the wall of a house, canines have a protected, concealed fort to keep a watch on the forest. Then, by shaking them from their lowest point, their mouse-hole, these monstrous trees wobble back and forth creating the perception of a moving tree preparing to attack. Next, by barking upwards from the base of the tree similar to how a human uses a trumpet, the sound is amplified outwards until it escapes through the top. This clamor never fails to scare unsuspecting felines. It’s a foolish trick, yet foolish cats always run away in fear.

Papillion knew the lookouts would be ever-vigilant so she eagerly led the hounds towards the first outpost. As the Howlers approached, the first barker, hidden within his outpost, surveyed the approaching pack. Obviously, these trees weren’t crafted for scaring dogs, yet the barker observed Papillion leading the hounds directly towards his tree; he understood her intention.

Slowly, the barker began his work. Starting with a low, drawn out growl, it swiftly escalated into a consistent howl. Then, initiating the shaking, the tree swayed from left to right as if it were alive. The tree’s movement caused its large branches to sweep downwards like the outstretched arms of a walking monkey, nearly scraping the ground as if attempting to strike the canine’s.

Together, the Howlers manifested a state of unbridled shock. The initial rumbling caught them off guard, triggering the first signs of alarm. Then, as the noise increased and the limbs of this wooden monster began to move ape-like, the hounds retreated in fear. Scattering in different directions, the pack immediately disbursed; except for Papillion.

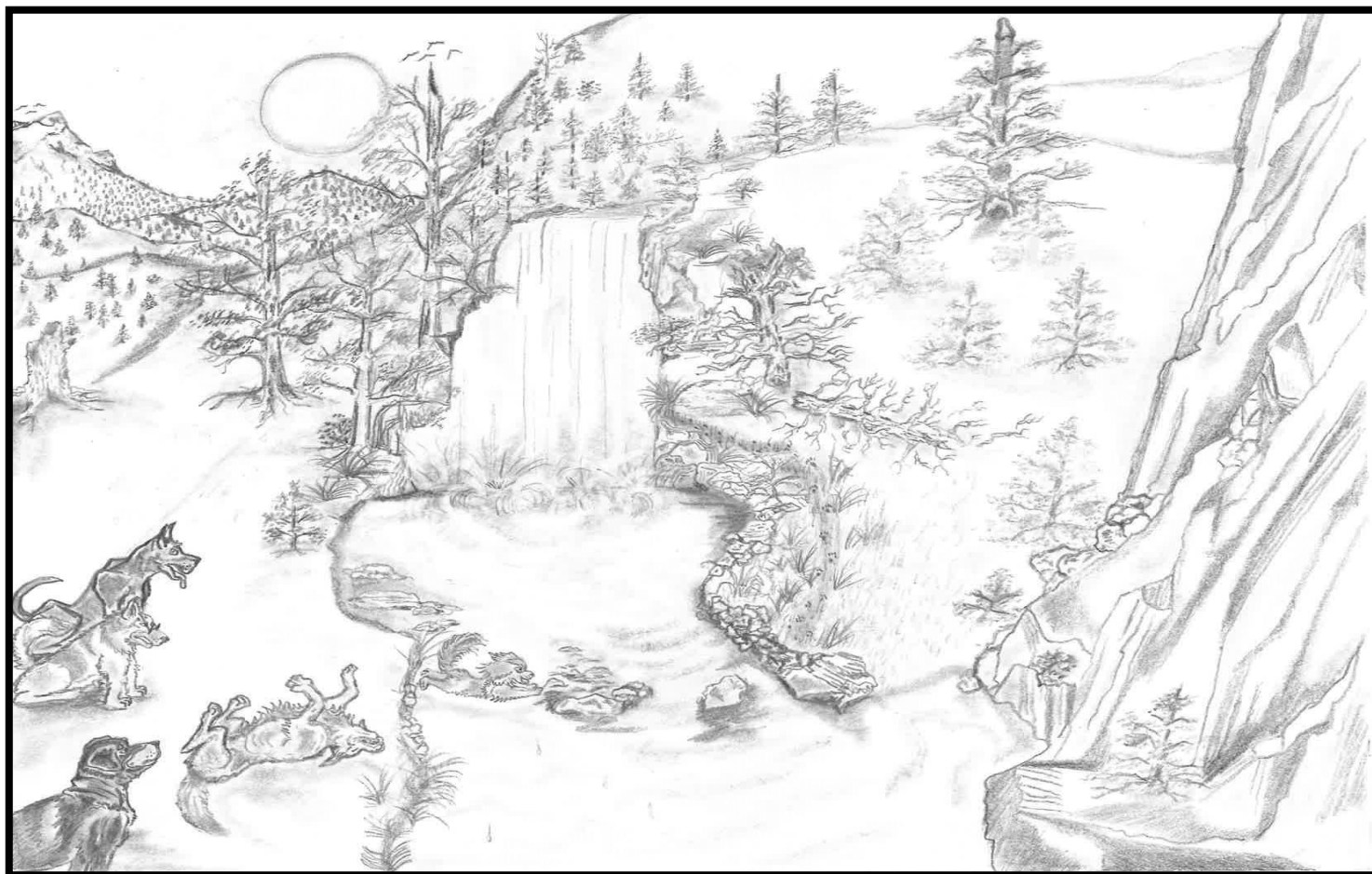
Unyielding Papillion held her ground, reveling in the spectacle. After a moment of chuckling at their expense, Papillion made her move. Triumphantly she walked ahead, one little dog marching forward to face a freakish enemy.

Courage, hiding behind the safety of a nearby tree, watched with awe as papillion sauntered forward without fear. *What is she doing?*

Like a brave warrior facing certain death, Papillion continued towards the ferocious tree. Then, breaking her march, she fell to the ground. Rolling onto her back, Papillion unleashed a torrent of laughter in the direction of the Howlers.

It took a few minutes for the hiding dogs to realize the trickery and cautiously approach Papillion who continued chuckling at their expense. Playfully barking at her in anger, a few of the hounds tackled Papillion and nipped softly at her body. Redirecting their revenge towards the towering spruce tree with a shower of barks and howls, the tree defiantly continued shaking its enormous trunk.

Eventually, Papillion again led them through the forest, still having much ground to cover.



## CHAPTER 19

### UNDER THE WATERFALL

**T**he day came on hot and dry as the sun, luminous and angry, announced itself onto an azure sky. Bending their way through the lush forest, the sensitive paws of the hounds began to discern the dim vibrations of an earthly beast residing in the distance. A changing wind then assaulted them, carrying whispers of impending danger. Pausing to sniff for scents of threats amidst the gusts, the hounds perceived no immediate threat and continued to follow trustingly in Papillion's pawsteps. Progressing further, the forest floor resonated with a low roar as a damp mist infiltrated, engulfing their paws and adorning their furry pelts with a crystalline dew. Regardless of the unknow danger lurking ahead, the pack endured their journey, faithfully trailing the path of the GoMan Master.

Pressing onward, the mist thickened, passing through the tree line to bestow a damp layer on their furry pelts which was repeatedly shaken off. Emerging from the protective canopy of the forest, the hounds entered a small clearing, facing an immense waterfall cascading from a colossal stone mountain as if a giant, petulant child was pouring milk into a morning cereal bowl.

Flooding the moist air with an ostentatious display of its greatness, the raging waterfall discharged clear, emerald-colored water onto a sprawling lagoon below. Enclosed by the surrounding mountain and thick forest, the resonating roar echoed like a thousand chimes clashing. Born from these cliffs, a virulent river, plunged hungrily downwards, nourishing the land beyond. Formidable boulders tilted out of the river at unforgiving angles, bearing witness to the cascading furor.

On the near side of the lagoon, beavers diligently maintained the walls of their dwelling, a patchwork structure above the waterline that created a concealed walkway. In the trees, birds called back and forth to while squirrels hollered accusations at the intruders. The lagoon ebbed and flowed like ocean waves, reflecting the sun's caress in between ripples. The scene before them shimmered with an earthy pandemonium, a living painting on nature's canvas.

Papillion stood proudly at the edge of the woods, basking in the external beauty of her home. Behind her, the Howlers hesitated, captivated by the enchanting spectacle. Discretely, barking three times, Papillion announced her presence. In response, a beaver stopped its busywork to raise its head from the water to survey the woods, attempting to locate the source of the sound. Observing Papillion and the Howlers, the beaver quickly disappeared underneath the waterfall.

Moments later, the beaver resurfaced, executing an elegant dive from the lower rocks into the lagoon, showcasing aquatic talent fit for the Olympic synchronized swim team.

Muffled from behind the waterfall, three distinct barks echoed in reply—Papillion received her permission to proceed. She then traversed across the rocks with ease, gliding over the makeshift bridge like a canine butterfly. Halting before the waterfall, Papillion turned towards the pack, encouraging them to follow. “The beavers are our friends!” she barked.

One by one, the pack cautiously scurried across the pathway, enduring a relentless mist that saturated their fur. Reaching the end of the wooden bridge, they found safety on a rocky ledge, near the base of the waterfall.

Gathering the Howlers together, Papillion explained, “These beavers serve as our early warning system, alerting us to any danger at our doorstep. Next, we have this waterfall and the tremendous amount of water it brings down upon the land. We know cats hate water and would never risk venturing underneath such a massive waterfall. Finally, we have our three watchdogs, whom you’ll meet in a moment. Follow me if you dare!”

Passing beneath the waterfall, they entered a spacious cavern adorned with a multitude of low-hanging stalactites that dripped salty water onto them like a room full of leaky faucets. The concussive sound of the waterfall overhead colliding onto the bay below echoed through the cavern like a thunderstorm, the immense roar was deafening. Piercing sunlight filtered through the waterfall, casting a beautiful bluish-green hue against the

rocky backdrop. Following Papillion, the hounds progressed to the rear of the cave, proceeding through a small, unobtrusive tunnel. Initially pitch-black the pathway gradually became illuminated by distant torches lining the walls, weaving mysteriously into the distance.

Marching silently in a single file line behind Papillion, they ventured into the mountain under torchlight. Rounding yet another bend, Papillion was then greeted by the first guard.

“Good to see you again, Papillion,” barked a fierce looking Doberman pinscher who emerged from the shadows. “I see you’ve brought us some new friends. This must be the other Great Dane we’ve heard about,” he said, pausing to stare appraise Courage. “Go on ahead; Apollo and Ramsey are playing a game of chess just down the hall. My name is Mack; it’s a pleasure to see so many new faces entering our city. I hope you enjoy your stay!” He barked with a happy grin spread across his mischievous face.

“What other Great Dane?” Courage asked as he walked by. Receiving no reply, he was met only by a pair of assessing eyes, scrutinizing his every move.

Advancing further, the distant sounds of arguing became clearer. “Check!” Yelled one of them.

“Still playing your favorite game, I see,” remarked Papillion as she approached. “What’s the score now?”

“One hundred twenty-eight games for me and one hundred twelve for Ramsey,” answered Apollo.

“But, I’ve got him this time!” Ramsey barked in retort.

Nestled into a lighted nook along the pathway sat two formidable Doberman pinschers’, with a chessboard displayed between them. Pausing their game to observe the incoming parade, the two hounds sat square-jawed and motionless, silently appraising each member of the Howlers as they sauntered along.

“Knight takes queen’s rook, checkmate!” was heard in the distance after the hounds had passed by.

Turning the next bend, what began as a faint glow in the distance intensified with each pawstep into an immense light that dominated the tunnel ahead. approaching the light, the sun’s rays attacked the tunnel with a fury that momentarily blinded them. Nevertheless, they stumbled forward faithfully entering into a whole new world.

Once their eyes adjusted, the hounds found themselves atop large stone steps intricately carved directly from the mountain. These steps led down into an imposing valley that was cradled by the mountain on all sides, a protective circular bowl. To their right, rows of fruit trees extended as far as their eyes could see, creating a massive orchard, accompanied by large vegetable gardens. On their left, a wall of clear, sky-blue water gently poured from a high cliff onto a large lake, resembling a faucet left open in a giant’s bathroom. Numerous small huts, constructed from rock and dried mud dotted the landscape, surrounding an open courtyard with an immense fire pit. Across the courtyard stood a large stone cathedral with massive steps along the entryway.

Throughout the valley, dogs engaged in various tasks, their shiny pelts glistening in the sunlight. Some gathered fruits from the orchard, others trained in the courtyard like

soldiers on an army base. Smaller dogs repaired huts, receiving supplies from larger hounds on the ground. Canines nipped at the grass or tended to the grounds, creating a well-tended landscape. Opposite the courtyard, a stairway carved along the mountainside ascended upwards, disappearing atop the mountain. Bustling with active hounds of every type, this city operated like a well-oiled machine.

For hundreds of years, no human had ever discovered this hidden paradise where our four-legged friends led fulfilling, productive lives, akin to that of man.

The Howlers stood immovably at the cave's end, glaring outwardly in disbelief. They were collectively dumbfounded, gripped by an overwhelming sense of skepticism experienced only by those who have stumbled upon such an unimaginable place—this city was filled with marvels beyond comprehension.

“I had no idea!” Exclaimed Rhody, his curiosity overflowing. “I’ve lived in the forest all my life and I never imagined that there could be a place this beautiful!”

“I just thought we were going to a hidden temple in the mountain,” remarked Courage, skepticism warring with his consciousness. “I don’t believe what I’m seeing.”

“This is an absolute dream. I bet we could live here forever!” barked Don Garbage.

Announcing the arrival of the Howlers, Papillion let loose with a lengthy howl, “Aaaaaaaaarrrrrrrrrrrrrrooooooooooooo! She roared.

Stopping their work, every dog in the city barked a welcome greeting back which reverberated pleasantly throughout the city. This glorious sound filled every canine, even the smallest of puppies, with a feeling of brotherly warmth, as if they were being hugged by their best friends.

With dogs of every kind running up to greet them, Papillion led the Howlers across the courtyard like a proud knight leading a horde of warriors to his king. The path ahead of led directly to the Temple of Four Paws, casting a shadow over the courtyard. Built with stone blocks pawpicked from the rocky mountainside, it was a massive building with four circular pillars lining the front porch. Carved above the entrance were four large paw prints, symbolizing the front and back paws of the canine race—a rare sight to behold for mere hounds of the street.

Courage immediately recognized its meaning. “This building was meant only for hounds!” he barked.

Directed to find comfortable spots on the lawn just before the temple, the Howlers sat bewildered, admiring its beauty.

“Wait here, I know the Elder wants to meet you all,” Papillion remarked before climbing the steps and entering into the Temple.

All around them, the dogs of the city quietly returned to their daily routines. Each canine living in the Hidden City contributed to the common good, with assigned tasks based on their individual talents and skills. This productive society thrived on interdependence, with each member’s contributions crucial for its overall survival. Like a machine with a thousand parts. These dogs maintained happy, fulfilling lives with no help from the outside world.

Resting comfortably on the grass, Courage observed the organized activity around him, reflecting on the strange turn’s life had taken. The loss of family, meeting Ironcoat,



his new friends of the Howlers, and the daily adventures, Courage had transformed into a different hound than he was before. He could no longer be the simple-minded house dog he once was. Courage was growing up, becoming smarter, gaining knowledge, experiencing real life and creating his own identity. His mind was now opened to countless possibilities, Courage played with this concept like a child with a new toy. Glancing at Apple, now resting beside him, a smile creased his lengthy muzzle as he imagined the wild possibilities of a future with her.

Amidst his contemplation, a tapping invaded his thoughts like a knock on the door of his mind. Instinctively, his senses heightened, the hairs on his back tingled as if a ghost was petting him with invisible hands. Rotating his ears as if they were on a swivel, he honed in on the surrounding environment while his nose scanned the air for signs of danger. Focusing on the Temple, he felt a mysterious connection.

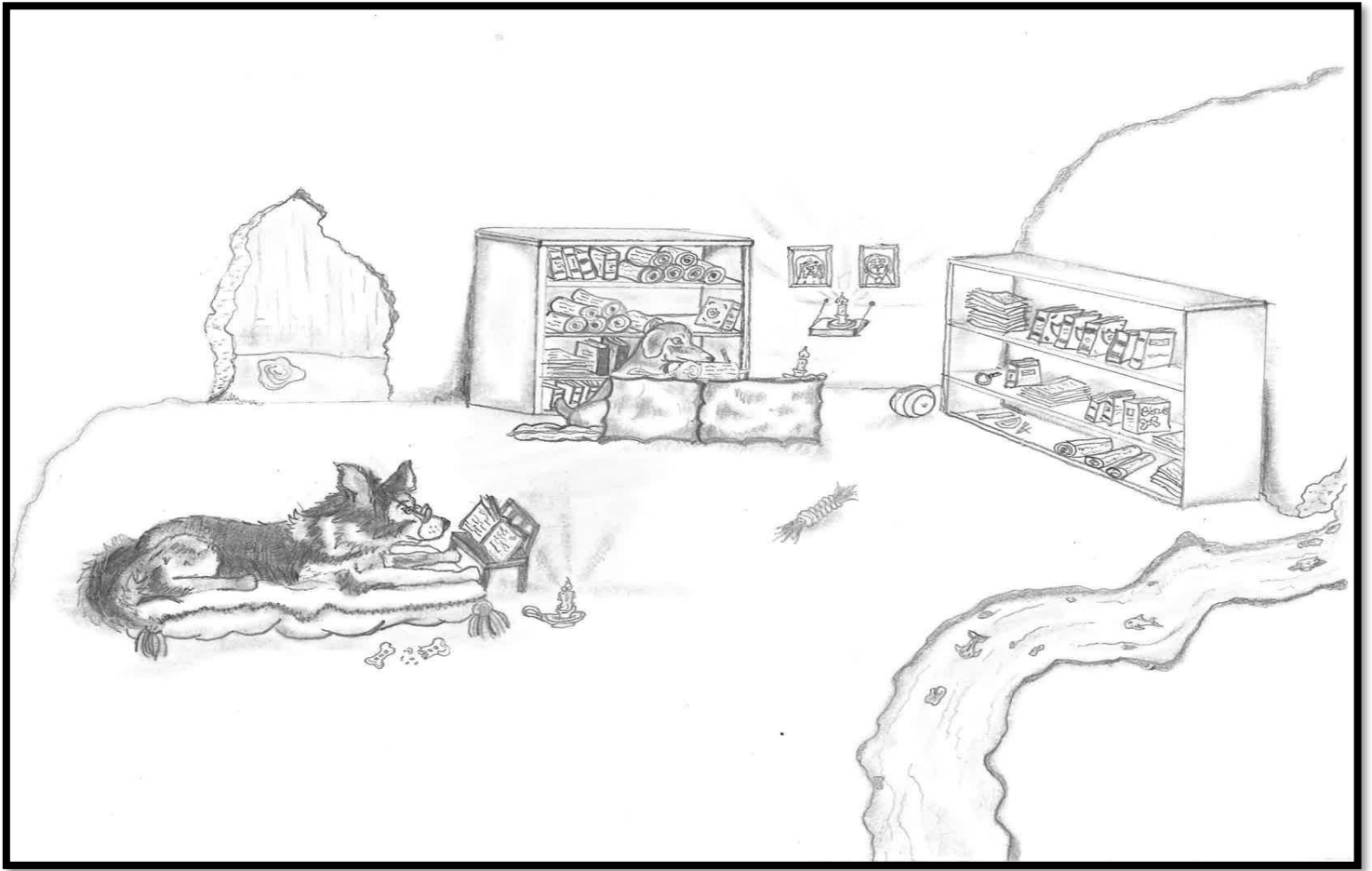
Proud like a lion, a massive horse of a dog sauntered forward, her presence commanding the attention of all those who were near. Feeling as if he were a newborn puppy looking through unjaded eyes for the first time, Courage experienced a moment of clarity—he had seen her before, this vision of white, in his dreams.

Covered in a white pelt with a patch of black on her chest, a massive Great Dane stared back at him. Taking in a deep breath, she lowered her head to the ground in a slow, respectful bow.

“She looks just like you,” Apple barked.

Courage, regaining his composure, whispered to Apple, “I’ve dreamed of her!”

These words sent chills through her body.



## CHAPTER 20

### THE ELDER

**E**yes locked together in unison, a recognition washed over them, a connection was formed. Breaking contact, this beautiful Great Dane looked back towards the temple as a hushed silence descended upon the city. No one moved; all snouts pointed towards the temple in anticipation.

Walking with a practiced grace that made each step appear calculated, a slender, yet muscular dog emerged from the temple doorway. Angular features which seemed to have been chiseled with only the finest of tools reflected his face. His eyes exuded a cunning intelligence, radiating the full extent of his strength from beneath his prominent brow and his tan fur shimmered in the daylight like a desert mirage. With a long neck supporting a powerful, bony head and wiry body that held not an ounce of fat, he looked so basically canine that all dogs could have been crafted from his very image. He was a Pharaoh hound, a breed that could trace its lineage back to the dawn of canine history.

Following in his wake came a golden retriever who possessed all the unmistakable traits of canine beauty. Her presence, exuded an aura of such compelling charm that every hound, being male or female, couldn't help but experience a moment of envy. Silken

strands of blonde fur cascaded like a river of liquid silver, framing her delicate yet strongly-featured face. Her kind eyes roamed across the crowd coming to rest upon the Howlers. She stood at medium height with a diamond necklace hanging loosely around her neck. Her confident, graceful strides allowed her glide effortlessly across the floor until she proudly stood beside the Pharaoh hound, her opulent-white canine teeth on display as she greeted all with a welcoming smile.

The Elder, his voice resonating like a loudspeaker, barked, “Hello my weary travelers!” His words rang clearly throughout the valley. “I am known as the Elder, and this is my wife, Passion,” he said, gesturing toward the golden retriever beside him.

Until this very moment, Courage, still naïve to the inner workings of this secret canine world, had regarded the fantastical stories he’d heard as elaborate jests. In his mind, Ironcoat, Knowledge, and even his mother, had spun these tales as part of an intricate joke. Yet now, a thunderstorm of comprehension descended upon him. He grasped the magnitude of this newfound belief, and from deep within, a wellspring of strength began to rise as he listened to the Elder’s entrancing voice.

“Welcome to our little city,” the Elder continued, steering his gaze upon the Howlers, his intelligent eyes now deep with purpose. “We are delighted that you have joined us and are honored by your presence today. You are all welcome to stay as long as you like; there’s ample space for everyone. I only ask that you contribute to our community by putting your skills and talents to work in whichever fashion best suits our common good.

“Many claimed we could never create such a wondrous city as this,” the Elder proclaimed, but we not only accomplished such a task, we mastered it. For countless years, your fellow canines dedicated themselves tirelessly to refine this hidden valley and build what now stands here before us. This monumental task, this splendid city, was constructed to preserve the traditions passed down to us from by forefathers. Just as those who came before us sacrificed so much, there may come a time when we are summoned to undertake the most improbable of challenges, regardless of the cost. This is our duty to the canines of tomorrow, to our puppies who will inherit what we have built.”

Pausing for a moment to allow his words to sink in, the Elder was met with a thunderous wave of cheers, howls, and barks that tread on the heels of his voice.

“Ages ago, it was said that man and dog would forever endure the feline’s wrath, but the GoMan Arts emerged and freedom prevailed. GoMan Warriors have trained in this city since long before my own time. These noble hounds have dedicated their lives to the fight against the felines and the protection of man. This proud legacy, an honor passed through our sacred bloodline from hound to hound across countless generations, carries the wisdom of our past and the hopes of our future. This bloodline carries profound strength; it carries heroism.”

“From this wonderful city I spent my life as a student, then a practitioner, and now as a teacher the GoMan Arts to my fellow canines. It is from here that I lead our forces of good against those who perpetuate evil in this world—our ageless adversaries, the wild feline. As free canines, beholden to no master, it is our inherent right to seek out destiny’s path.”

“You, noble hounds have arrived here by the hands of destiny, to stand tall in front of me. You have already played an important role in our unending battle against our age-old enemy.”

Turning directly towards Courage, who promptly felt a flood of warmth bathe over him, the Elder continued. “Many moons ago, young Courage, I sent Ironcoat on a quest to find you, for you are the son of Gallant, descendant of Valor, second heir to the throne of StrongPaw Canyon, a hound born from the purest of GoMan bloodlines. Long we have awaited your arrival.” His eyes, gleaming with a forceful energy, pierced sharply as a needle, deep into the mind of young Courage, questioning. He paused for a moment, mentally discerning... *do you have the mettle for what your future holds?*

Pausing again for a moment, the Elder bent his gaze slightly to look upon Knowledge, his tone lightened as he continued. “Knowledge the Wise, what a pleasure it is to finally have you here! I've been looking forward to meeting you. I know of no other hound who has managed to accomplish such feats in the literary world as you have. Gaining a mastery of the human language is such an impossible task that I feel a duty to congratulate you on your incredible efforts—you're quite a remarkable canine. What I find most impressive though, is that you accomplished this exploit all on your own without any help from other canines.

“As you explore our magnificent city, you'll discover that many of your star pupils have made homes for themselves here. They've told me all about your teachings and thanks to you, we now have a better understanding of the human language. I hope we might have the opportunity to learn from you during your stay, and if you could spare the time to teach a few classes, I would be immesnely grateful.

“Our Chamber of History holds quite a large collection of ancient scrolls and books that I'm sure you would enjoy looking through. Our Keeper of the Chamber, Wisdom, is eager to meet with you and show you around.

“I have lived here in this great city all of my life. My ancestors labored for much of their lives to help build this wonderful valley. For now, please make yourselves at home, we have plenty of huts for everyone. Courage and Knowledge, if you would, please follow me inside.”

Courage jumped up immediately and scampered over to the entrance where the Great Dane still remained.

“Hello! I've seen you before, haven't I?” he questioned.

“Yes you have,” she replied. “I have been reaching out to you. My name is Savior. You and I have a long road ahead of us. That was me, answering your call last night. I knew you were close, I could feel your presence. Come inside, we have much to discuss.”

Watching them intently, Apple was painfully aware of the immediate connection between the two Danes. It was hard not to notice how beautiful the other Dane was, but it was her similarity with Courage that bothered Apple the most. She tried hard not to be jealous, yet envy poured from her skin, hot and painful.

Sensing her uneasiness, Von Schnitzel appeared alongside her. “Don’t worry Apple,” he barked reassuringly. “I see da way he looks at you, you’ve nothing to worry about.”

Entering the Temple of Four Paws was a precious moment akin to walking on sacred ground for Courage and Knowledge who simply looked about, awestruck. The Temple, built purely by stone mined from caves deep within the mountain, held a grand stage at one end and was preceded by rows upon rows of what could only be described as large, comfy-looking pillows.

Walking through the temple, they came upon a silver-haired dog who was lying comfortably upon the stage reading a book cradled between his front paws. The Elder made introductions, “Courage, Knowledge, I have someone I would like you to meet. This is Wisdom; he is the Keeper of the Chamber, where we store our ancient scrolls.”

Wisdom, so consumed with his reading, took a few moments to peel away from his story. Rather nerdy in appearance, with a slothful body and a pair of black reading glasses that rested a bit low on his nose, he looked perfectly content. Wisdom was a Weimaraner, a breed often nicknamed the “Silver Ghost.” Quite overweight for a canine, he smelled of complacency, resting on the stage engulfed in a story. Lazily putting down his book, Wisdom greeted the new arrivals.

“It’s wonderful to meet you both,” Wisdom barked as he struggled to bear his girth upon four legs. Immediately setting his sight upon the Border collie, he questioned, “You must be the one called Knowledge? I’ve heard wonderful stories about you. I do hope you’ll find the time to teach me what you know of the human writings during your time here; I’ve always been curious about the workings and deeper meanings of their language. I also have a collection of books and scrolls that you may wish to look over. They were gifted to my ancestors a long time ago by the venerable spaniels of Tibet. I have spent a lifetime reading and watching over these ancient writings.”

Finally, the Elder turned his gaze to rest upon the Great Dane. “Courage, there’s no doubt it is you. Your size alone attests to your bloodline. These scrolls speak of your forefathers who fought valiantly against the felines. Your ancestors have defended both humans and canines for generations, earning their places as heroes among dogs worldwide!”

“Recently, we’ve received troubling reports about a resurgence of feline activity,” explained the Elder. “Our scouts have observed their training in the upper hills of Goblin’s Forest. We assume their intent is to launch an attack on the city below, aiming to eliminate as many traitors as possible. These traitors, as they call them, are our friends who have chosen an honest life among the house of man, as many a hound has done. It is our duty, our right as GoMan Warriors to protect them with our lives.”

The Elder turned to Courage, locking eyes with him. “Young Courage, it is your family’s legacy, the proud descendants of the victorious Dane warriors of old, who possess the power and fortitude needed to lead our troops in battle against these felines. When the time is right and our forces are ready, you and your sister must take your place at the forefront of our ranks. This is your destiny.”

A painful throbbing began to form in his chest, not in his throat, but in his heart. Each beat, each passing of blood, felt like a woodpecker hammering a new home. “My sister!” Courage exclaimed, glancing over at Savior, he now understood.

“Yes Courage, we share the same parents,” Savior explained. “Ironcoat brought me here on the day of our birth. The Elder and Passion raised me as their own ever since. In my heart, I always knew that one day you would find your way to me. After you tell me all about our mother, we must start your training. Are you up for the challenge, my brother?”

Courage struggled to respond, his throat feeling as if he had swallowed a grapefruit. He paused for a moment while he attempting to clear the obstruction. A myriad of emotions surged through him like an unstoppable river before he finally found his voice, his determination hardening. “Never could I have imagined that life would ever be this crazy! I’ll do whatever is needed, as long as it benefits the hounds of the world.”

“Very well, then. We begin your training tomorrow,” the Elder affirmed.

“Since that’s settled,” Wisdom barked before turning towards Knowledge with a broad smile plastered across his face. “I have something to show you; come and follow me.”

Venturing behind the stage, Knowledge’s curiosity grew as he followed in Wisdom’s footsteps. Wisdom led him down a back staircase that crept mysteriously into the heart of the mountain. Torches lined the earthen walls, casting a dance of shadowy creatures battling for their fleeting moments of light.

Knowledge soon found himself in a large, rectangular room. Bookshelves lined the walls, and a large stone desk stood prominently at one end, scattered with sheaves of loose paper, book jackets waiting to be sealed, spines, bindings, muzzle pens, and ink jars—every tool essential to a writer. Lists lined the wall behind the desk while books and scrolls saturated every visible surface except the floor, which was adorned with large, feathered pillows. Nobles canines of antiquity gazed from paintings along the wall’s alcoves, their unyielding gazes seemed to question if Knowledge was worthy of their presence. Most impressively, a small stream of water flowed steadily along a meandering path in the ground. Providing an endless source of refreshment for thirsty readers. Reading light danced from candles scattered throughout the room that accentuated their furry pelts in an orange-colored hue.

Wisdom proudly strolled down the room, settling on a colossal pillow behind his desk, which stood no more than a foot above the ground. “How do you like my library?” he asked. “We hold the works of our greatest thinkers, planners, architects, and foretellers, and also the manuscripts of our royalty and nobles from ancient times. This library, these compilations of work, compose the known legacy of our canine race. I’ve been entrusted with safeguarding these documents and have devoted my life to preserving records of our history. Allow me to introduce you to our most cherished scrolls, passed down to us by the Tibetan Spaniels.”

Knowledge’s eyes brimmed with eager anticipation as he glanced around. “This place is incredible! He exclaimed. “I could happily spend a lifetime within these walls!”

Walking to a row of books, Wisdom selected one from the end and proudly presented it to Knowledge. “This book dates back to 600AD, and it is the only known copy,” he boasted, a contented twinkle in his eyes, extending the book to Knowledge.

Taking a seat near the desk, Knowledge opened the cover with the enthusiasm of a young child unwrapping a Christmas gift. His eyes widened as he began deciphering the archaic text and meanings that only the brightest of hounds could grasp. Satisfied, Wisdom climbed back onto his cushion and began documenting the day’s events parchment.

Satisfied, Wisdom climbed back onto his cushion and began documenting the day’s events on parchment.

Meanwhile, Savior was joyfully giving Courage a tour of the city. Prancing about the grounds like best friends, they were oblivious to everyone around them while relishing their first moments together as brother and sister.

Glaring from under angry eyebrows, Apple watched Courage chase Savior around the city. Thoughts of loneliness without Courage in her life flooded her mind like a relentless tide. *We were that close*, she thought, groaning with discomfort. Lost in her inner torture, Apple failed to notice Passions silent approach.

Passion softened her eyes, though her voice remained neutral as she addressed Apple. “So, you’re the one who captured his heart?”

Apple shrugged, a hint of bitterness tainting her response. “It certainly doesn’t seem like it today.” Changing the subject, she inquired, “How long have you been with the Elder?”

“As long as I can remember,” answered Passion as she passively looked over the city, yet with her mind’s eye, she envisioned her youth. “We were destined for each other. You know how sometimes you spend your whole life living and learning, yet searching for that perfect match. You could meet a thousand dogs and never find the one who perfectly fits in your heart. Then one ordinary day, just like any other, you stumble upon someone you were always meant to find. A dog that completes you, makes you whole. Your life is transformed into a blissful happiness you never expected to find. That’s what happened to me one particular day long ago.

“When I was a rambunctious little pup, I ran away from home.” Passion began, her eyes reflecting the memories of youth. “Life was one big adventure back then, and I didn’t have a care in the world. After a few days on the run, I found myself lost and hungry in the middle of that very forest you passed through. I was cold, alone, and with so many creatures calling to each other in the dark, I was too scared to sleep.

“That’s when I prayed, asking the Gods of Canis to send someone to rescue me. The very next morning, my hero appeared. The Elder was out collecting berries for breakfast when he stumbled upon me. He showed me where to find the best berry patches and brought me back to this city. We soon became inseparable, and a few years later, he asked me to marry him. We’ve haven’t left the city since. Can I show you what he gave me as a wedding present?”

Apple harrumphed before glancing over at Courage one last time. “Sure, anything to get my mind off of him!” She replied, a hint of annoyance trickling from her tongue.

Passion led Apple into the temple and guided her along the left side of the building. They followed a winding staircase down to the lower levels and through a series of underground tunnels until before entering into a larger cavern.

“He built this room for me, this is my art studio.” Passion proudly declared, gesturing her nose, as she dotingly looked about.

Apple gazed into a room that surpassed her wildest canine imagination. Murals were carved onto the walls throughout the chamber, and buckets of various colored paints were scattered across the floor. Each colorful painting seemed like a window into another time, depicting an array of scenes.

“The Elder discovered my true passion for painting and he’s called me Passion ever since. It’s taken me many years to create all these murals. I start by carving my design into the rock with stones and then I add colors using paint we create from crushed berries. Anytime you wish to get escape from the hounds in the city, you’re welcome to come down here. Who knows you might discover your own talent for painting!”

Passion spent the next hour showcasing her work engraved along the wall.

That evening, a massive bonfire was ignited and a celebration in honor of the Howlers ensued. The night passed pleasantly with ballads, songs and various games of speed and tag were played, also their favorite game of the mind—chess!

During the festivities, the Elder made his way over to speak with Racer, who sat with his hind legs closest to the fire, warming his paws by the hot embers. “I’m delighted that you could make it to our city master Greyhound,” the Elder said. “Come, take a stroll with me.

“Racer,” the Elder began as they departed the campfire, trotting towards the deeper shadows of night. “I am well-acquainted with your lineage. Your ancestors were magnificent hounds who passed on to you an unrivaled bloodline of swiftness unmatched by any hound. Greyhounds served as couriers for the GoMan Maters from the earliest of our days; swiftly delivering orders across vast distances and the harshest of terrains. Your body was built for speed, and as you know, few animals can match your pace. You will play a vital role in the near future. When the moment arrives, never be afraid, and never show signs of fear. Have faith in your abilities, Racer, and you shall triumph!”

The Elder then left Racer alone to ponder his words.

Back at the bonfire, Courage was trying his best to be near Apple, but she was too upset about his new relationship with Savior to be nice. “Why don’t you go cozy up with your new girlfriend?” she snapped.

“I would, but she looks busy right now,” Courage replied.

Apple’s patience wore thin, and she growled with intensity before bolting away. Courage pursued her, caught up with her, and implored her attention. “Listen to me!” he pleaded. “Can’t you see the resemblance? We’re both Great Danes. We’re the same age, with similar patches of fur on our chests. We are dogs of destiny, fated to battle the felines like our fathers before us. Somehow, fate has brought us here, to this city, at this moment, to meet for the first time. I have found my missing twin sister!”

“Your sister! Courage, I was so worried. You two were getting along so well,” she barked. “I guess I was just being jealous.”



“You've got nothing to be jealous of, my love.”

Making their way back to the bonfire, Courage and Apple squeezed their way into a spot next to Savior and wrapped themselves in the warmth of the fire.

“Brother and sister! I should have guessed,” chuckled Apple, licking Savior’s face with affection.

After a while, the Elder took center stage. “I would like to propose a toast,” he declared. “The GoMan Arts of Tooth and Paw have allowed me to live a long and joyful life in this Hidden City over many wonderful years. During this time, numerous noble hounds have graced our city with their presence. However, I believe this is the most extraordinary collection of talent, of canine intellect, that has ever been gathered before our Temple of Four Paws, with one exception: our beloved friend, Ironcoat. He will be missed by all of us. A toast for Ironcoat, may he forever be remembered as the Noble Knight!”

Barks, howls, and hoorays then echoed in the distance.

# PASSAGE III

## CLOUDED DESTINY

Together at last  
After so much has passed.

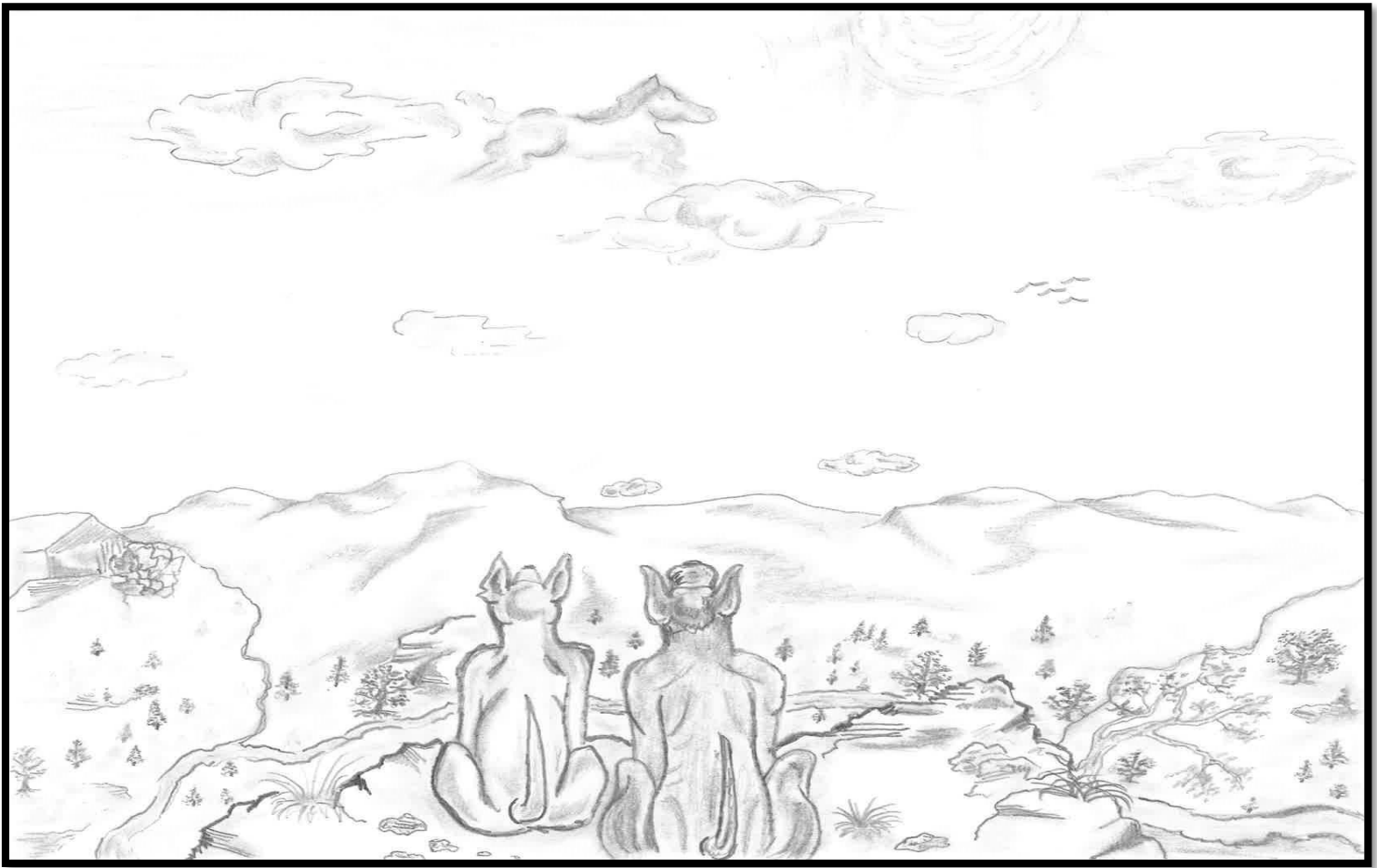
Twin warriors of good stand proud and tall  
Training to fight, hearing destinies call.

Searching for evil that moves in a fog  
A mighty force travels, many miles they log.

Soon armies collide, many lives are gone  
But who will live, come light of dawn?

But first a race, for the fastest of all  
Yet careful the feline, eager to maul.

Then off to a city, a house and a home...  
And to little ones who love to roam.



## CHAPTER 21

### SPIRIT IN THE SKY

**I**n the midst of an endless sleep, a wet nose nudged Courage along his rib-cage. The Elder, moving with stealth, had come to awaken his newest student as the first crimson splashes of dawn began to paint its strokes across the distant skyline. “Awake, my young prince,” he whispered, trying not to alarm Apple. “Your first day of training is now upon us; I have something remarkable to show you!”

Careful not to stir the beautiful Afghan hound lying next to him, Courage dutifully followed the Elder out of his hut and across the courtyard. Like a chorus of lions roaring in the distance, the crashing sound of water spilling down into the misty reservoir below was the only noise to be heard at such an early hour.

Directing him towards the monstrous stairway winding up the side of the mountain, the Elder walked side by side with Courage. Matching the Elder step for step, Courage ascended up the never-ending stone stairs as the path before them slowly illuminated with the morning light. At first, his movements were sluggish, for the steps were cut high and narrow and his body was not yet fully awake, yet before long he found his rhythm and the

city became no more than a memory behind him. Courage's focus was now on keeping up with the Elder whose strength of step displayed no indication of his elderly age.

“While we climb, take this time to ponder the enormous journey that has brought you here. Though you may call it luck or perhaps chance, I have seen your path differently. You were meant to come here young Courage. I have been waiting a long time for this day to arrive,” barked the Elder as they labored together in unison one step at a time.

Reaching the top, the two hounds were at the highest point of the mountain, its zenith overlooking the hound city below. With the sun rising on the horizon, Courage and the Elder sat side by side, the teacher and his student. Slowly, the sky came alive as the bright yellow star shined its warmth on the world around them.

“My young Courage,” began the Elder. “To become a true warrior, you must learn to gain full control over all of your emotions and be at peace with your inner soul. Do you remember the days not too long ago, when you were just a puppy and didn’t have a care in the world? Those are the feelings you must tap into once again. Only with a clear mind empty of all concerns and free from distractions will you be able to tap into the immense power that dwells inside of you.

“As canines we are beasts of nature and from the natural world around us we gather our strength. From the soil in the earth where the plants of life grow, to the rain that nourishes all, and the clouds above that shield us from the sun’s fury, mother earth is our creator and our protector, always reminding us of her presence by scratching at our paws with her soil or rustling our fur with her mighty wind. When our time finally expires it is in her that we will return our bodies.

“When you can let go of worry and fear, two emotions that can debilitate a warrior, you will find yourself moving and fighting without hesitation, without second-guessing your every action. You see, all of nature is a circle, a moving force where one action leads to an even greater reaction. If you are without confidence or have worry gnawing at your thoughts, chipping away at your concentration, your focus of the moment, you are exposing a gap in your armor, leaving your underbelly exposed to your enemy. This can cause you to falter in battle. You and I are very much a part of nature and so, like the tides of the ocean, our strengths can rise and our strengths can just as easily fall. Yet, by maintaining your confidence and fighting without distraction, you can battle with superiority and defeat your enemy with ease. Your reward shall be victory.

“Just like today; as the night ended, this new day began. As the winter goes, the summer will come, and as a bird flies into the sky, soon it will land. Once a fight begins, there will be an end. The fighter who maintains complete control over his emotions will prove to be the victor.

“Knowledge and experience through repetitive practice are essential to this process. Over time, you will learn the proper ways to engage in battle. A great fighter knows when to conserve his strength, how to defend by deflection and my favorite, how to counter-

attack. However, you will find that it is a smarter hound who can settle a dispute through words and kindness, than from anger and malice.

“I am a GoMan Master, my young prince. That means I am a skilled practitioner of the sacred Arts of the GoMan and have sworn my life to the unwavering protection of the human race. Forever man’s best friend, I am loyal to the plight of humankind. I have spent my life focusing on the study and practice of the defensive arts of Tooth and Paw. I have made an oath to mother earth to never be an instigator; never to be the initiator of battle, the cause for aggression. I follow the laws of love and happiness rather than the rules of hate and anger. Calling upon the ethereal energy of nature, I can advance my own energy, my inner power to insurmountable levels providing me with the ability to defeat the strongest of enemies with defensive countermoves unknown to an aggressor intent on the attack. Especially against a feline who is quick to pounce and skilled at anger and manipulation through fear.

“Courage, you need to set aside your fears, find peace within yourself, and leave behind any anger you may hold from your past. Having a clear conscience is the first step to enlightenment and can become a matter of life and death when battling the deadliest of foes. I want you to tell me of your pain, tell me of the one thing that gives you anger. Today, we will conquer that pain.”

Courage looked up at the Elder with tears in his eyes; he had been harboring a deep anger for quite a long time now. “I am angry at my family,” he explained. “We went to the mountains on a family trip and I protected them from a terrible creature, yet somehow I became lost deep in the hills. I spent days roaming the woods, searching for our campground, and when I finally made my way back, they were all gone. My family left me behind,” he barked with a whimper to his voice.

“My young Courage, forgiveness is something you must learn, it is the attribute of the strong; the weak can never forgive. You must understand that all things happen for a reason, and as one door closes, another will open. Having anger for the past will do you no good today. The past is done and you must find good in what has happened to you. All that you have endured has made you the stronger hound that you are today and has become the essential building blocks to your future doghood.

“You must understand that there is a reason for all that has happened; that because of your past, because of what happened to you, you are now here sitting by my side listening to my words. Ironcoat waiting for you at the dog pound, the Howlers, all your loyal friends, and meeting Apple, it never would have occurred if you had gone back home with your family that day. What happened was meant to happen, my young hound. It is your destiny.

“Your family loves you very much Courage, you must never forget that. I’m sure leaving that forest was very difficult for them. Perhaps they are home right now waiting for your return. Believe me Courage, one day you will see them again, when the time is right.

“For now, you must replace that anger with forgiveness and gratitude. To do this, you must simply understand that you being here today was a necessary piece of your destiny that was needed to make your life whole. Be happy that your past has brought you here to us. There is no reason for anger or resentment; these negative emotions are only self-destructive. Move forward with your life and have total forgiveness.”

After pausing for a moment to let his words sink in, the Elder continued. “I knew your father, my young prince. He was a dog unlike any other; a true leader and a fearless hound whose mere presence empowered those around him. Little do you know how similar you are to your father; just looking at you reminds me so much of him. Your mannerisms, the way you carry yourself, it is identical to how he once was.

“Your father, the great King Gallant, passed down to you a powerful bloodline that began a long time ago with your forefathers. You possess within you the purest of all the GoMan bloodlines; your potential is immeasurable. When battle finds you, you will discover just how much like your father you really can be.

“As for me, my bones are too tired, my body too old for battle, yet I now fight in a different manner. I oppose our enemies by teaching all that I know to the younger generation of hounds—which as of today, includes you. I am the Elder. As the wisest of all GoMan Masters and free canines it is my responsibility to pass down all that I have learned in my life. We are the defenders of man, their guardians. It is their way of life we are bound to protect. We are warriors of good who offer help to all those in need. It is what we were taught and how we were raised; it is how we honor the dead—canines who came before us.

“Man, in their wisdom, has chosen to accept us and domesticated felines into their homes as members of their families. In return, we are duty-bound as GoMan Warriors to protect them and their family members from the wild feline, our most vile enemy.

“Now, let me give you a little history lesson, my young hound. Ages ago there existed a tribe of revered canines known as Tibetan spaniels who lived peaceful lives alongside the spiritually enlightened monks of Tibet. These monkish hounds had acquired the ability to manipulate the energy of nature that emanates from all living things through an ancient discipline called the GoMan Arts.

Through the mastery of these sacred arts, these spaniels developed the ability to synchronize their hearts with that of man. This process, called canimicry, can only be accomplished by a GoMan Master who shares in a life-bond with a human. Establishing such a bond with one specific human whom we watch over for life, produces an echoing of souls.

“This echoing of souls, a life-span mimicry gives us the ability to live the full span of a human life while in turn bestowing the human with the unique ability to comprehend the canine’s prose. Meaning, my young Courage, we get to live lengthy lives with our chosen human and they in turn acquire the knowledge to correctly interpret our bark, comprehending our words just as you and I are now doing. Two souls can acquire the ability

of cross-species communication through the mastery of our arts. This coordination of two souls through the harnessing of nature's energy produces a synergistic relationship that is the most cherished outcome of the mastery of the GoMan Arts. It gives our soul a truly symbiotic purpose.

“These Tibetan spaniels joined forces with a fierce clan of warrior-hounds called Tibetan Mastiffs who were masters of a fighting style called Tooth and Paw. This battle technique had proved an effective deterrent against the felines of the wild.

“Joining together, these Tibetan hounds formed a new society solely focused on the practice of the GoMan Arts of Tooth and Paw. These spiritually enlightened fighting warriors became masters of the GoMan Arts, a practice we dutifully follow every day of our lives.

“I was born here in this city and I suffered from what many of us hidden hounds suffer from, a longing deep within our souls to share in a bond, a deep connection with man. We carry an innate need, a destined desire to become man's best friend. It is an irresistible urge that pumps through our hearts and into every inch of our being. One that unlike our cousin's the wolf of the wild, I could not deny.

“In search of my calling, I ventured out into the world beyond our city. A canine never knows where the winds of fate may take him. Surviving alone on the streets of man, I endured many things and learned much about how these humans live. Things that were part of your everyday life since you are one of the privileged dogs who have found a place in the house of man—sharing in their love while giving them your protection. A symbiotic trait that has been passed down to you by your ancestors for thousands of years.

“On my journey I discovered that living alone in man's world without a human soul to bond with and protect is a difficult struggle. It is a loneliness in life that I found many sad canines suffering through. Eventually, I was rescued by a wonderful man when destiny found its' way to me. He was old for a human, yet glowed with a wonderful kindness that I always dreamed man would have. Taking me into his home, we quickly became best of friends and our bonding felt as natural as the dirt below our paws, like it was always meant to be,” the Elder said with a huge human-like grin curling at the corners of his muzzle as he looked backwards in time.

“We took care of each other and shared together in a great love. Unfortunately, he was nearing the end of his journey through life and I faithfully remained by his side until the very end. When his journey was over, I returned here to my place of birth, yet I still feel the pulse of his human heart run through my canine body with every beat of mine. I was not able to share in the full gift of canimicry because of his age, but I would never change a moment of our time together if given the opportunity to rewind the clock of life. You see Courage, I am 52 human years old, oldest of all known free canines.

“The hounds who faithfully practice in our arts and harness the energy of mother earth as is a benefit of our practice, manage to live considerably longer lives than that of normal hounds. However, they experience nowhere near the length of longevity given forth

by canimicry. Echoing your soul with a human will allow you to live as long as the oldest of man, especially if you're lucky enough to form that bond when the human is just a child as you practically are now my young hound. There is much about this world you have yet to learn, today we begin that process.

With those last words, the two dogs sat on the mountaintop in silence, watching the rising sun grow brighter. Sharing the morning with the Elder, Courage began to free his mind of all the anger he had built up towards his family.

Sitting together, these two hounds watched the invading storm clouds play hide and seek with one another until the noon hour approached. "It is said in the legends," the Elder began, "that only a true GoMan Warrior has the ability to channel his spirit animal at midday. To discover whether you are a rightful GoMan heir, you must search the skies to see if you have a spirit animal watching over you. This spirit animal is the soul of a guardian being that protects you and offers you strength in time of need. This mountaintop is a magical place, from here you must look to the sky when the sun is at its highest point; hopefully you will see this vision. If so, the clouds closest to the sun at midday will represent your guardian spirit.

"When I look to the clouds at midday, I see an elephant staring down upon me. This elephant is old and wise, having survived numerous battles and traveled the earth for many years. My spirit animal is an elephant that carries a trunk of knowledge used to broaden the horizons of my many pupils.

"Now Courage, let go of your worries, let go of your fears. Look up to the sky and tell me what you see, tell me what creature is guarding over you."

Courage looked up into the pale, blue sky filled with monstrous cotton ball clouds looming in every direction. At first glance, nothing caught his attention. Then, pausing for a moment he thought hard about what the Elder had said. Using all of his energy to concentrate, he looked up at the cloudy sky once again, yet this time things began to take shape.

Slowly passing before the sun, blocking its magnificent rays was a long, silver rain cloud with two lengths on the bottom that started to stretch out like legs. On the top, a corner of the cloud began to extend out even longer, taking the form of a long neck. A beautifully shaped face began to take form. Next, long strands of hair appeared along this mane and it acquired a tail. Watching the magic unfold, Courage's eyes widened and his jaw dropped as the silver cloud perfectly formed an elegant horse with long legs slowly galloping across the sky.

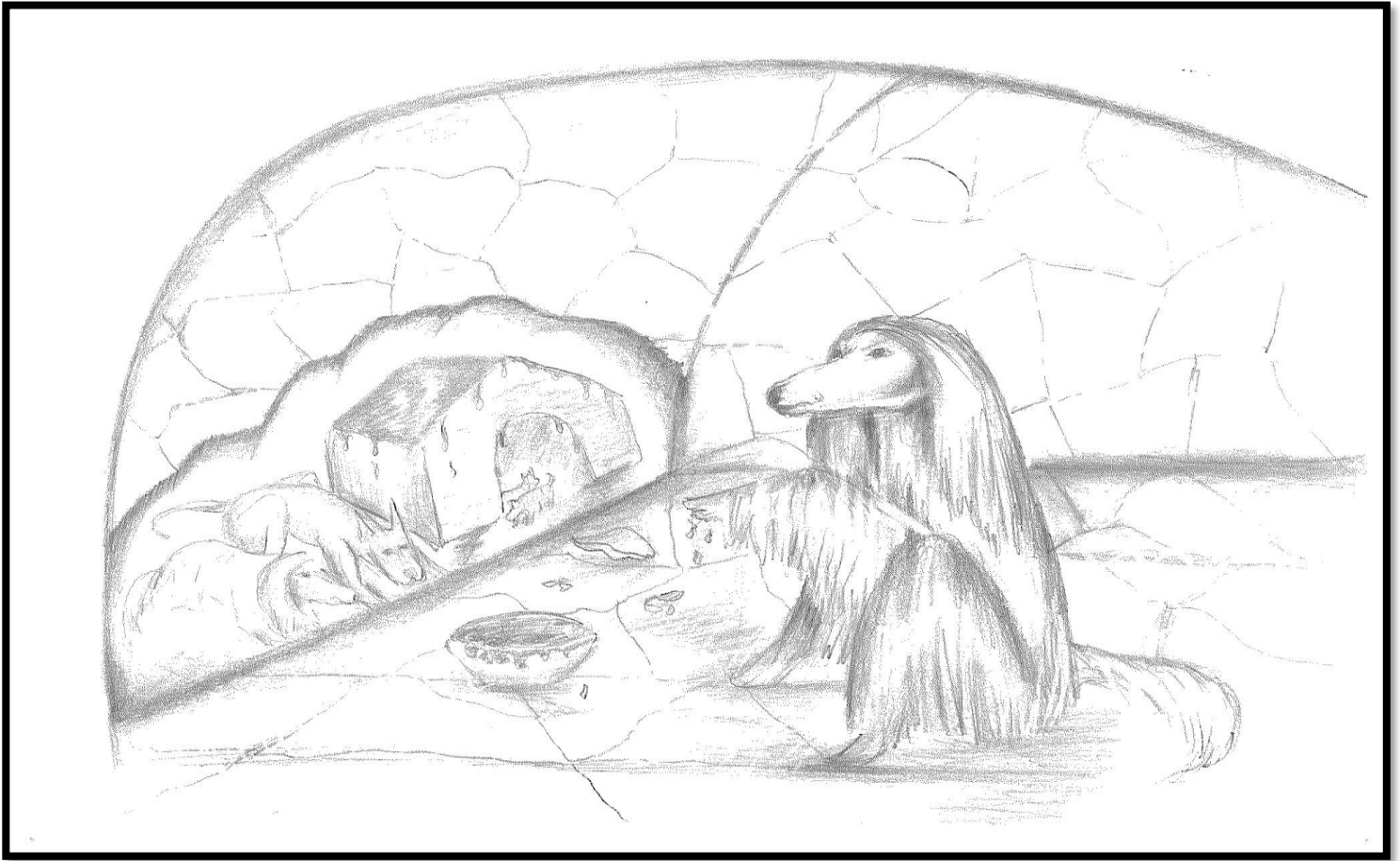
"I see a horse," he barked, "a strong, silver-haired horse running along the sky!"

"Very good," replied the Elder. "Only those with the blood of a true GoMan Warrior pumping in their veins have this ability. I should have guessed what you would see. When I took your sister up here, she also saw a horse. With the way you two gallop around, it figures!"



Staying atop the mountain for the rest of the day, the Elder taught Courage how to completely rest his body, allowing him to heal quickly through meditation. By the end of the day, the Elder stopped being a teacher and they talked as friends discussing life, family, and the future.

When daylight began to fade, the two hounds cautiously descended step-by-step down the steep mountainside. Finally approaching the city from above, they paused for a moment. Below them, dogs buzzed all about like a hive of bees, nonstop and unrelenting. “If only man knew what feats mere dogs could accomplish, the world would be a different place,” the Elder remarked to Courage as he pridefully looked about.



## CHAPTER 22

### THE SACRED CRAFT

**I**t was cold in the morning with a frosty chill that invaded their slumber like an unwanted guest, yet Courage awoke promptly at sunrise in anticipation of his training with the GoMan Warriors.

The GoMan Arts of Tooth and Paw was originally designed as a defensive fighting style to be used against a more powerful aggressor, yet over the years the fighting tactics have been adapted to allow for offensive maneuvering as well. Each day started with classes on both offensive and defensive fighting, body positioning and grappling maneuvers, mental acuity combined with attention focusing, the proper healing of battle wounds and the study of opponent behavior along with endurance training before sparring practice begins. Spiritual enlightenment and sessions on the proper healing of battle wounds consumed the remainder of the day. Most importantly, the GoMan Masters taught their disciples to use their mind as effectively as any weapon; many times an opponent could be outsmarted without having to reach physical confrontation.

At dusk, when the weary dogs relaxed together around the campfire, there would be no mention of cats or of training, it was time for stories. These evenings were spent enjoying each other's company while tales were recited; this became the Howlers's favorite part of the day. Sergeant Tank always managed to captivate the audience with his war stories while Racer loved to speak of his many tournaments at the racetrack; bragging of the races he won, never the ones he lost. Knowledge, being the storyteller, continually gripped the audience with new adventures every night. However, his favorite story, Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, was recited so many times that it practically told itself. Eagerly discussing their many capers in the city streets, the don's would often reminisce about their past escapades and compete with each other for the best stories of the night. Wisdom would also get into the spirit by telling the many dog adventures he recorded in his library. Last of all, Courage drew tears from the crowd when he told the story of Ironcoat and his selfless charge at the dog pound. This was a story to be told for generations to come.

The hounds of the Howlers each found jobs they were good at, becoming contributors to the common good. Some even trained in the GoMan Arts, while others helped to manage the crops, prepare meals, or work on the grounds. No dog remained idle.

Knowledge and Wisdom quickly became the best of friends who poured through the history books, clarifying details and recording the most recent of events.

Spending much of her time with Passion in her art room below ground, Apple became quite an artist herself who enjoyed putting her skills to work. But, as Courage and Savior spent more time together, Apple's jealousy consumed her and she began having difficulty concentrating on her new pastime.

"I have an idea," remarked Passion, giving an effort to cheer up Apple. "I know of an old hokey ritual the ancient foretellers used to practice. It's supposed to give you total concentration and entwine you within your drawings! It's now a dead practice since there are no more foretellers left to carry on the rituals. However, we can still use it to try opening your visual mind, allowing you to paint better. Maybe it'll bring out ideas that lay hidden deep in your subconscious."

"Let's try it!" barked Apple; not waiting for any further explanations.

"First we need to dig up a small root from our most blessed tree, the Lotus Blossom. This tree grows out of black dirt in our deepest cave. Few hounds know of its existence; but don't worry I've discovered every secret in this city. Being the Elders' wife has its advantages," Passion barked with a sly grin.

"This tree was discovered many years ago by our earliest diggers. Back then, foretellers were sacred magicians who used the roots of this tree to see into the future. This root was crushed, boiled, and then drank by only the holiest of foretellers. This 'Future Vision,' helped our warriors draw up effective strategies for battle. Who wouldn't like seeing the future?"

Passion then led Apple through a small, sparsely lit passage that wound deep into the mountain. Following one tunnel after another, they continuously traveled downwards.

At first the torchlight was sufficient to see, yet as they traveled further each level became darker. Finally, after stepping into near total darkness, they reached their destination.

“We have to smell our way to the tree,” Passion explained. “Any light damages the Lotus Blossom, that's why it thrives so well down here in the dark. But don't worry, once you catch a whiff of that unmistakable sweet scent, it's easy to find.”

Following their snouts along the tunnel, they soon found themselves overwhelmed by the perfumed scent of the Lotus Blossom. “It's amazing that it grows in such a dark place,” Apple exclaimed as they found their quarry.

Using their snouts like modern day homing devices, the hounds located and dug out a section of root then bit off a piece to carry back.

Once they made it back to her art room, Passion crushed the root into a fine powder with her mixing stones and placed it into a small bowl that she'd already filled half-way with water. Carefully carrying the bowl out to the fire pits with her mouth, she then set it to boil. Soon, the boiling water mixed in with the root and the tea was ready for them to drink.

After the bowl cooled down, each hound took turns lapping at the tea until there was nothing left. With the ceremony completed, they climbed back down to Passion's art room and waited for inspiration to hit them.

It wasn't much longer before both Passion and Apple felt an overwhelming urge to infuse their artwork on the walls. Eagerly, they jumped right in. Passion felt a renewed vigor surge through her and began to work steadfastly on her newest painting. Apple however, could not figure out what to draw or even where to start as she gazed openly at the blank canvas of a wall standing before her. She felt a remarkable painter's urge to create, but the idea had yet to take a form in her mind.

Finally closing her eyes, succumbing to her own imagination without having any visual interference, Apple felt a concept take shape within her mind's creative realm. Without any conscious effort, Apple felt her right paw, acting as a paintbrush, dip into the berry juice and begin to paint a scene on the open wall. Time seemed to stretch into an everlasting haze as her paintbrush of a paw manipulated the scenery before her, yet to Apple, the going was easy and she worked with the utmost fluidity.

At some point, Passion sauntered over to check on Apple and observed the painter in true form.

“Looks like you're in it now,” she whispered, then sat back and watched Apple whittle away at her portrait.

Morning arrived to find both hounds huddled close together with a mess of paints and painted paw prints scattered all about.

“You really got into it last night,” remarked Passion as she nudged the still-sleeping afghan.

“What are you talking about?” asked Apple. “I don’t remember a thing.”

Rising from the ground, they stood to take a look at the night’s progress. On the wall, where Apple had spent the evening drawing in a trance-like stupor was an elaborate, perfectly detailed painting of a house, a large backyard, and of a litter of puppies milling about. In the background, Courage and Apple could be seen resting together on the grass in front of a doghouse.

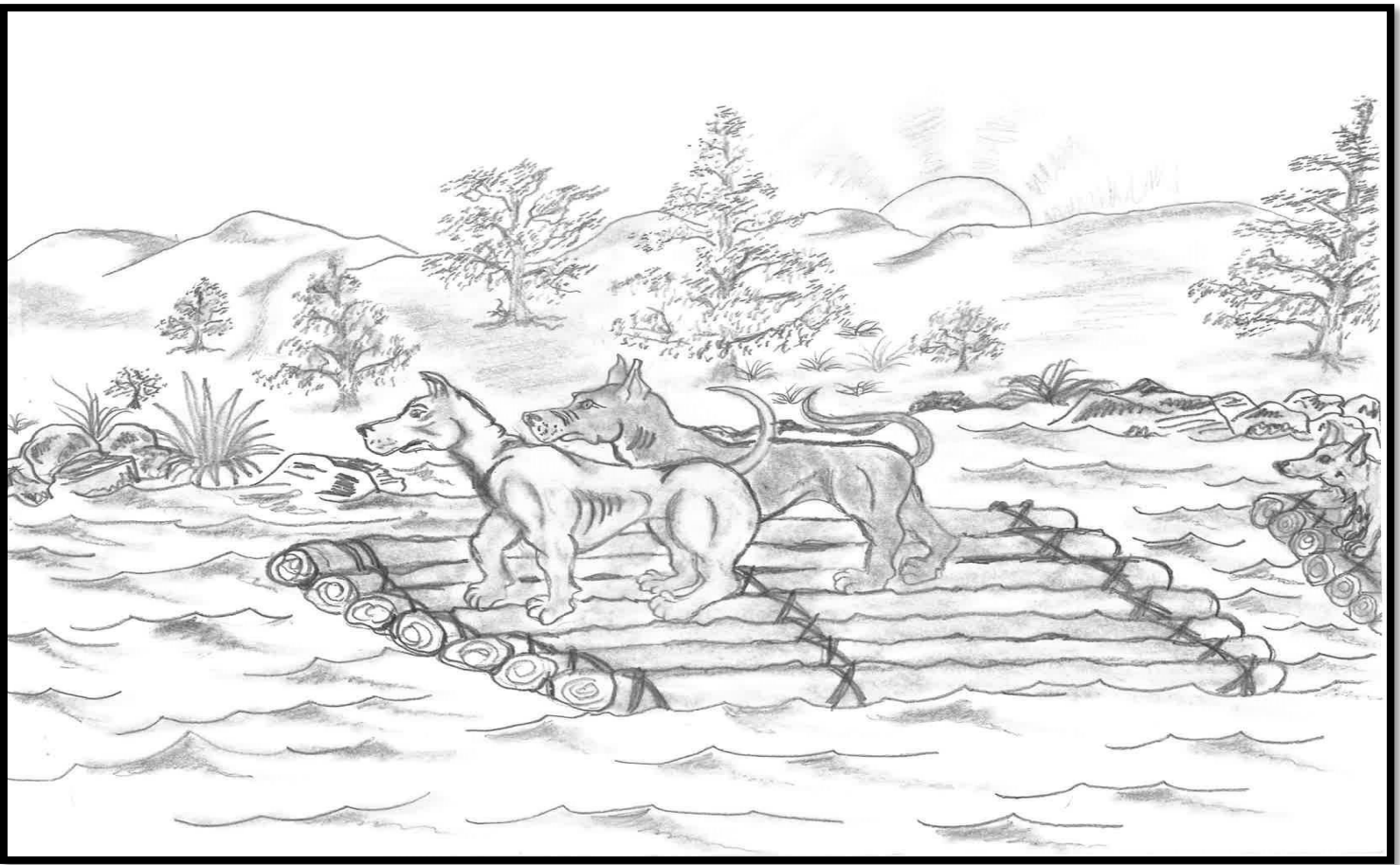
“Looks like we’ve got a foreteller in our mists,” Passion barked with a mischievous grin.

Meanwhile the Elder kept busy preparing for battle. Long before Courage and the hounds of the Howlers arrived, he had been sending out scouts to locate and monitor the enemy encampments. The more information the Elder had, the better his chances were of predicting their movements.

Over the ensuing months Courage grew bigger and more powerful by adding almost fifteen pounds of muscle to his oversized frame. Through his daily training regime, he also became quicker and more agile than he ever thought possible. More importantly, he learned the many advantages of defense. The GoMan Arts were used most effectively while being attacked from an adversary; aggression and uncontrolled anger were the keys to failure, while restraint, timing and proper decision-making in the heat of battle created victory against an opponent. With every day he trained and every partner he sparred against, Courage became more confident in his abilities as a GoMan Warrior.

Looking more like twins every day, Courage and Savior resembled wild horses galloping through the land as they frolicked together around the training grounds. Savior had been training all of her life and would get the better of Courage whenever they sparred against one another, however, Courage had a natural fighting talent and his intuition would always save him from serious harm.

Together, the brain and brawn of these two Great Danes could be matched against any foe. Watching these reunited twins train together, the Elder’s confidence in his new generation of warriors grew mightily.



## CHAPTER 23

### SEEKING THE ENEMY

**T**here is evil in the world, and the presence of evil guarantees the existence of pain and of loss and death; yet there also exists an opposing force of good which in turn guarantees the presence of joy and of love and happiness. These two forces have been at war since the beginning of time, and today it is the Elder who leads the forces of good for the canine race. Planning and preparing from his secluded city in the midst of a mountain, he patiently waited, as in a game of chess, for the cats to make their first move.

With the mid-summer sun growing long and hot as it floated leisurely across the sky, the Elder started to receive reports of mountain cats on the move. His scouts had tracked mountain lions, cougars, bobcats, and a myriad of other wild felines gathering together and making their way down from the surrounding mountains. Just as a drop of water accompanied by even more bits of water slowly expands until it is large enough to fall from a leaf, the felines were gathering an army until they were large enough to attack. When the Elder finally felt that he could wait no longer, he decided it was time to rally his troops.

In the evening, after the hounds had dined on fresh fish, the Elder took center stage to speak with his fellow canines. “My friends, the time for war is now upon us,” he began. “My scouts tell me that the felines have amassed a large army and are hiding their camp in the foggy mists of Goblin’s Forest. They appear to be making preparations to invade the city below as we’ve always feared. We know their plan is to attack all turnpelt felines and the humans that harbor them. We must do everything we can to prevent this!

“In two days’ time at first light, you will venture out in search of these cats. We’ve been waiting many seasons for an opportunity like this to catch the felines gathered together in one location. We will have the advantage of surprise on our side as we rise up together and once again save man from these vicious felines!”

Reacting to his words, the audience of hounds barked, howled, and cheered their enthusiasm. Sounding as if they were standing at center stage during a concert, the ensuing noise echoed from the mountain walls was both terrifying and magnificent.

“I am too old for this journey,” barked the Elder with a lump of regret stuck in his throat. “But as you all know, I’ve selected our twin warriors, Courage and Savior to lead our army. These two are well-prepared to lead you in battle against our enemy. You all must trust in them and follow their leadership as you have done with me. With all of your combined skills as GoMan Warriors, together you will succeed in battle as you have succeeded in life. I have no doubt that we will conquer over evil!” Another round of barking engulfed the valley as the dogs of the Hidden City cheered in applause.

Then the Elder withdrew into the Temple for a moment before reappearing with two large leather collars in his mouth. Six inches wide and made from strong, interweaved leather, each collar displayed four large diamonds placed along the center at equal distance from one another. Carved in black between the diamonds was Dog Script originally inscribed thousands of years ago.

Again, he spoke to the crowd below. “These are the Collars of Mollussi. They were created from the paws of our ancient Mollussus hounds that helped to train King Valrey during the Rule of the Cat many centuries ago. The king and the famous Irish wolfhound, Sir Ironcoatelle, who defeated the great cat leader, Bubasta, in battle wore these very collars! They are symbols of our strength and will protect its wearer from the fangs of the feline. Courage and Savior, step forward so I may present these to you.”

Like a general bestowing medals to his troops, the Elder placed the armaments around the necks of Courage and Savior.

“Now go forth and make us proud!” he barked. “Tomorrow you will all help to prepare rafts for travel. By taking the river, you’ll reach Goblin’s Forest much quicker than traveling through the mountains. Hopefully, you’ll find the enemy encampment before they embark towards the city of Raventon. The fate of every animal and many humans in this city lies on the speed of your journey and your abilities in battle. Go forth without fear my young warriors!”

Huddled together in the half light of the campfire that night, all the hounds of the city enjoyed this time together; many knew they might not make it back and this was cause to cherish the moment even more.

It was also a night for love and Apple had a surprise for Courage. Over the past few months she had spent much of her time in Passion's art room, now she was finally prepared to show Courage her accomplishments. Leading him into the temple and down the side stairs, Apple was hoping her newest painting would surely leave Courage astounded.

"Close your eyes," she told him as Courage was led into the room.

Directing him to a position just before her painting, she stopped him right in front, "Alright, open your eyes."

Slowly, Courage opened his eyes. Looking up he saw a painting of himself and Apple running along a field of green grass, with a blue lake behind them. The sun was aglow with a stunning red color and gray clouds were painted in the sky. He quickly recognized the scenery.

"This is Canine Park, isn't it?" he surmised. "It's beautiful.

"It's the first time we met," answered Apple with an impish smile smeared along her face. "I thought it might be a good addition to Passion's collection. I've had a little free time to hone my new found art skills and now we'll always be etched together on these walls."

Surrounded by a lifetime of artwork, the two lovers spent the night together, cuddling under the torchlight of passion's secret art room.

The next day, every hound in the city gathered together at sunrise to begin making the rafts. The Elder sent all the able-bodied hounds into the woods to scavenge for the largest pieces of felled wood that could be carried back within their muzzles.

While they were off hunting wood for raft building, the smaller hounds were sent to the fabricating rooms to gather the rope bundles previously made from the sturdiest bushes found throughout the forest. Gathering the rope together outside of the city in an open meadow just before the waterfall, the Elder made preparations for the incoming wood.

As wood was brought back by the larger hounds, they were fastened together width-wise. In this fashion, rafts were assembled all during the day. By nightfall, a dozen sturdy rafts were lined up and ready for use, each one was large enough to carry eight dogs.

On the second morning, the misty gray clouds hovered low against the mountainside, as the sun, still hiding beneath the horizon like a scared child timidly began to show its might. The Elder had left the city two nights earlier on a secret mission, so Apple, now in charge of the city, decided it was time to awaken the troops. Standing outside the Temple she howled a tempestuous good morning. This tremendous howl echoed



throughout the city, waking the sleeping hounds. Answering in kind, a great chorus ensued as the city came to life once again.

After a hearty breakfast, the war party gathered together in the main courtyard to say their goodbyes to those who were staying behind. All the original members of the Howlers had joined in and were ready to embark, except for Knowledge, Apple Pie, and Von Schnitzel, who were staying to help maintain the city. With most of the warriors heading out for battle, the Hidden City would be looked after by a skeleton crew.

Then Courage and Savior, two proud generals marching off to war, led their troops through the tunnel. Clearing the waterfall, Courage quickly got to work giving a final inspection to each vessel lined along the shoreline. However, this “inspection” was merely a two hundred pound beast of a Great Dane playfully pouncing from one raft to another in an aquatic game of hopscotch. Courage was satisfied with the stability of the rafts as he pronounced each one fit for travel.

Piling onto the lead raft with Savior and a few of the toughest warriors, Courage led the procession down the river. “Relax Courage, as long as you don’t mind cold water this will be nothing more than a wonderful ride!” barked Monster, an enormous Newfoundlander who was equal to Courage in size.

Behind them, another group of dogs packed aboard the next raft and so went the process until every able bodied warrior in the city was eagerly drifting down the river.

At first, the rafts were barely moving with the current. However, once they began merging with more water, their collective speed increased. The once calm river slowly turned into a raging waterway and the dogs found themselves in for a wild ride, yet the rafts, agile and strong, adjusted well to the changing flow of the water. With each canine waging his own balancing act on the raft against the temperamental river, they still managed to cover more ground with much less effort than they would have on foot.

“Courage, this is where I get off!” Hollered Rhody from the second raft as they neared a large bend in the river. “My hounds would be rabid if I didn’t get them involved in this battle! You didn’t expect me to leave them behind did you?”

“I wondered when you’d be hopping off,” Courage barked in response.

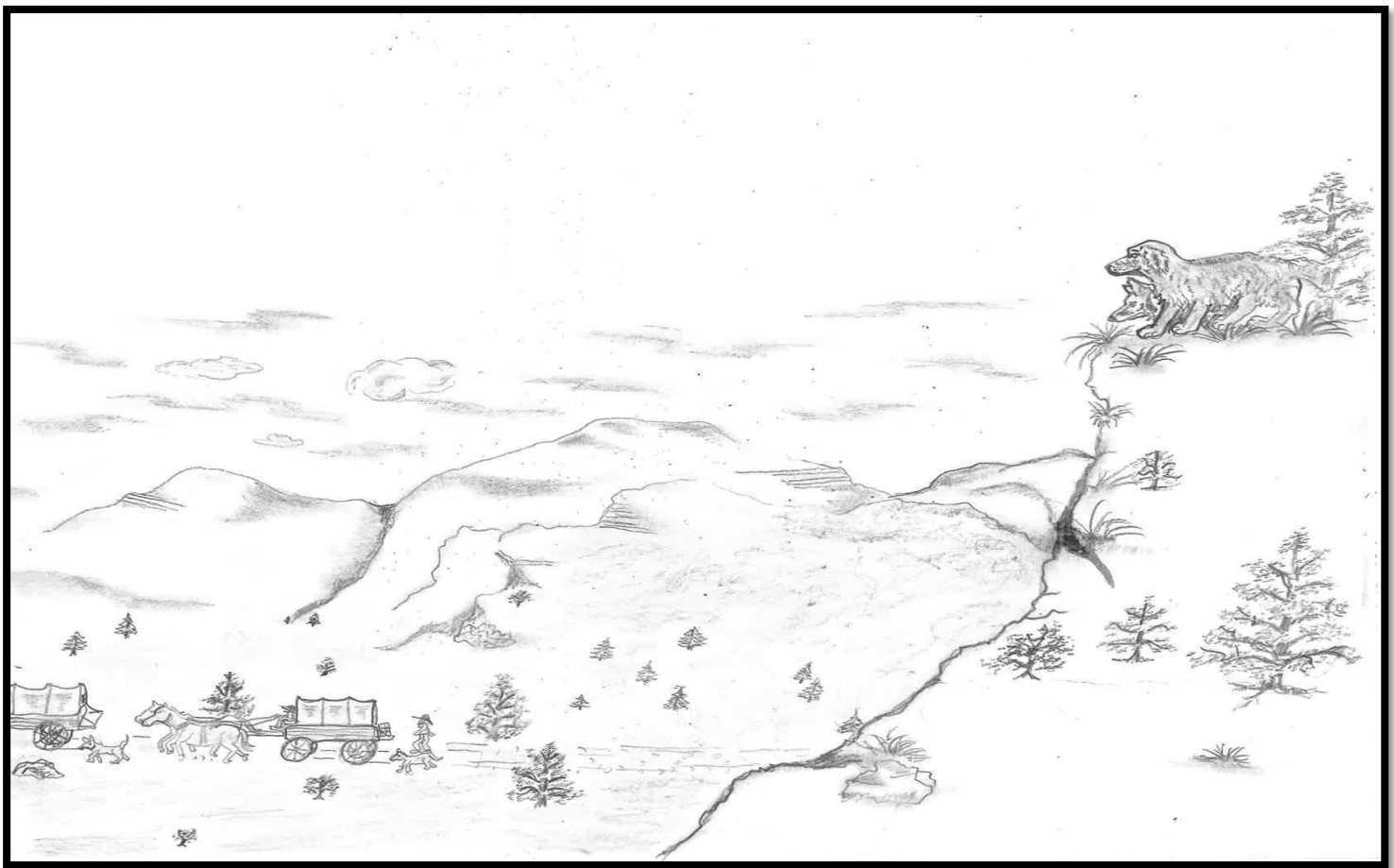
“In two days’ time at first light, we’ll be there!” shouted Rhody before jumping from the wooden vessel. “Watch for my tribe coming down from Goblin Mountain; we won’t disappoint you!”

Quickly reaching the shoreline Rhody stood tall, took in a deep breath then moved his right paw to the center of his chest and lowered his head in a slow respectful bow, acknowledging each raft with the GoMan salute as they floated by. After the last raft passed, he quickly disappeared into the woods.

For the rest of the afternoon, the war party progressed along the river while the sun played hide and seek with the clouds, occasionally choosing to come out and dry their

river-drenched fur. After a full day riding the river, the hounds needed a good rest before they trekked through the forest.

When the distant, reddish-yellow sun had finally descended behind the mountains, the hounds came ashore, shaking their pelts dry. Not wishing to travel in the darkness, the canine army made camp near the shoreline for the night. Darkness was the time of the cat and not a good marching idea for hounds who have difficulty seeing in the dark. There would be no fires tonight; they needed to remain undetected.



## CHAPTER 24

### GIGGLING VALLEY

**T**hat night, when the pale, quarter moon started its ascension into the sky, adding its glow to that of the twinkling stars, Savior gathered the warriors together to prepare for the next day's journey.

Speaking as loud as she could—almost in a yell so each hound could hear her words, she began. “I'm not looking forward to telling you this bit of information,” she explained before pausing for a moment to garner the strength needed to proceed.

“But as some of you may already know, the Elder is traveling ahead of our army. He left a few nights ago in order to seek permission for all of us to travel safely through Giggling Valley.”

Whimpers of fear could be heard among the crowd at the mentioning of the dreaded Giggling Valley. The older hounds who'd heard the legend of Whitebear and the Bearclan Wolfhounds knew it was a territory that was fiercely protected. No animal had traveled through this valley and lived to tell the tale, or so the legend goes.

“This wild valley cuts straight through the mountains and has always protected our foreground from the cats. It will save us an extra day’s travel by not having to work our way around the mountainside,” she barked, staring with confidence at the fearful hounds.

“The Elder has gone to seek permission from Greybear, the head of the clan, to travel through his valley. If we are granted safe passage, you must remain watchful every step of the way. For those of you who have not heard the story of Giggling Valley; grab a seat, get comfortable and I’ll tell you what was told to me many years ago by the Elder.

Pausing for a moment, allowing the hound’s time to settle in for her story, Savior then began. “It all started a long time ago in the early frontier days of the Wild West, with a steely, blue-eyed puppy named Ghost who was born with a thick pelt of white fur.

“Ghost, an Anatolian shepherd, was born in New York City. When he was just a puppy his family ventured out west to San Francisco for the booming gold rush. Traveling across the great western plains was no easy task, especially for a young, city dog who needed to walk every step of the way.

“Banding together for better security, humans made this journey in large groups called wagon trains to help protect them from marauding bands of Indians who roamed freely through this wild land.

“As Ghost and his family’s wagon train approached the Rocky Mountains, they were attacked by a tribe of Arapaho Indians, the most feared warriors in the land. Kidnapped that day by this Arapaho tribe, Ghost never saw his family again. Still a young puppy, he was then given to the Indian Chief as a present from his victorious warriors and bequeathed with the Indian name of ‘Whitebear’.

“Whitebear was then raised within this Indian tribe and given the same level of respect as his master, the Arapaho Chief. During these formidable years Whitebear was taught the secrets of the hunt and the laws of the land by his Chieftain Master and eventually he became an accomplished scout dog for the Arapaho tribe. No longer a naïve puppy, he grew to become a massive dog that quickly learned how to adapt to the wildness of this unforgiving land. Growing strong and powerful, Whitebear gained status as the fiercest dog of the Arapaho tribe, its alpha hound. However, as a dog raised in the wild, Whitebear knew in his heart that he belonged to no man!”

This drew a massive round of barks and growls from the canines who’ve spent their lives as free dogs, owned by no one.

“Well, one warm summer night as Whitebear grew more confident with his abilities to live off of the land, he felt it was time to move on and seek out the adventures of the Wild West on his own. Gratefully licking his master goodbye as he peacefully slept unawares, Whitebear then quietly strolled out into the wild on his own.

“Meandering through the lands in search of adventure, Whitebear visited strange cities where he looked on in wonder at the contraptions and buildings of the white man. Then, after sauntering through wild territory for over a year, he came across a familiar

sight. At first, Whitebear couldn't believe his eyes as memories from long ago flooded into his mind. Forming in the distance like a never-ending snake, he saw a wagon train approach. Seeing this moving, man-made snake bend its way along the terrain brought back long hidden memories to this Arapaho Indian hound. Instinctively, Whitebear was moved by an overwhelming need to protect these pioneers from the very same fate that he and his family endured a long time ago.

“Like a long lost puppy finally coming home, Whitebear ran out to happily greet the forward scouts of the wagon train. Although uninvited and initially facing taunts from the alpha scout dogs, he held his ground and slowly became an accepted pack-member to the roving pioneers. Assisting them in the hunt for wild game, Whitebear soon proved his worth and eventually became a lead scout for the wagon train.

“Over the ensuing years, Whitebear became the most famous scout dog in all the land. He was known to lead wagon trains over any mountain pass and through any weather no matter how difficult the trek. The legend of Whitebear grew as the seasons passed; he was considered a lucky charm for traveling pioneers.

“Through all his many years as a lead dog, Whitebear never once lost a family to the wild Indians. Raised as an Indian himself, he knew how to access the safest passageways and how to keep out of sight of the roving Indian bands; he knew which territories to avoid. Then, one fateful day, Whitebear discovered that love can make you do crazy things—that's when he met Penny.”

Savior paused for a moment, looking around to see if the hounds were still listening. Seeing many pairs of eyes still staring at her, she continued.

“Penelope was a street-smart Irish setter who grew up without a home on the streets of Boston, Massachusetts. Living in dirty city streets amongst a multitude of mangy hounds who survived by begging for food; Penelope always managed to carry an aura of class about her. Never having to beg for food herself, Penelope was blessed with impeccable beauty and kept her head held high as she walked along the city streets impersonating a hound from a good family. Using her good looks, Penelope discovered life was easier by mingling with the canines of higher society where food and shelter were always plentiful. Soon, she fell in with a family of boxers who served as guard dogs for a wealthy banking family.

“Sigmund Brook, the eldest of these boxers, fell in love with Penelope at first sight, like most unsuspecting dogs did when confronted by her grace and unmistakable beauty. When Sigmund's owners were preparing to move out west to California for the gold rush, he invited her to tag along. Sigmund promised her an amazing adventure and intoned that a better life was waiting to be discovered out west.

“Penelope accepted without hesitation, and little did she realize, this would become the grandest adventure of her life.

“Keeping to himself as the lead scout, Whitebear remained far ahead of the wagon trains, yet he couldn't help but notice Penelope on their first day out of Boston when they

started off together as a group. However, as a wise hound he knew to keep his distance since the over-protective boxers were always lurking nearby, protectively watching her every move.

“It didn’t take long before this rambunctious Irish setter found herself at the forefront of the ever-moving wagon train, following in the earthly scent of this mysterious Whitebear. “Tell me about the wild west!” she often asked after finally matching pace with the elusive Anatolian shepherd. Penelope was quite intrigued by this wild, Indian hound and enjoyed hearing his stories of surviving in the wilderness.

“Each day Penelope and Whitebear began spending more time together far in front of the wagon train, and on these days, Sigmund Brook began to grow more jealous. Sigmund discussed this with his brothers and they eventually formed a plan; soon they would teach Whitebear a lesson.

“With her irresistible charm, wit and beauty, Whitebear grew more entranced with this vibrant city girl as each day passed. That's when he first realized there was something important missing from his life. Whitebear discovered feelings of love and desire harboring inside him that he never before knew could exist. Thoughts of family and a future with little puppies running around flooded his mind as if they were a raging river that had finally been set free from a long-confining dam. Questioning his current course in life, Whitebear realized he had worked as a scout dog long enough; he decided his new purpose was to win Penelope’s heart.

“Waiting for her in the first light of morning, Whitebear taught Penelope all about surviving in the wild as she joined him in leading the wagon train together. Entering the Rocky Mountains, these two dogs traveled stride for stride, as each one fell in love. Whitebear fell in love with Penelope while Penelope fell in love with the wild.

“Nearing a tall mountain peak with the shape of a flying Eagle, Whitebear took the wagon train around the mountainside towards his favorite valley. This picturesque valley was filled with lush, green grass engulfed by wide meadows of tall, wild wheat that was fed by a slow-moving stream running unfettered down the middle. High mountains encompassed both sides like a protective glove feeding this stream with its runoff while a grove of aspen trees added a sprinkle of white to the green of the meadows. The wagon train arrived and made camp just as the sun sank in the distance exactly where the stream traveled out of view, like a burning flame cooling off in gentle waters.

“That night, as he slept alone at the far edge of camp, Whitebear awoke to a faint rustle approaching his way from the distance. At first, he prepared himself for an attacker, until he smelled the familiar scent of Penelope sneaking out to meet with him. ‘At first light, the boxers are coming for you,’ she warned. ‘I heard them whispering their plans while I pretended to sleep.’

“Whitebear was a beast of a dog that never once ran from a fight, yet it wasn’t a fight he wanted, it was Penelope’s heart he was hoping to win. ‘I’ve journeyed over mountains, through the most treacherous of forests, and across barren lands in the course

of many years,' he explained to Penelope. 'Yet I've never come across another creature like you. Traveling with you these many days has opened my heart to such great feelings that I never knew existed. If you feel the same way about me, my beautiful Penny that I feel about you please consider running away with me. We could start a family right here in this amazing valley!'

"That next morning, before sunrise, Sigmund and his brothers silently crept their way towards the unsuspecting Whitebear. As they sprang into action and pounced upon his camping spot, Whitebear was nowhere to be found—neither was Penelope.

"Later that day, as the wagon train exited through the valley without its lead scout, two hounds of the wild watched from the high cliffs above.

"Whitebear and Penny remained in that same valley and carved out a happy home within its woods. Between the high cliffs and steep hills grew many litters of Irish shepherd puppies who ran wild and free on their sacred land. One day, listening to the laughter of his puppies playing along the stream, Whitebear gave their home a name, and never again left the hills of their 'Giggling Valley'.

"As the years went on, these puppies knew less and less of civilization that existed beyond the hills of their valley. Word spread far and wide of the ferocious Bearclan Wolfhounds who fiercely protected their valley from all outside intruders. In the following years, traveling hounds heard rumors of this dangerous valley where animals would enter and never be heard from again.

"This is the same valley we need to venture through in order to reach the enemy camps before they move their position once again. If the Elder succeeds in getting permission from Greybear, everyone must stick together and follow each other in a single file line. Surely, any hound that strays from the pack may never be heard from again. Also, no matter what you see, or what you hear, just keep moving forward and follow the dog in front of you. Courage and I will be leading you every step of the way.

"Now all of you get some rest. We'll be heading out at first light."

Afterwards, Courage and Savior huddled close, their warm bodies sheltering each other from the damp, nightly chill. Discussing the next day's adventures, they both understood that this could be their last time spent together.

"Sister, no matter what happens," remarked Courage, "we go out fighting side by side. We came into this world together, we leave this world together. Agreed?"

"Agreed my brother," she replied.



## CHAPTER 25

### FOG OF EVIL

**D**uring the night, angry dreams fueled visions of an unrecognizable enemy who took the form of a ghostly figure baring snarling fangs. Comfortably laying on a freshly dug pad of soft dirt, Courage's eyes remained closed, but his lips angrily twitched, pulling back into snarls as he battled an unknown adversary.

The dark of night was fading into light when he jolted upright, biting viciously into an empty wind. With his heart racing, Courage gulped fresh air into his lungs as he desperately tried to shake the nightmare from his still-slumbering mind.

A fiery sting made siege upon his lower neckline and the scars on his muzzle bit hungrily into his skin; both reminders of the fury he suffered at the claws of an evil beast. *How long will this continue to burn?* He pondered.



All about him was a quiet calm; in the distance an owl softly hooted, before escaping the approaching daylight to a nearby wooden home. This was the morning's calm before the storm.

The morning sky quickly turned angry as ominous clouds moved venomously under a bruised sky attacking the sun's strength and bringing a damp chill to the air. Lightning lanced the horizon, flickering in and out of existence like a giant toying with a new flashlight followed by the approaching sounds of thunder that shook the ground below as if the child was now angrily stomping the ground in frustration over withering batteries.

The sleeping dogs rose and huddled together under nearby trees to avoid the torrent of rain, yet after a while it was of no use, for they were all thoroughly drenched.

Throughout the morning they marched onwards, wet fur and clogged paws drudged along muddy pathways until the noonday sun blinked its way over the weakening clouds. Eventually their pelts dried, the land hardened, the leaves withered, and the hounds grew parched as the afternoon sun poured its brilliance upon them, yet the hounds plodded ahead; uncertain as to where they were going, but sure of their ultimate destination.

Making good time, the war party moved on in silence as they neared Giggling Valley. Trepidation and uncertainty washed over the troops; no one had ever traveled to, let alone ventured through this valley before and not one hound knew for sure how Greybear would react to their intrusion.

Clearing a low ridge, they came upon a menagerie of thick woods and dense undergrowth which served as a living doorway to the valley beyond. No clear trail or passage presented itself so Courage and Savior, now leading the pack, inserted themselves into the forest as best they could with the canine force following in their footsteps. Threading their way through a scatter of thorny shrubs and scraggly trees, errant branches mercilessly clawed at their faces leaving many with thin strips of blood across their snouts. Above them, spruce and soldier pines thrust up to the belly of the sky like tall, green spears while on the ground, hidden roots grabbed at their feet molesting the hounds as they passed.

They had traversed only a short distance through these treacherous woods when Courage caught sight of swift shadows darting to and fro up ahead. Sensing that something was to the left, then to the right, Courage turned to look, yet nothing could be seen.

A strong breeze fought its way through the trees, carrying with it an unfamiliar odor—a scent of earthen canine which heralded the presence of wolfhounds. The smell of death clung to the trees and to the prickly shrubbery all around him, pelting Courage's nostrils with a heavy smell that was both sweet and foul. Or was it just his imagination?

From somewhere ahead a wolf howled. It was a long, rising wail that moved through the trees like a cold, treacherous wind and seemed to hover in the air, locked into the windswept stillness before echoing back again—a dreadful noise that served as a warning to the invaders.

Then, in response, the forest quieted and all was still. No birds could be heard, no crickets chirped, only the forgotten echo of a throaty howl carried above the sound of their footfalls on the forest floor.

After what seemed an eternity marching through the silent forest, yet was only a short distance, the reassuring glow of sunlight slanting sideways through the dense canopy marked their exit.

Clearing the forest, the army of dogs found themselves standing before a massive valley with imposing mountains encroaching downwards. A winding waterway bordered by meadows clad in a dark green hue pierced the land. Thickly wooded forests climbed high into the hills in a vain attempt to reach the upper mountaintops.

Leading the pack, Courage and Savior were the first to notice the Elder resting against a dead tree that angled awkwardly from the ground like an old, gray bone on a tired body. Next to him sat a massive wolf of a dog who appeared to be part of the tree, dead and gray, if not for the presence of its tail which swished slowly back and forth, sweeping dry leaves—the only movement that caught the eye. Perhaps due to a trick of the light, sitting next to the Elder, an aristocrat amongst canines, this wolfhound appeared in comparison to be a monstrous beast. His pelt was gray in color with intermittent stripes of pure white, a gift from his forefather, Whitebear. His name was Greybear and his unblinking eyes watched Courage and Savior with a cold crispness as they neared, wearily examining their every move. This unwavering stare hinted of an unhinged wrath that was only temporarily held in place. He appeared to be as tough as an old root and as hard as stone.

“Glad you could finally make it,” barked the Elder as he looked over the approaching army of fellow canines. “Greybear and I have been waiting for your arrival,” he continued, nodding in the direction of the hulk of a hound next to him. “Greybear has graciously given us permission to travel through his valley, but there are a few rules that we must adhere to. First of all, everyone must move in a single file line and only travel along the river's edge at the heart of the valley—do not stray from this route. Need I remind anyone here that the Bearclan Wolfhounds do not enjoy having visitors travel through their valley?”

“Follow the hound in front of you and do not stray, no matter what you see or hear around you.

“Greybear and I will follow in the rear. Now let's get going before we lose any more daylight!” he commanded. “Savior and Courage, you lead the way.”

Traveling down into the valley, grass along the wide open meadows rose waist high around them, spreading outwards like ripples on an ocean. Aiming directly for the shiny glitter of a central river way fed from the opposing mountains, the army moved in a single file line as instructed. The smell of death had vanished along with any hint of wind. The sun, now directly above, shined warmly over them while the going now proved faster. Moving unmolested they once again made good time. No hound dared to stray from the

pack, nor spend time looking about. Their mission was to move swiftly and pause for nothing—a task in which every hound followed to the letter.

The pristine valley proved inviting and uneventful as they spent the afternoon trotting through, which was quite unexpected from such a treacherous place. Greybear had kept his word and his wolfhounds remained in the woods beyond, watching for any stragglers detouring from their route.

When the sun was once again low in the sky, they ascended the valley. Ahead of them, golden wheat-filled meadows stood before low rising hills like an entryway carpet. Beyond the hills stood a forest of oak and evergreen trees that appeared older and darker than any they had previously encountered. This was Goblin's Forest where the felines were rumored to be amassing.

The canine army stopped to fish along the river's edge before entering the meadows. The fishing proved bountiful and the canine army filled their bellies while watching the golden-orange sun make its final descent past the far off cliffs, burnishing all the little white clouds above it with a bright red and purple as it fell. Not wanting to travel in the treacherous night, they made camp in a shallow, grassy bowl atop a nameless hill that lay before the entrance to the forest.

Huddling together to stave off the encroaching chill, Courage and Savior bedded down for the night in a thicket of grass, yet anticipation of the coming battle gnawed at Courage's stomach like a toothless dog, offering him little solace and zero chance of falling asleep.

Thunder rolling softly in the distance threatened to invade, but directly above the sky remained clear. With a cacophony of snores coming from his fellow canines, Courage laid in his back human-like exposing his belly to the stars above which seemed brighter than he had ever noticed before and appeared to be so close that he could reach out and touch them.

The wind picked up, becoming a living thing that howled about like a wolf, then fell off into nothing just as quickly. In response, the trees creaked back and forth, complaining of this torment like abandoned souls moaning into the night while their branches angrily scratched at one another with wooden fingers.

Amidst this commotion, a low voice, no more than a whisper as thin as a mouse's whisker called out to Courage between gusts of the biting wind. Barely catching the sound, Courage turned towards the noise, straining his ears in an attempt to triangulate the source.

Carried in the next williwaw, the soft, fluttering voice sounded again, yet this time he heard it more clearly. "Come this way," it announced.

Staring into the darkness, Courage was unsure of whether he should venture forth, yet waiting for the voice to sound again, curiosity got the better of him and he found himself cautiously rising from his nest in the grass. Scampering towards the sound, he came across a stream and paused at the edge, not willing to venture across.

Catching movement from the corner of his eye, a pale shadow appeared from the rustling of the nearby woods and glided smoothly along the darkness towards him. Stopping on the opposite bank, the Elder appeared with a stoic expression on his face, “Come this way,” he requested with no other explanation before turning back into the trees.

Courage scurried across the waterway then followed the Elder into the woods until they came upon a small clearing amidst a thick grove of Aspen trees—an oasis of leaves and grass surrounded by watchful sentinels.

“Courage,” the Elder said when they were sitting face-to-face on a soft patch of wheat grass in the center of the clearing. “I came here tonight to give you a final lesson. You've become an excellent warrior; capable of fighting any beast, but now it is time to open your mind to a new power, one that will add a new dimension to your strength.

“My young Courage, you must understand that there is an ever-present shadow in the world and an evil that represents it. We, as a canine race, were born to stand with the light, with the good, and to always fight against the forces of dark. We are the rulers of good; ignorance, fear, and hate—these are the tools of our enemies.

“In order to effectively battle these forces of evil, you need to have mastered a level of peace within yourself and by doing so; your mind will flow with complete openness freeing it to receive the true natural energy mother earth provides for us. First, like I have taught you, put aside any thoughts that keep your mind occupied and focus only on the peaceful world that surrounds you now.”

The Elder then rested his body on the comfortable grass and closed his eyes, patiently waiting for Courage, whose face was frowning in concentration, to follow suit. They lay together while Courage focused his mind to reach the proper state—a process he practiced many times since that first day atop the Hidden City.

“Now that you have set your thoughts free and are not bothered by petty issues, I want you to open your mind to the world that exists all around you. Hear with more than just your ears, listen with your heart,” he commanded. “Search outward with your mind and feel the life-forces about you. Listen to all of the beings that encompass your surroundings and hear what they are thinking; concentrate on their thoughts. By doing this, you will be able to comprehend the purpose of a great many creatures you never knew existed before. You seek a congruence with them by using your two strongest muscles. Search with your mind, listen with your heart and let your soul be the conduit.”

Courage held Elder's voice close to his body, letting the warmth and comfort of his words soothe him like a child with his favorite blanket, lulling him into a trance-like state where he no longer held thought nor carried a concern; his mind reached nothingness. Floating through this surreal level of consciousness the quiet of night washed away and in its place came the rhythm of nature.

Feeling a surge of energy erupt from within him, Courage felt as if he had been standing deaf in the midst of a crowd and now he could hear rivers of conversation whirling all around him. Courage's whole body; starting from his head and the neuron's in his brain

to his throat and through his heart, a channel of energy continued downwards to his spine and then to his legs which felt like they were sunken into the soil below, as if he was rooted tree-like into the earth, sending down then drawing up in return a natural current of energy. Tuning into this ethereal world, he felt the thoughts of the beings around him; from the worms and the ants just above them to the squirrels residing in the heart of the trees and even the birds in their hidden nests. The concerns of a nearby owl floating through the air mixed with the dreams of sleeping crickets in the shrubbery next to him became a simple melody. Intelligent life, he observed, existed everywhere.

Immersing himself in the thoughts and feelings of the beings around him, Courage was able to attain a state of inner peace so profound that he ceased to exist as an individual and now found himself to co-exist together with the world all about him. Understanding himself to be in unison with nature, Courage felt the energy from every creature around him absorb into his presence. He became stronger of body, keener of mind, truer of sight, and more intensely in love.

The Elder knew exactly when Courage reached this state of mind, for he too felt it. Joining together with Courage a bond formed between them. Using this newfound connection, the Elder now spoke to him through a telekinetic process of the mind without vocalizing any words.

*Excellent my young hound, he said. This level of inner peace you have now attained will help to strengthen your mind and body in times of need. When you're facing your harshest enemy or enduring your toughest moment, it is this force that you must tap into. Summoning this power in the midst of battle will bring you to your fullest might.*

*Stay here and flourish within this tranquility.* The Elder commanded before silently vanishing back into the shadow of night.

In the hour before dawn, when the world was still and gray, well before the first rays of sunlight broke over the horizon from the east, Courage woke fully-rested from his short slumber. Taking in a deep breath of morning air, he expanded his lungs to their fullest. The air felt fresh and clean, full of new scents and wondrous smells. This day marked a new beginning for Courage, one where he now felt a congruity with nature and was truly able to share consciousness with all beings that existed all around him.

Rising from his nest in the grass, Courage eagerly galloped off towards his sleeping companions with a joyous spring to his step. Entering into camp, he found many others to already be awake and by the time the first lights of dawn rose from the eastern horizon they were once again on the move.

Goblin's Forest loomed ominously before them. It appeared eerie and treacherous in the morning light as a blanket of pale fog crept along the forest floor—long white fingers of dampness that flourished among these treacherous woods. Yet they had no choice but to enter and the dog army, well rested from a good night's sleep, cautiously approached with Courage and Savior taking the lead.

Venturing into the forest, they encountered groups of thick, black tree trunks crowded close together with masses of twisted branches woven into dense canopies that kept most of the daylight out while harboring darkness within. The undergrowth beneath was sparse and the forest floor was carpeted in a thick layer of fallen needles and soggy leaves, all of which made for slow going.

After some time, they came upon a crooked game trail that meandered its way through the woods and by following this newfound pathway the hounds made better time while endless hours slipped by. Prepared for battle at every turn of the trail, they constantly sniffed for any scent of felines and remained ever-vigilant for signs of movement or danger.

The woods became thinner and patterns of gold sunlight threaded through the trees lighting their way as more leagues were traversed. At the day's start, the distant mountains were no more than ghostly shapes on the horizon, yet as time progressed the distant range acquired substance. The highest peak of Goblin's Tooth Mountain could now be seen, which was gray and of bare stone, for it was so high-up that nothing would grow on it.

Come nightfall, the scouts returned with news of a nearby watering hole but still no sign of the felines. Following a well-traveled pathway, the canine force discovered a large, open bank, bordered by a stream so clear, it was invisible in the faint light of evening.

Camp was made, fishing commenced and lookouts were posted; the further they traveled, the more cautious they became. With the sun already descending behind the nearby mountaintops, the sharp bite of frost now crept into the air and fires were set to provide them with needed warmth. Dinner was cooked over the crackling fires while the dogs relaxed, told stories of past adventures, and discussed strategy for the days to come.

They slept peacefully that night, the low mounds of fire continually throbbed like beating hearts of ancient dragons, earthen beasts which provided them with comfort from the frigid night air and protection from wayward creatures. Occasionally, a patch of silver sparks would flare upwards and cowardly escape into the darkened sky towards the gray-colored quarter moon that rose stealthily across the night sky.

In the midst of another nightmare, Courage found himself battling a new foe. An evil beast with a body of smoke, was smashing him into a bloody pulp with swipe after swipe from its bear-like claws. Courage's jaw muscles knotted painfully as he fought back with a berserker's rage, but in this nightmare, he could not get the upper hand.

As Courage fought for his life in this deadly dream, a thin shadow removed itself from the darkness and silently crept towards him. Approaching closer, the figure stopped when it was nearby. Speaking to Courage telekinetically with a strong, confident voice. *You cannot escape this beast, it said. You are strong and brave, be not afraid of the dark. Find strength from within and defeat this creature.*

In his nightmare, Courage still cowered against the onslaught from this smoky beast, but hearing the words spoken to him, a mysterious energy sprouted from within. Tensing the muscles in his body, he brought forth a fever that initiated from somewhere

deep inside. This fever quickened his breath and energized his body, producing a sense of invincibility.

*Now destroy him!* The voice said.

Stepping sideways, Courage parried a blow from this creature, then bobbed and weaved like a boxer before charging from low on the ground. Chomping on skin and fur with his canine fangs, blood poured from the open wounds of this smoky being. Rearing back on his hind legs, Courage then aimed for the throat of this faceless anomaly. Finding purchase, he grabbed hold of the skin and bit down with all his might, causing the neck to snap like a broken twig. Moments later, the creature imploded and vanished into the air.

With the destruction of his adversary completed, Courage woke from his dream to find the fatherly eyes of his GoMan Master, looking upon him.

“Not a bad victory my young warrior,” the Elder spoke in a whisper, careful not to wake any other hounds. “Always remember that any beast, no matter how terrible and vicious they seem, can be defeated.” With those words, he turned and departed into the same shadows he had come from.

*Follow me, Scarface,* he spoke to Courage.

Dutifully, Courage rose and followed in the footsteps of the Pharaoh hound.

Courage found him sitting in an open field and took a seat directly in front of him.

“The next phase in your long journey begins tomorrow,” the Elder said to him as they once again sat nose to nose under the stars in a grassy meadow devoid of trees. “You need to prepare yourself. Courage, you are an immensely strong hound and a powerful GoMan Warrior. You have the right to match up to any beast, but it is your mind that still harbors doubt and carries within it a sliver of fear. Confidence in yourself is the next mountain you must climb. You will now derive this confidence, this power, from mother earth and the energy she provides you. This energy is shared by all the beings of life that surround you. Not just the mobile creatures you connected with yesterday, but the lethargic beings that slowly rise from mother earth herself such as the monstrous trees that surround us and each tiny sliver of grass that encompasses this meadow. We all share in the same energy and are nourished by it as well.

“You will now concentrate on what I tell you and do exactly as I do. At this moment, you are not in battle; you are relaxed and living in the present. Own this feeling and calm your emotions, create peace within yourself. Now feel the earth beneath your paws as I taught you. The soil breathes beneath you.”

The Elder calmly closed his eyes and carried himself into a trance as he awaited Courage’s arrival on this enlightened plane. Following the process he learned yesterday, Courage lulled himself into a trance-like state as the world went dark around him.

“Can you feel it?” the Elder asked when he felt Courage’s energy join with him. “This is the vitality of mother earth. Sense this energy seeping up from the ground and upwards into your heart until it ultimately engulfs the whole of your body.”

*Now open yourself to this feeling and listen to the brilliance of the world around you, the Elder said to Courage through his mind. Hear what the trees are saying and what the grass is telling you. Visualize what the birds are seeing and taste what the ants are eating. Feel me next to you and share in the love that flows from my heart. All of these creatures are speaking to you and waiting for you to partake in their world, to share in their energy. Join with them and become one with nature. Find that true connection with all the beings around you. Feed from their energy, share in their strength and grow with unimaginable power.*

Through his mind, Courage expanded his senses and began to taste, feel, and hear the once-hidden world all about him. An internal awareness grew from within.

With his heart working like an antenna, receiving input from every possible angle, while his mind continued the circle by sending his energy outwards, Courage felt as if he had just awakened from a long night’s sleep into a bright new morning. He sensed a family of squirrels resting in a nearby tree and felt their closeness to one another, their unconditional love for each other. Then incredibly, he felt the pure joy the pine tree relished in for being chosen by the family of squirrels to make their home in. Courage peeked through the eyes of an owl whose nighttime world was bright as day. He understood the language of a cricket who was romancing a resistant mate. Courage even experienced the taste of a freshly chewed leaf from a caterpillar that was eating dinner nearby. He was sharing in the life-force of every being that dwelled about him.

Immersing himself in this brilliance, Courage was able to acquire a state of connection that was so complete he lost all feelings of individuality and personal regard. Accepting this new state of being, Courage felt his body grow stronger, his mind grow sharper, and his vision become limitless.

*We are creatures of the light, he heard in his mind’s ear. We fight for good, for our fellow hounds, and for the protection of man. Hate and fear is our enemy. When you find yourself in battle, draw from this energy. Feel the strength, share in the power and innate love of everything that surrounds you and acquire the vigor that mother earth endows upon you. Then let your actions flow naturally and trust in yourself. Have no doubt in your ultimate victory. Sleep now my young hound and when you awake, realize your destiny.*

In the morning, Courage woke as a punishing breeze crept in from the mountains carrying a chill that attempted to pierce Courage's fur. If he could form them, goose bumps would scour the surface of his hide as he scampered back to his pack. As the top of the orange sun birthed the far horizon, he nuzzled against Apple lovingly, nudging her awake. More hounds rose with the sun and before long the army was once again on the move.



Traveling through sparse woodlands, they marched quickly in search of their elusive prey. Scouts were sent out in all directions, yet the spearhead, led by Tracker and a few others with remarkable sniffers, continued towards the feline's last rumored location.

Moving just behind the spearhead, Courage felt a wave of nausea grumble his insides as if a rotten meal was attempting to settle. Running with the pack, his heightened senses were fully entwined with his immediate surroundings, yet try as he might, he could not get a bead on anything ahead.

After traveling for two league's they entered into a heavily wooded valley and descended into the lowlands where a dank mist had settled, masking the damp ground underneath. A mounting sense of doom attacked Courage's heart, causing it to skip a beat as his footfalls disappeared into the shallow fog.

While they continued along the valley floor, the mid-afternoon sun above was vanquished behind a horde of dark clouds allowing the fog to ascend to new heights creating dark shadows of the trees and indistinct shapes beyond.

However, the mist had no effect on Tracker's nose; he knew they were getting close—a fire burning in his nose had become scorched with the scent of dirty felines.



## CHAPTER 26

### TERROR

**R**ising up over a small hill, it was Savior who first spotted the enemy. It was nearly impossible to miss the two mountain lions lazily perched atop a large boulder overlooking the valley below.

Surprised by the army of dogs approaching from above, the two lions quickly turned and ran off towards their camp. Quite big in size, these monstrous cats moved with unmatched speed and agility while leaping amongst the trees.

Instinctively, the canines gave chase, heading straight for the lion's den. With hearts pounding and canine teeth flaring they ran down the back of the ridge in pursuit. Up and over a few more hillsides they followed until finally reaching an encampment of cats.

At first, all was calm, until the mountain lions charged into camp to rouse their fellow felines who quickly took notice. Suddenly, cats of every kind including cougars, leopards, panthers, and jaguars, among many others, began crawling out of their temporary dens. With vicious fangs protruding from their muscular jaws and hair standing up along their backs like the quills of a porcupine, the surprised felines hissed with anger at the approaching army.

An endless supply of felines roused from hidden lairs in a steady flow until there looked to be twice as many felines as canines. Standing in the center of camp yelling commands to his troops, was the most terrifying of felines. He was an overgrown Black Panther, who easily outsized all the other cats. With charcoal black fur and a streak of silvery-white running from his forehead down the center of his back to his rump, he looked like a giant, angry skunk. This panther had fangs dangling from his mouth like icicles hanging from the corner of a house after a melting snowfall. Yet, it was his eyes that were the most vicious; he had huge snake-like eyes that glowed with pure yellow, resembling the fire of an angry sun.

Recognizing this cat, shock rippled through Courage's body; he felt as if a bolt of lightning had just slammed its fury upon him. The fur on his back pricked up and cold fingers of fear walked down his spine as old memories resurfaced and fear sunk its icy claws into him. This unforgettable face of evil was forever chiseled onto the stone of memory that weighed down Courage's mind and invaded his nightmares. Directly before him stood the very same panther who attacked Mason and bestowed Courage with the pink scars along his muzzle and neck. *How cruel fate can be*; he thought to himself.

The canines formed together at the base of the enemy camp. These were no mere dogs; these hounds were not raised indoors with nice families and fed gourmet food. They were GoMan Warriors who've trained since they were puppies for an opportunity like this to defeat their archenemy, the wild cat. They didn't train for glamor or glory; these hounds were GoMan Warriors because it was their calling in life. They were born with that extra drive, that inner strength which placed them a step above normal dogs. These canines were proud defenders of the human race and of all creatures friendly to man!

Lining up side-by-side like Roman warriors, the army of dogs marched forward as one. Proudly led by Courage and Savior, twin generals; one black, one white, they prepared to confront a hostile enemy. Decorated with their diamond studded leather collars, they tapped into an inner strength and took each step with brazen confidence knowing all eyes would be upon them, scrutinizing their every move.

"We are here to stop you from attacking the city below!" announced Courage in the fiercest voice he could muster as he stepped forward, peeled his lips back and threateningly displayed his oversized canines before gazing over the enormous crowd of felines. Although his bones seemed to quiver at the reality of what he was saying, Courage knew he could not visibly shake, stutter, his words, falter in his actions, nor show any outward signs of fear. He learned the art of acting tough during his stay in the dog pound—it was a performance he was once again perfecting.

In support of her brother, Savior seized the moment to step forward as she also peeled her lips back exposing her fierce canines, her face becoming a visible storm cloud of restrained fury. "We will not let you pass! You must fight your way through us if you wish to go any further!" she barked as menacingly as possible.

Then Courage turned his attention to the Black Panther with those unforgettable, menacing yellow eyes who led their pack. He took a deep breath, expanding his broad chest

to its fullest while holding his head high and proud. Then staring unblinkingly into those dreadful eyes, he barked with ferocity strengthened with a throaty growl. “Perhaps you are a true leader and can bring us to a peaceful solution without the need for bloodshed.”

In the crowd brooded a ghostly calm; no cat dared to speak. The Black Panther, a commanding presence in the crowd, stood with his nostrils flaring back and forth as he moved his head about, as if he was searching out the source of a bad smell that had invaded the dusty air. His eyes then contracted to vertical black slits as he purposely stepped forward; with each movement he made, each shift of muscle, he seemed poised for attack.

This Black Panther was an evil-looking creature and that’s what he meant to be. He ruled his fellow felines with fear and intimidation and he thrived from the power he received over his subjugates. Those who dared to oppose him were not long for this world. His name was Terror and he was the most terrible cat ever to roam the forest!

Face-to-face with his worst fear, an icy chill started within Courage's bones and rapidly spread outwards like a snowstorm in the arctic, yet he could not show this monstrous panther any signs of fear.

Quite impressive in size, Terror stood with a slight stoop to his shoulders as if he were prepared to pounce at any moment. He looked the part of a seasoned fighter with muscles bulging outwards from every part of his feline frame. His body, thick and massive from a varied diet of deer, antelope, rabbit, and fish, was tattooed with a multitude of scars—the mark of a lifetime in the wild competing for game and territory. Before speaking, Terror clenched his jaw and hissed at the hounds, revealing a full row of razor-sharp daggers.

“How dare you come to our camp and challenge us!” snarled Terror as his tail waved venomously from side to side and distilled hatred spilled from his predatory eyes.

The dog-twins, Courage and Savior, were both a little taller than Terror, yet as they looked down upon this impressive Black Panther they were intimidated simply by peering into those cold, yellow eyes. Courage looked to be a little less thick in size than Terror. Savior, however, looked to just outweigh the cat with her size and muscle. Over the years, Savior had grown into a beast of a dog through her endless training as a GoMan Warrior. As a Great Dane, she was the largest breed of all the dogs and as a GoMan Master; she was a powerful enemy to any cat.

“We will not accept threats from you half-witted canines!” roared Terror, his sharp teeth flashing as he spoke. “I will give you one chance to withdraw your troops and leave this area, or you will all die here today!”

“We will stand here and fight to the last dog,” Courage instinctively barked in response with a resounding growl to his voice. Yet looking at the size of the feline army spreading out before him, Courage could now clearly see that his forces were outnumbered. This sudden awareness allowed for doubt to enter into his mind. *But*, he argued with himself, *these are the toughest canines in the entire world—my fearless Howlers hounds from the streets of Raventon and an army of GoMan Masters who've trained their whole*

*lives for a battle like this!* Then looking across at the opposing forces, he noticed leopards and cougars who were just as large as he was. At that moment, he thought of a way to save his fellow canines from certain death.

“But perhaps we can settle this without bloodshed,” he now argued. “There is no need for cats and dogs to die here today. I challenge you to a duel, just me against you! If you lose, you will be disgraced to have lost to a dog and your followers will be disheartened at your weakness! Yet, if you defeat me, you’ll have defeated a pup of the great King Gallant!”

Savior couldn’t believe what she was hearing. *Was he insane?* She wondered, listening to her brother attempt suicide by battling such a war hungry Black Panther. Hearing his brother’s words, Savior instantly feared for his life and wished she could stop him from speaking, yet she masked her fears behind a face kept still and stern, she could not speak up to question his actions, it would ruin this thunder.

Courage, on the other hand, was willing to sacrifice himself in a bold attempt to disgrace the feline army with just one tactical move. He knew that if he could somehow defeat their leader, it would be like cutting off the head of a snake. Without the great panther commanding his forces through intimidation, Courage knew many of his followers would be unwilling to fight for a cause they didn’t full-heartedly believe in—or so he hoped!

Now, all he had to do was face his worst fear! Drawing on the lessons the Elder had taught him, Courage cleared his mind of doubt and worry as he prepared himself for battle.

“Why should I battle you, when we have the numbers to destroy your whole army?” Hollered Terror, his menacing voice echoing in the distance.

“You should fight me to prove you’re a valiant fighter who’s willing to take on any enemy that challenges you!” Courage quickly countered.

“I think we’ll just fight your whole force!” Hissed Terror as he defiantly turned his back to the dogs and carelessly strolled back to his troops.

Then, out of the ensuing silence came a low rumbling from the distant hillside. Faint at first, the noise quickly became a thunder rolling off the hills. This storm suddenly morphed into a chorus of barks as a group of dogs appeared from over the nearby hill and galloped towards the feline camp.

Turning in surprise, the felines observed a large group of dogs stampeding down the slope with one dog leading the pack, his bark like a foghorn announcing their arrival. Stopping their approach on the opposite side of the camp, the new arrivals managed to sandwich the cats between the two groups.

The Hottentot tribe had arrived. These unruly hounds had been hunting wild cats for decades and were itching for a fight. The Hottentot Warriors began antagonizing the larger band of cats that were now within shouting distance; however Rhody had instructed

his warriors not to charge until he gave the word, and he was waiting for a call of battle from the GoMan army.

Terror was now presented with an opportunity to show whether he was a ruler with intellect and reasoning, that which is required to be an effective leader, or whether he was a mere evildoer with the guile of a snake in the grass. With his forces divided and now facing an enemy on two fronts, Terror's defiance began to wane. "I agree to your terms and look forward to devouring this ugly hound who dares to stand before me!" he responded. "But first, I wish to know who is the fastest among our two kinds.

"I challenge your fastest dog to a race against my quickest cat. Today we will determine who the fastest animal in the land is!"

Then Terror called behind him where a wire-framed, yellow and black spotted cat confidently sauntered out from amongst the crowd; her name was Vixen. She was a cheetah who possessed a pair of long, hind legs that acted like feline spring-boards. Shaped like a missile her movements seemed effortless, almost as if she was floating just above the ground with no dirt to heed her motion. Terror had selected his fastest cat, an African claw biter with an unmistakable confidence that she would surely win. Cheetahs are gifted with excellent speed and are said to be the fastest animals on land. However, the longer they run, the harder it is for the cheetah to keep up a solid pace, they are not known for sprinting long distances.

Immediately, Courage knew which dog would match the feline's speed. That's when Racer stepped up alongside him. Racer spent his youth on racetracks, having won over fifty races and lost a few—no dog is perfect. But, today's competition would prove to be his most challenging.

A race was agreed upon and the opposing forces were ordered to temporarily stand down by their leaders. Next, they established the rules. It was decided that this race would start and finish here at the feline camp. They were to race almost five miles to Waterstone Lake, grab one of two sticks that would be placed upon the front shore and race back to the starting point. Savior then drew a line in the dirt, representing the start and finish line.

Racer knew he was facing a daunting challenge, yet he was prepared to sacrifice everything, even himself, to defeat this representative of evil. He was not exactly sure where Waterstone Lake was located, yet Racer planned to follow Vixen to the lakeshore, and then make his move. By staying behind the cheetah and saving his energy for the return trip, he was hoping to trick the cat. Racer hoped the cheetah might gain a false sense of victory by leading the first half of the race and would underestimate the true speed that he possessed. Then, at the last stretch of the race, Racer planned to use all his remaining strength and sprint ahead of the cheetah. By sneaking up from behind and passing the unsuspecting cat like he had done in countless races before, Racer hoped to reach the finish line first; but simply having a plan does not guarantee victory.

Racer was no fool. Spending most of his life competing against the fastest of animals, he knew that no point in the race mattered until the very end. Whichever animal

managed the most acceleration at the end always proved to be the victor. Racer knew the cheetah was extremely fast, yet he hoped to be just fast enough in the last stretch to overcome this formidable feline.

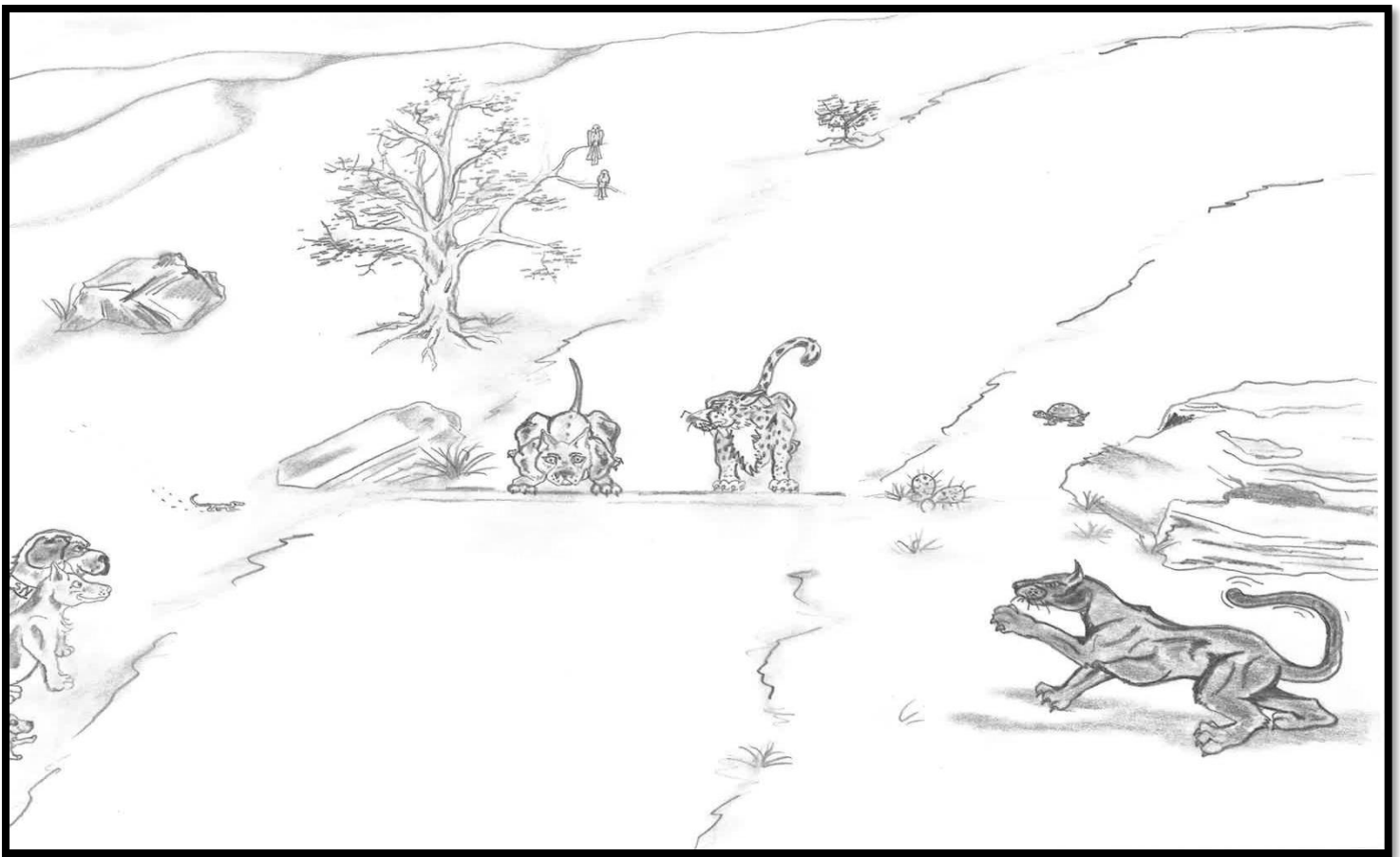
Stretching his hind legs as he stood near the starting point, Racer, with his eyes closed, began mentally visualizing the upcoming race. Every move, every gallop he was to take, he was walking through in his head beforehand.

Courage then approached to offer encouragement. "I just wanted to wish you good luck. This is your time to shine!

"When you are experiencing trouble or getting tired, I want you to place your mind somewhere that gives you happiness. Recall your favorite victory back when you were young and quick, relive every moment of that race. Be that same dog today! Tell yourself you will win, over and over again, and when you think you can't go any further or run any faster, you must believe in yourself, like I believe in you now. Racer, I know there is a great warrior inside of you who will not be defeated. Now go and make us proud!" Courage said before stepping away, leaving Racer alone to prepare for the race.

Both groups of dogs had now merged together, creating a larger force that could now match the size of their prey, this dog army would cheer with all its might for Racer.

A few cats and dogs had already left for Waterstone Lake to place the wooden sticks on the front beach. Suspiciously they watched each other, ensuring neither would cheat.



## CHAPTER 27

### ASSASSINS OF THREE

**T**he grim, cloudy sky dulled the light of day as Terror defiantly stood on the starting line preparing to signal the start. No one, not even a feline stood within striking distance.

Holding position on the opposite end of the starting line stood Courage and Savior. Behind them, an army of dogs remained vigilant, watching for any signs of treachery from the felines. Cats and dogs fanned out along the runway, separated by a mere twenty feet, like bystanders at a Fourth of July parade.

Imitating jackrabbits jumping up and down on the starting line, Racer and Vixen prepared their legs for the race. Looking over at his competitor, Racer noticed just how skinny the cheetah really was. There was not an ounce of fat on this animal. *This cat must never eat*, he thought.

Racer had been training with the GoMan Warriors for months and traveling with the Howlers had helped to increase his daily endurance from where it had suffered at the



dog pound. Looking at his own rib cage, Racer realized he was just as skinny as the cheetah and hopefully just as fast. Being a champion greyhound, he competed against the fastest of dogs over his many years at the racetracks. Positioning himself in a perfect racing stance with his front elbows bent downwards and his nose placed just above the ground, he was an Olympic sprinter waiting for the starting gun to sound. *I will win this race!* Racer told himself over and over again, repeating the same mantra he used when he was a champion racer.

Vixen stood straight up, eyes focused into the distance as she also waited for the signal from Terror. Although her exterior showed no visible signs of emotion, Vixen's insides were in turmoil. This internal tempest was neither stage fright nor pre-race jitters; it was derived from the very real fear that if she lost this race to a dog, she would surely lose her life to a Black Panther.

The felines hissed and roared in encouragement of their fellow cat, while in return the canines were ferociously barking for Racer. Like competing cheerleaders at a football game, the sound of cats and dogs bellowing back and forth echoed throughout the nearby hills. Even the birds high above flew away from the comfort of their patchwork homes in fear of the incessant noises below.

Terror then raised his paw high in the air and silence spread across both forces, whether they were friend or foe. Slowly, he unsheathed his dagger-like claws, using this moment to spread fear upon the opposing army. With his paw still raised, Terror slowly looked out over his brood of cats, prolonging each second into an eternity before he glared viciously at the opposing dogs. At this moment, with all eyes on him, Terror gave the impression of calculated, cold intelligence, as if he were pondering a hundred ideas at once. Finally, Terror looked over at Racer and Vixen, offering his most evil glare to the greyhound. For this one moment, this one miniscule mark on the universal clock of time, Terror was in complete control and enjoyed every second of it. Then, in one dramatic move, he threw down his paw.

Instinctively, Racer leaped from the starting line like a baseball flying through the air for a home run hit. He was extremely fast off the start, a talent he'd acquired at the race tracks. Vixen was right on his tail. Racer immediately began testing the cheetah, trying to figure out her top speed, but before he knew it, she thundered right by him, leaving dust in her wake. *She must be at her fastest,* Racer thought as he fell behind.

Running along the lower hills, these two carved their own trails through the grasslands. Racer increased his pace, yet still found himself trailing the cheetah by about twenty yards. That's where he caught Vixen's trail and began following in her footfalls thus ensuring he wouldn't get lost. Cruising along the grassy meadows for a few miles they maintained their high speeds until nearing the forest.

With the Cheetah in the lead, the two racers approached the forest. Vixen paused for a moment, searching for an entryway, then quickly darted between the trees.

Taking advantage of her indecisiveness, Racer was able to make up some ground before following on Vixen's heels into the forest. Coming upon a patchwork of oversized oak trees littered throughout caused Courage to immediately slow his pace. This terrain proved much more difficult, requiring a great amount of agility to evade the giant, wooden obstacles and wet moss that saturated the ground like muddy quicksand engulfing his paws as he sped through.

Dark and gloomy, Misty Forest acquired its name from a damp fog that creeps its way over from nearby Waterstone Lake every morning. For endless years, it's been a sanctuary for the most frightful of creatures—those who shy away from the light of day. Recently, the felines have used this territory to conceal their movements. Covered with dense brush and filled with massive trees from end to end, this forest was an easy place to get lost and a difficult land to sprint through.

Having never ventured into Misty Forest, Racer was at a terrible disadvantage, but he knew that following Vixen's path was his smartest move. Trusting in this feline, if only for direction, was no easy task, yet at this point, Racer had no choice but to follow the leader.

Darting through the forest, Racer immediately became engulfed in a layer of dampness that clung to his body. The morning mist had now arrived which caused the moisture in the air to limit his keen sense of smell. Reducing his speed, Racer feverishly looked about for signs of trampled ground as he tried following in the feline's path.

Vixen, on the other hand, knew the forest all too well. Not every inch of it, not even the best way through, yet she knew enough to safely dart amongst the dry patches and avoid the moisture rich moss that grabbed at her paws. Agile as all cats are, she became a feline rabbit bouncing safely from place to place. Making quick glances behind her while traversing the woods, she knew Racer was on her trail and used the cover of the forest to remain out of sight.

Losing track of the cheetah, Racer continued his frenzied pace yet now moving through this maze of trees by instinct he relied solely on his senses. Racer feared he would get lost at any moment, yet somehow, he managed to keep moving in the same general direction. Then, sunlight filtered its way through the greenery ahead and he ran towards the light. Finally clearing the trees he acquired Vixen's scent before catching sight of her propelling undaunted through the open field ahead.

The grassy meadows were similar to the previous fields Racer had sprinted through at the start of the race, yet because of their vicinity to the nearby lake, the grass was taller—almost two feet in height, and sturdier, like colossal licorice sticks. Swift movement was easy for him, for the licorice sticks bent easily on contact, but stung his face, chest, and paws as if an army of bees was attacking him.

This was now a game of cat and mouse, only at this moment Racer was the cat chasing this speeding bullet of a mouse.

Finally clearing the fields, Racer now encountered a dried out riverbed littered with rocks and boulders making it hard to catch his footing as he scampered across. Twisting a paw on the uneven ground would surely cost the race. Concentrating solely on his gallop, Racer was not willing to glance ahead and now measured Vixen's lead by the strength of the scent she left behind; sadly his nose was picking up less and less of her scent.

Nearing the lake, Racer could no longer smell the cat and he instinctively chanced a look upwards. Unfortunately, he saw the cheetah racing straight for him with a wooden stick in her mouth. *Stinkin' feline!* He cursed in anger.

Vixen was sprinting directly towards him and a collision was imminent, however, these two were built purely for speed, not for ramming. Vixen veered to her right while Racer did the same and these competitors quickly crossed paths. Racer clearly saw the cat laughing at him as she passed.

Anger at the thought of her laughing seeped into Racer's mind, fueling his determination like high-octane gas to an Indy car. The midday reflection of Waterstone Lake now shown just ahead as he saw in the distance, a crowd of cats and dogs had gathered along the front sandy shore of the lake.

The opposing groups hissed and barked angrily at each other from across a dangerously short distance where the two wooden sticks were initially placed. With Racer approaching, well behind the cheetah, the cats began to shriek with hisses and roars and seemed prepared to ambush the greyhound. The canines that were sent to protect Racer immediately picked up on their enemy's intention and responded with a barrage of their own furious barks and growls.

The hefty wooden stick was easy to see, but its twin was obviously missing. Racer had been running close to full speed the entire race. As he approached the lake, the rampant barking of his fellow hounds reminded him of the cheering crowds he loved to hear at the racetrack. However, Racer could now clearly see that his friends were barking in anger at the cats while these cats were in turn glaring and hissing at him with venomous anger. No matter their intent, this familiar sound brought Racer back to his racing days. He was younger then and loved competing under the roar of the crowd. For a moment, Racer imagined he was back at the first race he ever won! He filled his mind with happiness and positive thoughts from that first victory. Racer imagined himself to be the fastest animal to walk the earth; he could not be defeated.

Approaching the lake, Racer decided that a little water would do him good and he jumped headfirst into the lake. Taking a moment to rejuvenate his body with the icy cold water, he quickly drank his fill before turning to look for his baton. Now completely refreshed, unlike the cheetah—he assumed, Racer jumped out of the lake and sprinted straight for the wooden stick.

With his body dripping wet from the replenishing waters of Waterstone Lake, he started the second half of the race with the wooden baton firmly grasped within his mouth. Retracing the path in the sand he just carved, Racer now ran with a replenished urgency.

Entering the field of boulders, Racer did his best imitation of a butterfly as he leapt from rock to rock just as he observed Papillion do many months before. These boulders were difficult to run through, but his jumping strategy was working well and he managed to move much swifter than before, gaining ground on the cheetah in the process.

Back at the finish line, Courage was anxiously waiting for the competitors to arrive. Accompanied by a few other hounds, he ventured through the grassy field towards the forest to get a closer view of the final stretch of the race.

Racer, having made up much of the distance between himself and the cheetah, was now just entering Misty Forest. Seeing a pathway directly in front of him, he zipped into it without hesitation and quickly picked up speed. This already trampled path contained a faint but obvious feline smell and Racer knew he was on the right course. However, this time he knew to avoid the damp moss that encumbered his speed.

Swerving around these patches, Racer found himself moving at a faster pace than before. He continued on with eyes searching all about, now keenly looking for signs of recent disturbance. Sensing movement ahead, Racer darted forward and instantly knew he was in trouble.

Out of his peripheral vision, he barely noticed a cat leap towards him from behind a tree. Catching sight of this charging cougar at the last moment, Racer instinctively shifted course. Doing so, he felt searing hot pain riddle his hind leg as he was slashed by the claws of the feline. Wincing from the stinging heat, Racer knew the Cougar had cut him deeply, yet no matter the pain, he could not falter.

Just after changing course, Racer felt a presence coming at him from above. Picking up speed, he tried to steer clear, but was caught at the last moment by a mountain lion who dropped from above onto his rear quarters. Yelping in anguish, Racer felt a stab of fire pierce his back as the feline sank his fangs into flesh. With momentum still carrying him forward, Racer instinctively turned towards the nearest tree with this lion clinging to his back. Turning the trajectory of his body, he flew in a sideways motion through the air and scraped against the tree causing the mountain lion to fly headfirst into the bark. Hitting with a bang, the lion instantly fell from his back, giving Racer an immediate release of pain and a new sense of freedom.

However, just as quickly, he ran straight into a third cat. *Seriously!* He thought.

With its back to the stump of a long-dead tree, a lynx was lying in wait, blending into the shadows. Not known for their size, lynx's are feline assassins who possess tremendous speed and agility along with razor sharp claws. Assigned with the task of finishing off Racer, this lynx was expecting to ambush a dog encumbered by two cats; not one fleeing at top speed ahead of these felines.

Seeing no clear angle around the lynx, Racer charged straight on, not losing a step. Swiped across the face in two quick successions as he approached, Racer then rammed into the cat headfirst, knocking him backwards into the tree with his bony head. Racer kept in motion, taking advantage of the momentarily disabled feline he trampled right over the

lynx. His nose and one eyelid were gashed and his face was now dripping with blood, yet Racer did not dare to stop.

Sprinting forward, darting amongst the brush, he heard the felines just behind him chasing on his tail. No longer looking for Vixen, Racer was simply running wild, searching for sight of an exit from this treacherous forest. The burning in his leg remained, the bite on his back throbbed and blood seeped from his snout, but if he faltered now, he was surely a dead dog.

Then, streaks of light filtered through the trees ahead illuminating a passage out of the forest. Moments later, Racer burst through the foliage like a rocket; bloodied and hurt, but alive. Looking about, his heart dropped as he observed the cheetah in the distance ahead of them.

Being a veteran sprinter, Racer knew this final stretch of the race, through the grass-covered meadows would be his ultimate test. Paying no heed to his injuries; he was determined to win and still felt refreshed from his short swim in the lake. Feeling every muscle expand and constrict to its utmost, Racer sped along the ground like a race car with paws for tires. With his mind working faster than his body, every move and every action was planned in advance and time itself slowed, inching by so that each second seemed to take an eternity.

Inching closer with every long stride he took, Racer found himself catching up with the cheetah. Developing tunnel vision, his only focus was on the path ahead and the only sound he heard was that of his own heart beating in rapid succession pumping the fluids of life to his extremities. His concentration was total and he felt no pain. In fact, his mind and spirit were fully invigorated with the extreme intensity of this very moment. Born into the fastest breed of canine, he was meant to run. Racer would make winning this race his destiny.

With every monstrous leap he took, Racer gained more ground on the cheetah and before he knew it, he was running right on her tail.

Fully stretching his legs with each stride, Racer inched his way closer to Vixen. Observing her stride, he noticed how she struggled with her gallop. He could clearly see that she was wearing down—she was tiring.

Finally, Racer had caught up and was matching her stride with his every leap.

Vixen looked over at him with shock in her eyes. *How could this dog be next to me now?* She thought. Kicking her weary legs into high gear, the cheetah now ran with all the speed she could muster.

These two four legged animals of speed running side by side was a sight never before seen. A greyhound, trained by man, with a lifetime of racing experience competing with a cheetah, the fastest cat in the world, trained only by the laws of the wild. This was a rare event; one to be told in the darkness of night from creature to creature, be they canine or feline.

Courage, barking with excitement, followed the competitors as they raced by at lightning speed. He had never seen such quickness before. Running in chase, he paid little attention to the ground before him and failed to notice the rabbit hole directly in his path. Sinking a paw into this hole, he found his paw momentarily stuck before hearing a snap and tumbling to the ground in pain. Instinctively, he climbed to his feet and continued to run, but applying pressure to his front paw, he whimpered in pain and again fell to the ground.

Hearing his cries of pain, the nearby hounds came running to his aid, only to find Courage lying in the dirt in obvious agony. Trying to help, they licked his paw and face with reassurance, yet there wasn't much to be done.

Meanwhile, a loud roaring in the distance reminded them of the race at hand.

With Racer and Vixen in sight of the camp, they were now running stride for stride, exactly even. When Racer nosed ahead, Vixen was able to match his increase of speed evenly. Racer knew he was battling the fastest animal on four legs, but he had faith in himself. Neck to neck with this cheetah, after surviving an ambush and running nearly five miles, he was set on winning.

Roaring and barking like fans at a Super Bowl game, the opposing cats and dogs cheered for their favorite competitor.

With his black nostrils flaring into overdrive pumping oxygen throughout his body, Racer was sprinting with every ounce of energy he possessed, yet he couldn't maintain a lead on the cat. Over and over again he charged, however each surge in speed was matched equally by Vixen. Seeking deep inside himself and recalling what Courage had told him earlier, Racer found an untapped inner strength. At the last possible moment, he once again increased his speed to what felt like an unimaginable pace and inched forward in front of the feline with his lengthy stride. This time however, the cheetah could not match his infusion of speed and for the first time, Racer held the lead. At first it was just by a nose, but as they crossed the finish line, Racer was ahead of the cheetah by half a stride.

He was a champion once again! Racer then dropped to the ground, thoroughly exhausted as an army of dogs came to lick and congratulate him.

With the twang of bellowing hounds in the distance preying upon his ears like a pack of hyena's quarreling over a scrap of meat, Courage knew Racer had won. All around him, his pals celebrated their victory with endless barking vehemently aimed at the felines, yet Courage could not fully rejoice in this canine triumph, he was enthralled with his own inner dilemma. Gathering his strength, he stood up on his three good paws to better examine his injury. His fellow hounds were now surrounding him, barking words of encouragement, but no words could heal this wound. Keenly aware that he was moments away from facing his worst fear, a diabolical cat that had ruled his nightmares for years, Courage felt crushed both in mind and spirit. Overcome with grief, his throat swelled and his stomach seemingly dropped to the floor. *How can I fight Terror now?*

Savior also felt his pain the very moment Courage pulled his paw out of the rabbit hole. Without hesitation she galloped to his aid and met him along the grassy meadow as he dejectedly tried to hop onwards. Licking his paw in a fruitless effort to heal the damage, she knew he was in pain. Standing next to him, she looked into his eyes and could see his quiet despair.

“Courage,” she said. “I know you are hurt, I can see you're in pain; now you are facing your toughest moment and you must use your training and all that you have learned to make yourself whole again. Now is when you tap into that inner power just as the Elder taught you.

“Let go of your worry and doubt,” she commanded him. “I am here to walk you through this, just listen to my words and concentrate on what I say, think about nothing else. We are alone, you and I; nothing else matters.”

Moving to face him head on, she placed her head against his with both their snouts pointing downwards. Then she cast her mind outwards, contacting him through a mental connection which registered more powerfully within his mind than any spoken word. *Close your eyes and let go of your pain, she communicated. Put aside your concerns, they are only temporary and focus on something you love with all your heart. Focus on Apple and let a calm peacefulness flow through your body.*

*Now, I want you to feel the energy of the world around you. Feel the grass below, it is speaking to you, offering you its strength—take it and use it! Your fellow hounds are all around you, can you feel their energy? She asked. Feed from their strength, receive their energy into your body. Now use this energy. Focus this power downwards to your paw. Send it directly into your pain. Tell your muscles, your bones, and your tendons to come together as they were before. Command your body to heal itself and it will be done.*

Meanwhile, not too far away, Terror, his eyes smoldering like liquid gold, looked over at the celebrating hounds and grew more enraged with every second he stared. He planned a perfect ambush, yet Racer managed to clear the forest unbeaten. *Wait till I get my hands on those damn cats!* He thought to himself. Quite an imposing figure, he stood defiantly in the center of camp, surrounded by his warriors. Folding back his black lips, Terror hissed in anger, unleashing his formidable saber-like white fangs. He knew it was time for battle. Being a warrior all of his life, he was now preparing to fight young Courage. Looking about, Terror searched for the Great Dane.

Courage had done exactly as his sister instructed and miraculously, he no longer felt any pain. He remained where he was for a moment, feeling the energy of those around him, using it to strengthen his body while blocking out the surrounding commotion and thoughts that tried to parade through his mind. Commanding his paw to become whole again, his focus was total. Then gingerly, he put weight on his leg and attempted to stand evenly on all four legs. Accomplishing this task, Courage carefully took his first step, bearing more of his body's weight on his injured paw. He was reassured when his leg took the weight without faltering. Step by step Courage cautiously moved forward with Savior hitched faithfully to his side.

With Courage approaching, the canine army erupted in praise for their young leader as barks and howls filled the air. Then, they noticed him favoring his front leg and a resounding silence engulfed the arena just as quickly. Each hound momentarily paused to take a look at Courage as he approached Terror without fear. He made an agreement and was going to stand by his words.

Slowly, Courage ambled towards the panther. His pain was now gone and his mind was clear, yet a sense of doubt that birthed from his injury was knocking on his mental doorstep, attempting everything it could to knock down his walls and invade Courage's mind.

Finally coming face-to-face with Terror, Courage stared directly into the yellow eyes of this beast. Gathering himself together, he prepared for battle. Courage now watched Terror's every move, trying to catch sight of that first twitch of the muscle which would be a precursor of things to follow. That's when fear and hesitation cracked an entrance into his mind, bringing forth an overwhelming desire to turn and run away. However, he knew that if he turned, if he did run, he would feel Terror's teeth on his neck in an instant, long before all four paws had touched back to the ground. Terror looked to be just that fast!

Feeling a wave of fear overtake her brother, as if a protective dam had just been released and thousands of gallons of fear-filled water was now pouring into his mind, weakening his resolve. Savior instantly knew it was her time to step forward. She recalled the words Ironcoat spoke to her before he left the Hidden City. *When you are presented with an opportunity to step forward at a time of great peril, do not hesitate, for you lead others by your actions.* Now, she truly understood what Ironcoat was alluding to—this was her chance to be a hero.

Sacrificing herself, Savior boldly stepped in front of Courage. “You do not show honor by fighting an injured dog! He may be walking, but it is obvious to everyone here that his foot is broken!” she fiercely barked at Terror, hoping to provoke him with her petulant inflection.

“I am Savior, daughter of King Gallant, sister to Courage, and I challenge you in place of my injured brother! Do you accept my challenge, or are you afraid of a girl?”

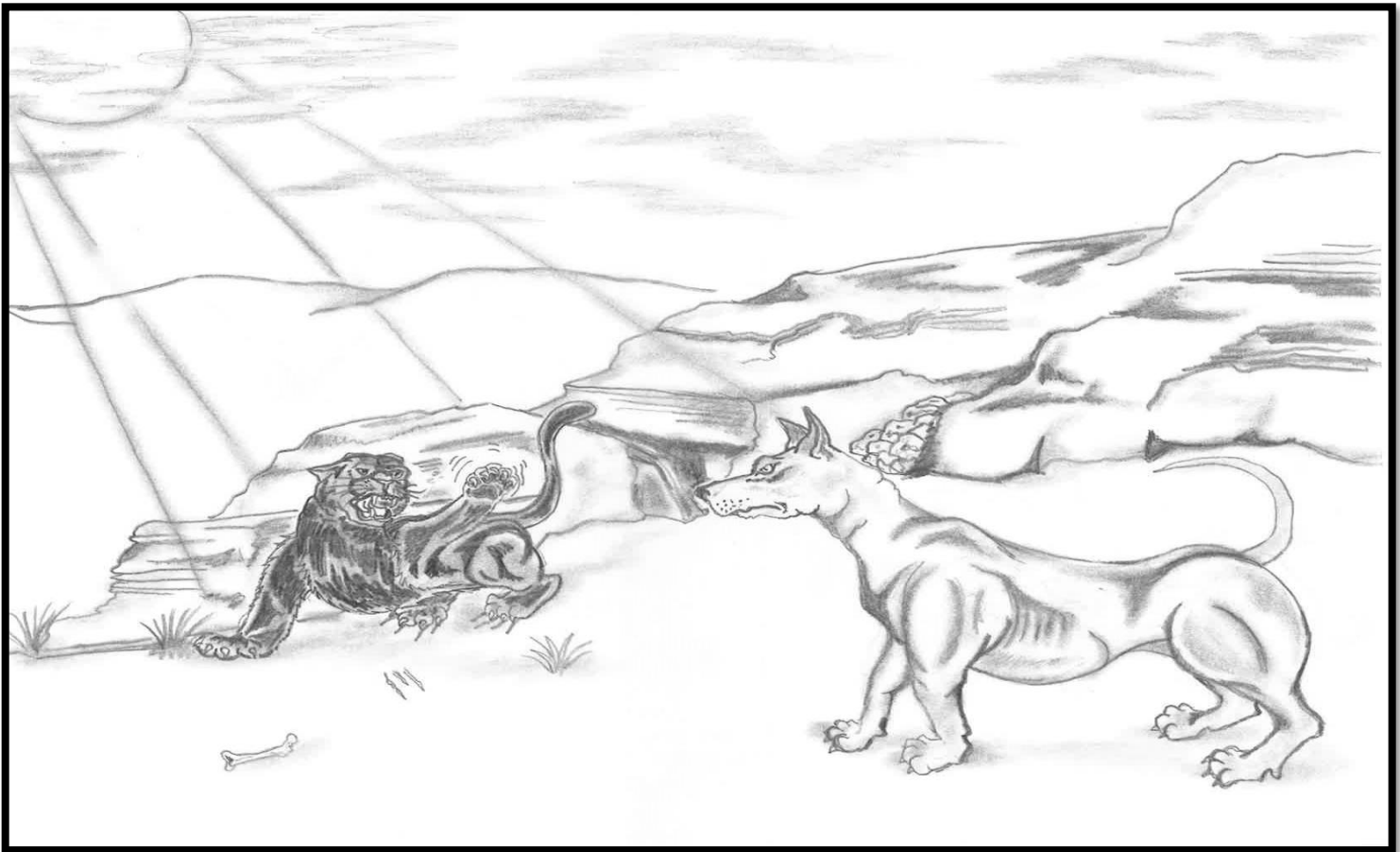
Terror now held center stage as both canines and felines were looking to him for a response. He could fight Courage and most likely destroy him, yet, he would surely lose honor amongst his fellow felines by not accepting Savior's challenge. However, she was also a child of his hated enemy and a victory over such a hound would be a great victory for any cat. Savior was a herculean-sized dog, but Terror was scared of no animal. Defeating such a powerful Great Dane would give his cats the needed confidence to battle this army of dogs.

Courage could only look on with guilt and helplessness as Terror accepted the challenge with a wry, evil smile growing across his face. Courage knew that smile to be the first deadly rattle of a snake.



Slithering forward from the crowd of felines in a smooth, silken gait, Terror began prowling menacingly back and forth in preparation for battle as a cat-like roar erupted from his lungs.

From opposite side's cats and dogs formed around the two gladiators, creating a circular coliseum for this deadly duel between two of the finest warriors known to either race.



## CHAPTER 28

### CLAWS OF THE PAW

**G**aining an unclouded view of the skirmish, sunshine glimmered from its nook in the sky and pierced a wedge in the clouds, forming a ray of light that shined on the gladiators below. An overwhelming tension permeated the air like a humid drizzle, dank and vengeful, as a deep silence crept over the crowd. All eyes were locked on the two, and of the two, both eyes were locked upon one another. Each step calculated and every movement quickly deciphered by the other.

Terror arched his back and hissed at Savior, producing a horrendous feline sound—the sound of death and intimidation. Looking to pounce at any moment, his hind legs were coiled springs awaiting their release. Protracting his claws, he revealed blades like knives as he swatted the air; imitating a boxer practicing his jab. “I’m going to gut you!” he scowled.

Savior, on the other hand, portrayed a calm demeanor—hers was an act of simplicity. She held her ground as she was trained. Standing in a perfect four-point stance, while keeping her body low to the ground; she was neither aggressive nor passive.

Nonchalantly, she sniffed the air in simple broad passes, as if to say, “Is that all you’ve got?” Training for battle her whole life, Savior was prepared for this moment. This fight was her destiny!

The first move happened abruptly. Initiating his attack, Terror vaulted frog-like towards Savior with such quickness that she was barely able to register teeth and claws while they were blurring towards her. But instead of retreating, as Terror expected, Savior quickly darted forward and ducked under his attack. The moment he landed, she kicked upwardly at him with her two rear legs, like a horse. Catching the blow under his hind quarters, Terror flipped forward butt first in an awkward summer-salt while twisting his body in mid-air to safely land feet first on the ground to regain his footing.

Savior, a GoMan Master, was trained to fight defensively. Instinctively, she commanded every skill, every piece of training she was ever taught to fight this vicious Black Panther. By keeping on the retreat from Terror’s aggression, she planned to ascertain his fighting skills while deflecting his attack; never giving him an unchallenged swipe or solid hold on her body. She hoped his consistent failure at an effective attack would elicit an uncontrolled rage that ultimately would prove to be his undoing.

Terror’s anger was a terrible thing when roused and Savior’s first move only served to enrage the panther who quickly pressed his forepaws hard into the ground and pounced, moving like a shadow across the day.

Savior calmly stood her ground, not moving an inch until the last possible moment. Then she suddenly dropped down onto her hind quarters and rolled onto her back just as Terror landed on top of her, catching him along his midsection with her rear legs. Savior then continued her roll and flung him over her body like she was a canine trampoline. Terror flipped in the air and came crashing to the ground, except this time he was not able to land on his paws. His frustration grew.

Suffering through the first thrills of battle, Terror decided to change his tactics. Charging his opponent wasn’t working, so this time he approached slowly. With his jaw open, exposing jagged icicle-like fangs, he moved in, snapping and slashing at Savior over and over again with startling swiftness; strike and step, step and strike, hacking from left to right, then left again, faster and faster still. His moves were a perfect blend of animal control and untamed violence. Terror's claws like unsheathed swords, swatted crossways seeking purchase while also driving her backwards; step by perilous step.

Anticipating each strike, Savior retaliated with fierce daggers for teeth, parrying and deflecting. Moving on light feet she back peddled with each thrust he made. Imitating his style, she mimicked his movement in advance of his action, keeping him at bay; learning his technique.

Good versus evil, light against dark, these were two prizefighters battling for the title.

Terror attacked and Savior counterattacked; again and again the battle went on. At one point, Terror seemed to gain the upper hand. His claws caught Savior’s front legs a few

too many times and his massive fangs pierced skin, causing blood to seep from her wounds. Each time Terror inflicted pain upon Savior, his confidence grew.

Charging once again, he caught Savior off guard, ramming straight into her. Momentarily dazed, Savior found herself wrestling Terror from underneath his burdensome body.

Pinning her against the ground, he then seized her neck in his mouth; his fangs digging into flesh causing her to yelp in pain. But, clenching down with his powerful jaws, Terror mostly caught the bland taste of leather in his mouth. What normally would have been a bite of death served only to snag his teeth with indestructible diamonds and a mouthful of unrelenting leather. Savior remained helpless underneath his grip, but as he re-adjusted, she used her hind legs to dig into his underside, drawing blood for the first time and forcing Terror to release his hold upon her neck or lose his underbelly to the sharpness of her claws.

Loosening his jaw muscles, Savior immediately crawled to her feet and once again, came face-to-face with her most hated enemy.

In combat Terror was a maniac, fighting entirely to maim, to kill, indifferent to any wounds he received; he simply fought to the death. Yet, after battling back and forth with this terrible beast, Savior was holding her own. Snapping fiercely with her massive jaw, she decided to change tactics and put Terror on the retreat.

Swiping his razor sharp claws at her once again, Savior seized one in her mouth. Then, with an instantaneous crack of cartilage, she bit down, feeling bones give way as she crushed the paw between her canines. Drawing blood, Terror yelped in pain. Instinctively, he lunged at her neck, but once more, the leather collar protected her from serious harm. Still using her vice-like grip on Terror's paw as leverage, she suddenly dropped her rear quarters and again executed a perfect roll onto her back, forcing him to follow. Next, she kicked out with her hind legs, causing Terror's momentum to be used against him. Like a state champion wrestler, she flung him onto the ground back first, causing the air to punch out of his diaphragm.

Stunned and out of breath, Terror was now momentarily vulnerable. Quickly seizing the opportunity, Savior lunged for his neck just as he had done before, catching him in the grip of her massive canine vice clamps. Although his neck was pure muscle and as thick as a tree trunk, Savior managed to hold on with all her might while he flailed about like a bucking bronco. Crawling, twisting, and rolling around, Terror tried everything he could, but Savior held tight and would not allow him to escape her stranglehold. He tried clawing at her, but Savior placed her body directly on top of his back and out of reach, effectively wrestling against his every move with her massive weight. Terror struggled hard to free himself, but crawling along the ground with a two hundred pound dog on his back was no easy task. Again and again, he tried to slip out of her hold, but each effort was met with failure. Every time he struggled, Savior managed to cut off more of his air supply with her jaw-like choke hold; his body slowly grew weaker.

Holding her grip with every ounce of strength she possessed, Savior's jaw muscles became fatigued, but remained immovable. With her damp, black nostrils flaring into overdrive, she labored to take each breath while saliva dripped relentlessly from her mouth. Terror's desperation grew, yet Savior held strong, not willing to let go.

Sweating, gasping for breath, his mouth dry and throat stinging with pain, Terror helplessly scraped and scratched for freedom, but his effort was in vain. The more he struggled, the tighter Savior clenched down with her canine fangs choking his throat to the point of closure. With darkness engulfing his vision from all directions, Terror's life was slipping away; he had no choice left but to concede defeat.

Terror stopped resisting and surrendered to the waiting darkness. A muffled, guttural sound escaped from his throat just as his body finally went limp. Terror's fate was now in Savior's hands.

During these final moment's time slowed to a trickle. Terror's entire life flashed before his eyes as a hundred tiny scenes played across his mind like a silent movie. His yellow eyes, now empty of their luster, looked beyond the present to the happy days of his youth before his hatred of man engulfed his very existence. Terror recalled what it was like to love and to be loved. He remembered his dreams of one day raising a family and teaching his cubs all the valuable lessons he had learned in his life. Terror realized he had much more life to live and many more adventures still ahead of him. Then one final thought hit him like a brick wall—there would be no more adventures.

Feeling his body go limp, Savior knew these were the final moments of a dying fire. Finally having gained the better of her foe she could not summon the necessary evil needed to finish the job. No matter how much she abhorred what Terror had become and the maliciousness he represented, she was not a killer.

Cautiously, she loosened her grip, letting oxygen sluggishly ease back into Terror's lifeless body. Watching Terror slowly regain his faculties, she observed gratefulness in his eyes; he understood that his life would not be taken away today. Nevertheless, he was shamed—the great panther had been defeated in battle by a dog.

With the defeat of their fearless leader, this evil band of cats was now thrown into confusion. Without a General directing the troops through fear and intimidation, the felines had lost their backbone. Looking from one to another, they were in a state of disarray.

Realizing their advantage, a clear understanding swept through the hounds and those hungriest for battle initiated the attack. What happened next became hard to decipher in any great detail. Each and every hound from both armies attacked with swiftness, flinging themselves at the felines without hesitation. The ensuing scene was a confusion of bodies and flying fur engulfed in a raucous frenzy of hisses, barks, and cat-like screams that reverberated across the hills.

Attacking in an ordered frenzy, each hound watched the back of the one next to him. The canine army moved with an organized determination, while the felines were being driven backward. Fighting on the defensive, they had no unity or clear strategy of battle.

With no sign of Terror directing his masses, each cat was fending for themselves and a chaotic retreat was taking shape.

Rolling across the ground, combatants were kicking, clawing, and snapping at each other while spatters of red blood covered their snouts, claws, and fur. Hideous screeches were heard all about as bodies were thrown to the ground. Felines leapt and twisted to get clear of their charging foe—it was a gloriously terrifying sight to behold. With the battle progressing in the canine’s favor, escape became the feline’s only option.

Hearing the cries of battle all around him, Courage made his way over to Savior and licked her face with reassurance. “You did it!” he barked as tears of joy swelled his eyes.

Savior greeted him with a small smile from the corner of her mouth. Both her front legs and underbelly were bleeding from her cuts and she was exhausted; yet she was happy. Doc, a Dalmatian, quickly came to her aid and ordered her onto the ground so he could start addressing her wounds. Raising her head to look about, Savior could no longer locate Terror.

When the afternoon had given way to the dusky gold light of the evening, the battlefield was aglow with a peaceful calm that seemed to contain no trace of the horror it endured. It was as if the evening sun had cleansed the land, effusing it with a new sense of hope and beauty.

By the darkest side of sunset, most hounds had stopped chasing the cats and had begun cleansing their battle wounds. A small celebration was held where Savior was praised for her heroic fight against Terror while the Hottentot Tribe and all the hounds of the Howlers were given gratitude for their bravery in battle which in a combined effort, led to the defeat of the enemy felines.

Savior moved little for the rest of the night, she needed a chance to recover from her wounds. The pain of the razor sharp cuts still lingered on her front legs, but the bleeding had now stopped.

Courage remained by her side all night. His ankle was no longer broken; he had successfully willed it to repair itself—a process he still could hardly fathom. However, it was painful to the touch and with every heartbeat, with every movement of blood his body sent to improve the healing of the injury, he felt spasms of pain from deep inside the bone and no matter how hard he tried to will it away, the pain would not dissipate. Perhaps the injury, now outwardly healed, was still reminding Courage of the damage he had inflicted on it. Yet, he could walk and that was what mattered.

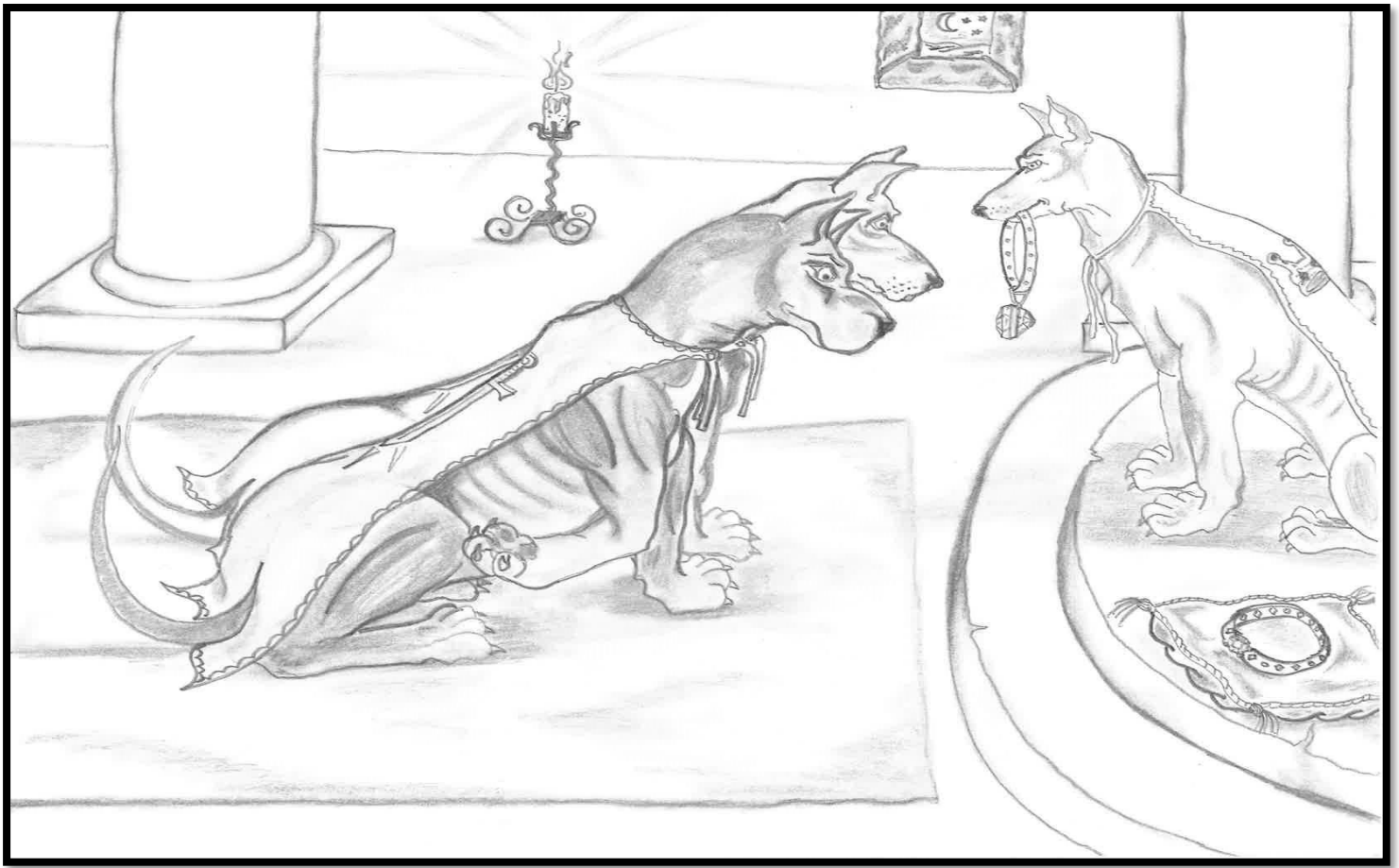
Starting at first light, the victorious army merrily marched back the way they had come, singing ancient fight songs as they went. They moved slowly across the land, those wounded from battle were in no hurry.

The next three days of travel went by in a blur. With their course meandering through the easiest sections of the woods, they progressed around mountains instead of

over them. Grassy meadows, open forests, and riverways with trivial currents were all easily traversed by an army of dogs who were in the best of moods without a care in the world.

Originally setting out a week earlier, for what many hounds felt could easily have been pending doom, every warrior hoped to make it back alive and safe, yet most knew such a thing was an impossibility. However, here they were safely marching home after a remarkable victory in which no hound had lost a life and the felines were dealt a crushing blow.

The last anyone had seen of Terror, or any feline for that matter, was running away with their tails between their legs.



## CHAPTER 29

### HEROE'S

**A**head of the victorious army, the scouts made good time as they ran unheeded to the Hidden City. Their job was to tell the tale, to inform their friends and the waiting Pharaoh hound of the outcome of battle. These were the swiftest of all the hounds, the ones who could run the furthest without need for rest. They had observed the race and the ensuing battle from the safety of the hillside and quickly sped away when victory was guaranteed. The scouts arrived early and reported to the awaiting crowd.

Days later, the army passed through the tunnel, as if birthing into another world. The grand horns blew in celebration announcing their arrival; every dog who remained in the city was lined up in the courtyard, eagerly anticipating the returning army. Clearing the tunnel and entering into the city one at a time, the victorious hounds received round after round of immense guttural barking.

When Apple first saw Courage coming through the tunnel, a comforting flame-like sense of happiness swelled from deep inside her. When he was away, like a courageous knight on a campaign to vanquish hostile enemies; her heart was filled with fear and



concern. She dreaded the thought of spending her life without him. From the very moment he left, until she saw him finally arrive back here again, safe and intact, Apple existed in a life of stressful anxiety. Her every thought was of his well-being. She could barely see him through the crowd of barking dogs howling their applause, yet that one glimpse, the first initial sight of his massive black body bouncing along gave her great comfort in just knowing that he was alive.

With the rampant barking from the mob of dogs offering him encouragement and solace, Courage swelled with pride for the first time since he tripped on that fateful rabbit hole.

The horns once again echoed throughout the valley to announce the arrival of their most honored warrior as Savior made her way out of the tunnel. The city burst with an overwhelming raucous which continued like a rock concert until she reached the Temple of Four Paws where she stood next to her brother.

The Elder and Passion, the king and queen of the Hidden City, were standing proudly on the top of the front steps waiting to greet the new arrivals. When all had settled down, the Elder began by speaking words of praise to Savior.

Reciting the story of Apple's battle with Terror, the crowd bellowed in praise after each sentence the Elder spoke. Afterwards, he took off Savior's warrior collar that saved her life in battle.

Turning towards Courage, the Elder also praised his heroics before removing his collar.

"And all of you great warriors who fought for victory, go tend to your wounds!" he commanded. "Tonight, we will celebrate your success!"

Apple was then finally able to wind her way through the crowd and reach Courage, "I was so worried about you!" she yelped, licking his face with adoration.

The cooks spent the afternoon preparing their finest foods; the sweet smells of barbecued fish and vegetables permeated throughout the grounds. A massive bonfire was created to light the city and decorative, sweet-smelling flowers were placed along the courtyard. Each dog bathed in the lake and groomed one another for the night's festivities. This night became a celebration of victory and togetherness. Teaming up to defeat their fiercest enemy, hounds from two different tribes had joined together in battle, tonight they celebrated as one!

Savior and Courage found refuge in the confines of one of the many medical huts. This hut had two comfortable beds and a large basin of water in the corner that was always full. Their every need was attended to by Doc. Doc was a Dalmatian with classic black and white spotting that marked his breed. He was raised at a firehouse in Raventon by the local firemen.

Dalmatians have been firefighters since the earliest of times. For generations, they passed down to their puppies the sacred knowledge of fighting fires and caring for the injured. Unlike most canines, Dalmatians are not scared of fire. They are fearless animals, natural healers, and good luck charms for any fire department. At the fire station, Doc learned all about caring for the injured. He was a big believer in herbal medications and healed cuts and bite's with bandages made from intertwining grass with special herbs grown in his garden. Doc knew how to reduce swelling by elevating wounds and was familiar with the benefits of having cold water applied onto fresh injuries. He knew that with proper care and attention, most injuries would heal.

Doc had enjoyed a great life at the fire station and loved helping his fellow fireman rescue people from the horrors of fire. He was a proud firefighter and one of few canines who actually held a job in man's world. However, one fateful day he discovered there was a better purpose to his life.

Traveling through the city, the Elder had strolled by the station to discover Doc relaxing on the front lawn enjoying his day. Joining him on the grass for a conversation, the Elder quickly made friends with the Dalmatian and told him all about the Hidden City and their need for a healer. Finally, he invited Doc to join their cause, "It's a dog's paradise," he explained. Doc was intrigued by the Elder's offer and finally decided to leave man's world behind; he left with the Pharaoh hound the very next day. His first project upon arrival, was to begin construction of the medical ward that was being used today.

Doc first worked on Savior's wounds by applying crushed plant roots and herbs over each cut to help with healing and then wrapped bandages around both of her front legs which were changed daily. Savior was prescribed ample rest and plenty of drinking water.

He then went to work addressing a long line of cuts, bites, and other assorted injuries from the troops as they made their way over to see him.

That night, as the cloudless sky turned a deep purple, the color of an old bruise, preparations were made and once the sky faded to black, the Elder and Passion initiated a grand ceremony inside the Temple of Four Paws. Standing proud on the front alter, they wore matching white-colored robes draped elegantly along their back and shoulders. Lined up before them were countless rows of canines, all groomed and cleaned, resting on comfortable pillows while they waited for the ceremony to begin.

Courage, Savior, Racer, and Rhody stood at the front of the courtyard, waiting for the ceremonial horns to sound before they were to be formally honored by the Elder.

Initiating the ceremonies, the ancient horns filled the valley with their melodious sound. Brother and sister, heroes of the Hidden City followed a path of rose petals into the temple and were greeted by a crowd of joyous canines who rose to their feet and barked in celebration at the entering hero's. Immediately behind them came Rhody and Racer who were also greeted by an immense roar.

Looking ahead, the king and queen of Dog City watched their every move with adoration.

Relishing every second, the four warriors slowly trotted forward like show dogs at a parade. Finally reaching the altar, they cautiously climbed four stone steps to stand before the Elder and his wife.

Silence then engulfed the temple while everyone waited for the Elder to speak. “The winds of change have brought to us countless adventures over the many years that we've flourished on this wonderful planet. These adventures have tested our character and the strength of our canine community while offering us the most wonderful of friends and the most fearsome of enemies.

“We have seen that for every dark night, there is an equally sunny day, and for every evil, there is a good. Standing before me today lies our four angels of good who have traveled on a great quest to defeat our enemies of evil. Having succeeded on their journey, along with all of our canine warriors here today, they have proved that the kindness of the canine will always outmatch the evil of the feline. I am so very proud to call you all heroes!”

Once the roar of the crowd finally dissipated, the Elder brought forth a polished leather collar with a stunning row of diamonds radiating along the center of its length.

“Mined hundreds of years ago by my ancestors below this very mountain, these magnificent diamonds were embedded into fine leather which was pounded 1,000 times into smoothness from our finest leather-makers. This collar will serve as an emblem to your victory against Terror and his band of cats. With this collar, I hereby anoint you ‘Duchess.’ From this day forward, you will be called Duchess Savior, Heiress to the throne of the Hidden City.”

Savior’s face was aglow with pride as the Elder placed the collar around her neck under an immense roar of applause.

Then the Elder turned towards her brother. “Courage, you have grown so much in the short time you have been here with us. I hear you were moments away from the deadliest of duels. How brave you have become my young warrior. You surely are named correctly; it is a name that stands for your character. I present to you a symbol of our GoMan pride,” the Elder said before awarding Courage with an identical leather collar, yet this one was set with one very large diamond solitaire. Standing tall, Courage beamed with pride while the collar was placed around his neck.

Next, the Elder called for Rhody to come forward.

“My warrior chief,” he said. “We owe you a tremendous debt of gratitude. Without your heroics, without your clan of ridgebacks coming to our aid, our battle with the felines would have had a very different outcome. You and your clan are forever welcomed to our great city and I do ask that you continue to guard our flank and help to keep the outlying forest clear of any wayward felines.” he remarked.

Then he presented Rhody with a leather collar similar to the first two, yet this one held four diamonds placed equidistance from one another along its length.

“This collar I bestow upon you,” the Elder said as he placed it around Rhody's neck. “It holds four diamonds that represent the four paths of direction; the north, south, east, and west. With your clan standing tall by our side, I know we will always be protected.”

Finally, the Elder asked Racer to step forward

“Racer, you magnificent hound of speed,” he said. “Though your race was not about fighting or of battle, by dueling yourself against a cheetah in a competition of speed, you have proved that we can defeat the felines in any arena. By your victory, you helped to bring doubt into the collective minds of our enemy which caused a shift in their thinking and helped to change the tide of battle before it had even begun. Tales of your great race will forever be told by our kind.”

The Elder then presented Racer with a skinnier leather collar that was half the width of the others. While the Elder was placing it around his neck, Racer could see that a single diamond was embedded as the collar's center-piece.

“This collar is representative of your quickness, a canine of your speed need not be hindered by a large width of cumbersome leather,” he proclaimed.

Turning to show their medals, the four warriors stood tall and dignified while they were greeted with another thunderous round of applause as the temple erupted with hooting and hollering from the barking dogs.

With the ceremonies finished, it was time for the night's activities to begin. A massive bonfire was lit which lighted the city in a garish, orange glow while games were played and feasts were held.

As the evening progressed, Courage and Savior found themselves alone near the reservoir. Sitting in the sand near the water's edge, watching the roaring bonfire chase the night's shadows back to their corners, Courage asked Savior about her battle with Terror.

“You know, Terror would have killed you if he had the chance,” Courage remarked. “He is a cat of complete evil who would not hesitate to break any canine's neck like my house cat, Ghost, dispatches a mouse. Few canines ever get the chance to destroy such evil. Why did you let him live, sis?”

Savior eyed her brother for a moment, considering his words before she spoke. “For some reason, when I held his life in my hands, I thought of the future,” she explained. “Not just his future, but everyone's future. I thought that perhaps he would change and become a better cat for what he had suffered. Hopefully, by him being within a heartbeat away from death, he would realize how valuable life really is; not only his life, but all life. I honestly hoped that this experience would change him, humble him, and even make him generous towards others. Perhaps he would become so full of love for life, for lost opportunities, that he would be changed forever. In those final moments, I weighed those thoughts in my mind and chose to let him live. I guess we can only wait and see what effect it really has on him.”

A bit later, Courage snuggled up to Apple, who was now a few months pregnant, and shared the night together by the warmth of the fire. Apple was gaining considerable weight—her belly had swelled up like a basketball. Soon, there would be a wonderful litter of puppies to parent. They needed to begin their trip back home before she was too big for travel.

Some members of the Howlers had become quite happy in this hidden paradise and a few had even garnered romantic relationships. Don Ristorante, who was always accompanied by J.D., along with Racer, Sergeant Tank, Scrappy, and Snacks, all decided to stay behind and enjoy what the city had to offer. Working as productive canines, these hounds of the street had found a place where they belonged, a place to call home.

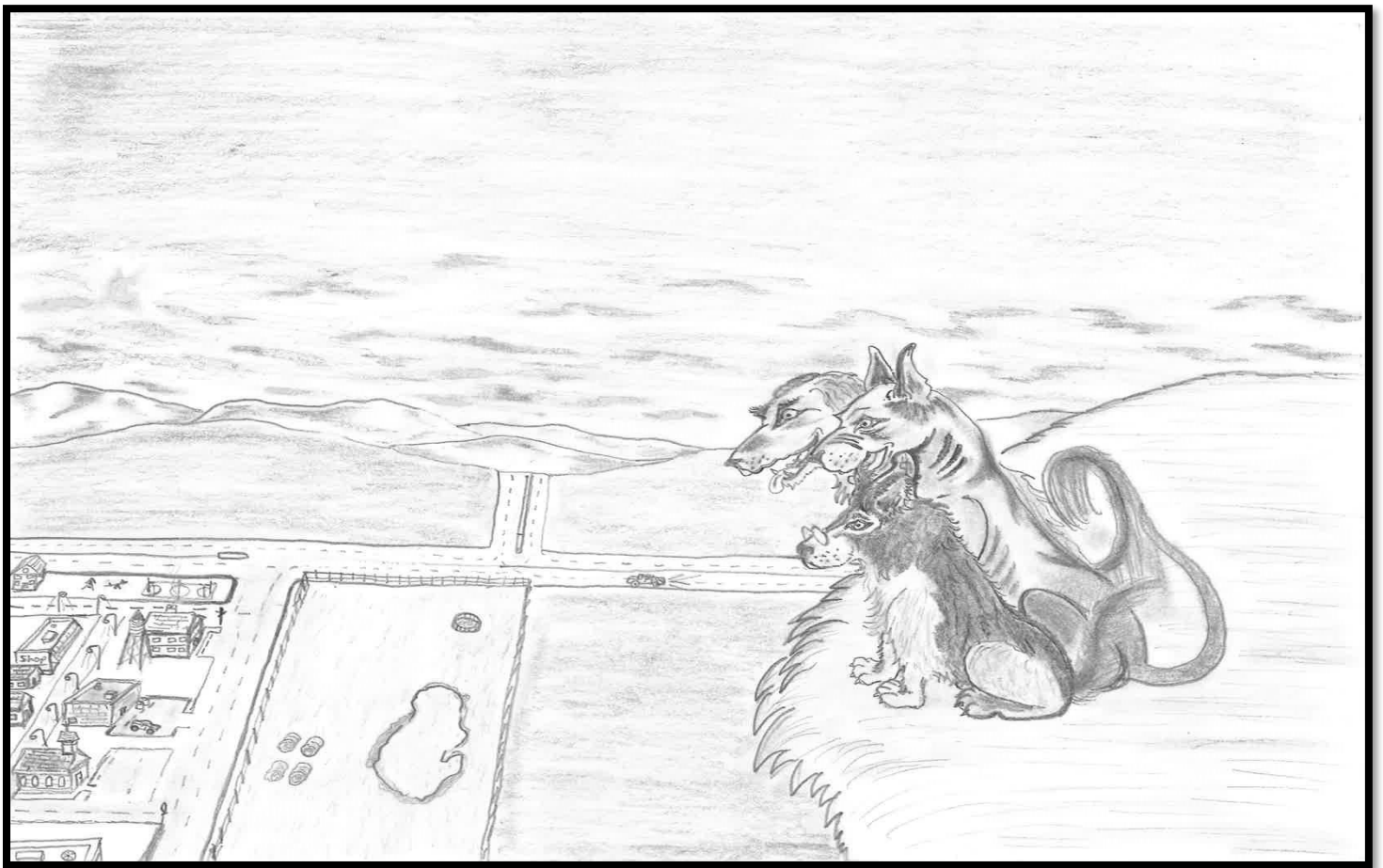
Don Garbage, Don Barbecue, Tracker, Knowledge, and Von Schnitzel, along with Courage and Apple were all eager to make their way back home.

On their final night together, gathering around the bonfire with its fiery brilliance drawing a parade of circus animals in the dirt, Courage took an opportunity to say a few last words. Standing tall on four healthy legs, he exuded confidence while firelight illuminated his face, drawing attention to the scars along his snout. “Never in my wildest dreams did I ever imagine there was a place as wonderful as this, with so many happy, friendly dogs living productive, positive lives. It has been such an amazing pleasure to discover this hidden paradise and to meet each and every one of you.

“The time has now come for us to travel back to our homes, yet I promise you, we will be back. So, with a heart full of love and gratitude, my traveling companions and I will soon take leave of you. I most sincerely hope that your future days will be as prosperous and happy as your former ones have been glorious and honorable!” With Courage’s final words echoing in the distance, the crowd erupted in applause.

In the morning, the final seven members of the Howlers made their way out of the city, accompanied by Papillion and Savior who would travel with them as far as Eagle's Peak. Before entering the tunnel, each dog paused for a moment to take one final look at the hidden paradise they were leaving behind. Every hound in the city was there to see them off, along with each original member of the Howlers.

“Don’t worry Courage,” barked Apple. “This will be a great place to take our pups one day.”



## CHAPTER 30

### INSTINCT'S RETURN

**A**fter saying goodbye to the three guarding Dobermans; Mack, Apollo, and Ramsey, this new, smaller pack made their way out through the tunnel. This time, imitating the beaver he had seen before, Courage ran under the waterfall and jumped into the reservoir. Still being a child at heart, Courage attempted a swan dive and splashed belly first into the water. Each dog then followed in turn-except Apple, jumping acrobatics were not a good idea for pregnant dogs. After a joyous swim, the hounds climbed out and dried off in the morning sun before beginning their journey home.

Their first day was easy traveling and the band of dogs camped in the low hills before the last light faded in the west. Gathering together with the woods growing dark around them, the hounds listened while Don Garbage attempted his first narration of the great race between Racer and Vixen. This was surely a legendary story that would be told for endless generations, and as a dog of the streets, he wanted to perfect the tale before he shared it with other hounds in the city.

On their second day, they reached the top of Eagle's Peak where they paused to look down on the world below. With the cool fall wind whistling along the highest point of the mountain, these nine dogs gathered together to share a final moment in each other's company. Discussing the many adventures they had experienced over the last few months, it was amazing how much maturity and growth each dog had gained. These were no longer mangy hounds of the street; they were the finest of dog warriors.

Courage, more importantly, had found the true meaning of love, friendship, and of family. His life had completely turned around after encountering that strange old dog, Ironcoat, at the dog pound. Since then, Courage found his true love, Apple Pie, and he discovered an unknown twin sister, Savior. He also gained many lifelong friends in the Howlers, and most important of all, he would soon have a family of puppies to watch over and to teach all that he had already learned in his short life.

"It's amazing how happy I've become since we escaped from the dog pound," he barked to Apple with a brood smile smeared upon his face like a clown.

Papillion and Savior soon gave out their last goodbyes and Savior bestowed each dog with her biggest hug. Then, with tears in her eyes, she saved her best for last.

"Brother, it's been an adventure," she said standing face-to-face with Courage, looking him squarely in the eyes. "I always knew we would find each other. Thankfully, you followed your nose to find me here waiting for you. I plan to return the favor and visit you and your new family in the future, since I greatly wish to see the place you call home. I love you brother, thoughts of you will always be carried in my heart."

Then Savior inhaled a deep breath and moved her right paw to the center of her chest before eagerly lowering her head in a slow, respectful bow, "Long life to you brother," she said.

At the same moment, standing beside her, Papillion also imitated her every move and bowed in respect to Courage.

"Long life to you Courage," she said in unison with Savior.

Standing tall, Courage in turn took in a deep breath and pounded his paw strongly to the center of his chest before lowering his head to the ground until his nose touched grass, returning the GoMan salute.

Raising his head, he looked each hound in the eyes, as he replied, "Long life to you Papillion. Long life to you sister.

"If ever you need me, just call out. I will always hear you."

Finally, the seven remaining members of the Howlers made their way down the mountain, yet, this time there were no worries about wild cats or other unknown enemies! Nearing a river at the bottom of the mountain, Courage heard the distant echo of a lonely howl. Hard to decipher at first, he soon realized where it originated.

Turning back towards Eagle's Peak, he replied with a long, drawn out howl of his own.

"Ooooohaar-ohrr-ooooha... *Goodbye sister, I'll see you again.*" Courage spoke to her as he took one last look at the towering mountaintop.

Spending the night on the river's edge, watching the cloudless, starry sky, the hounds enjoyed a cool, late summer breeze that flowed along the treetops like a never ending ocean wave.

That night, Knowledge once again told his favorite story. "In the land before time," he began, "there once lived seven dwarfs and a beautiful princess named Snow White." Happily listening to this fairy tale, for what had to be the twentieth time, the weary hounds eventually fell asleep to the soothing sound of his voice.

In the morning, it was Knowledge who wanted to venture across the river first. Mostly, he wished to show his friends that he was actually capable of crossing the water on his own. Knowledge was well-respected for his brain, not his brawn, and although his body was old and fragile, he still wanted to prove that he was a competent hound.

Stepping towards the embankment, Knowledge chose to continue wearing his glasses on his nose this time around instead of carrying them within his mouth. Then, with his eyes alert for the flow of the current and hidden eddies, he scanned the waterway looking for the most timid section to cross. Speckled with the glimmer of morning light mixed with the ever-changing shadows from the high trees, the river glowed with varying hues of silver from indigo to emerald, as you might find by discovering a long lost sunken treasure. Finally, with his face set in a determined expression, Knowledge eyed an entry point and waded into the water. Paddling forward, he gave every effort to keep his face and glasses above water while maintaining a steady, consistent course across the river.

Watching his progress from the safety of the shoreline, the hound's barked encouragement and even a few jokes as the elderly Border collie did his best imitation of a submarine with his body submerged and head like a periscope careening above the surface. Breathing with his head-like snorkel, he slowly progressed along the river with whitewash rippling in his wake. Battling fast-moving current and underwater obstacles, Knowledge paddled furiously, never willing to give up until finally reaching the opposite side where he heroically scrambled ashore. Barking fiercely at his companions, he encouraged them to follow his lead.

Following suit, the rest of the pack stepped out one at a time from the safety of the bank and into the river with its cold water penetrating their fur. Apple swam the slowest and most cautiously, she was swimming for more than one, yet she was reassured to know that all the while, Courage was keeping a watchful eye on her every move. Like a herd of buffalo trampling through the strong river current, the pack proceeded slowly but steadily. With a few heads bobbing up and down they eventually reached the opposing shoreline.



After drying off in the morning sunlight, the pack of traveling hounds was on the move once again. Steering around Giggling Valley, they met with no resistance nor came upon any straggling felines as they took the long way home.

Moving boisterously through fields and skirting forests under the cool light of the autumn sun, they were in no hurry and paused to enjoy the forest whenever the mood struck. By nightfall they came upon a peaceful lake speckled with wild geese and duck that lived so free, so nonchalantly wild, they barked in open defiance at the intrusion of their tranquility by the nearby hounds. Seeing this irritable flock of fowl, few hounds could resist themselves and sport was initiated. However, some of the more clever hounds, Courage and Apple included, knew these flying beasts could not be caught and simply watched as their friends swam the waters vain.

That night, the pack relaxed around the water's edge and although they heard owls more than once and the sharp cries of an animal hunting, no creatures attacked.

By morning the hounds were well-rested and ready for another day's travel.

Later that day, as the sun touched the far horizon; the last part of its descent, they came upon the final hill before Raventon. Ascending its ridge they stood proudly at the top, enjoying the view below. Looking down upon the city, it shined with a faint yellow glimmer; it was a remarkable sight to behold that filled them with a reassuring sense of warmth and happiness. After being away for many months and having experienced numerous adventures and amazing sights, they were still enamored with what Raventon had to offer. For everyone except Courage, this was their home, a place with fond memories and long lost friends and loved ones waiting to be greeted. Now rejuvenated by the sight of their city spread out before them, the hounds careened down the hillside together, creating a canine stampede.

Entering the outskirts of Raventon, each hound sniffed the air in their own private manner; each smell, each different scent carried with it a distinct memory of home. Moving through the alleys, they stopped to pillage every dumpster they came upon; the hounds were soon stuffed on leftovers and table scraps. Making their way to the library was their next priority—they needed to get Knowledge safely home as promised. Traveling through the city in the darkened light of evening, a strong scent of happiness, of homecoming, permeated the group and eager smiles could be seen all around.

Reaching the library by sunset, Knowledge was the first to bolt through its doors. By the time he made it back to the sun room after visiting with his family, the hounds were fast asleep and his bowl of food empty. His warm, comfortable couches proved to be much more irresistible than the grassy meadows they had become accustomed to sleeping on.

In the morning, Knowledge woke up early to begin recording their recent adventures in his sacred Dog Book. Every detail, every part of their journey was to be documented, especially the great battle between Terror and Savior. He had learned every detail of the fight sitting around the nightly bonfires. This was to be his contribution to their dog history.

Leaving Knowledge behind, the remaining members of the Howlers happily traveled through the city, heading for Canine Park.

With their canine sense of smell working overtime, Tracker and Don Garbage found themselves stopping at every street corner to smell familiar haunts and raid newfound dumpsters. Happy to be back in their hometown, these two were looking forward to spending their days on the city streets once again.

Reaching Canine Lake, the hounds jumped in the water for a daytime romp. Apple, now quite pregnant, happily rested in the cold water and washed her face with her front paws.

Being Von Schnitzel's last stop before leaving the Howlers, he took the time to share blissfully in dog play with the hounds. Yet, being so close to home, he soon became eager to see his family.

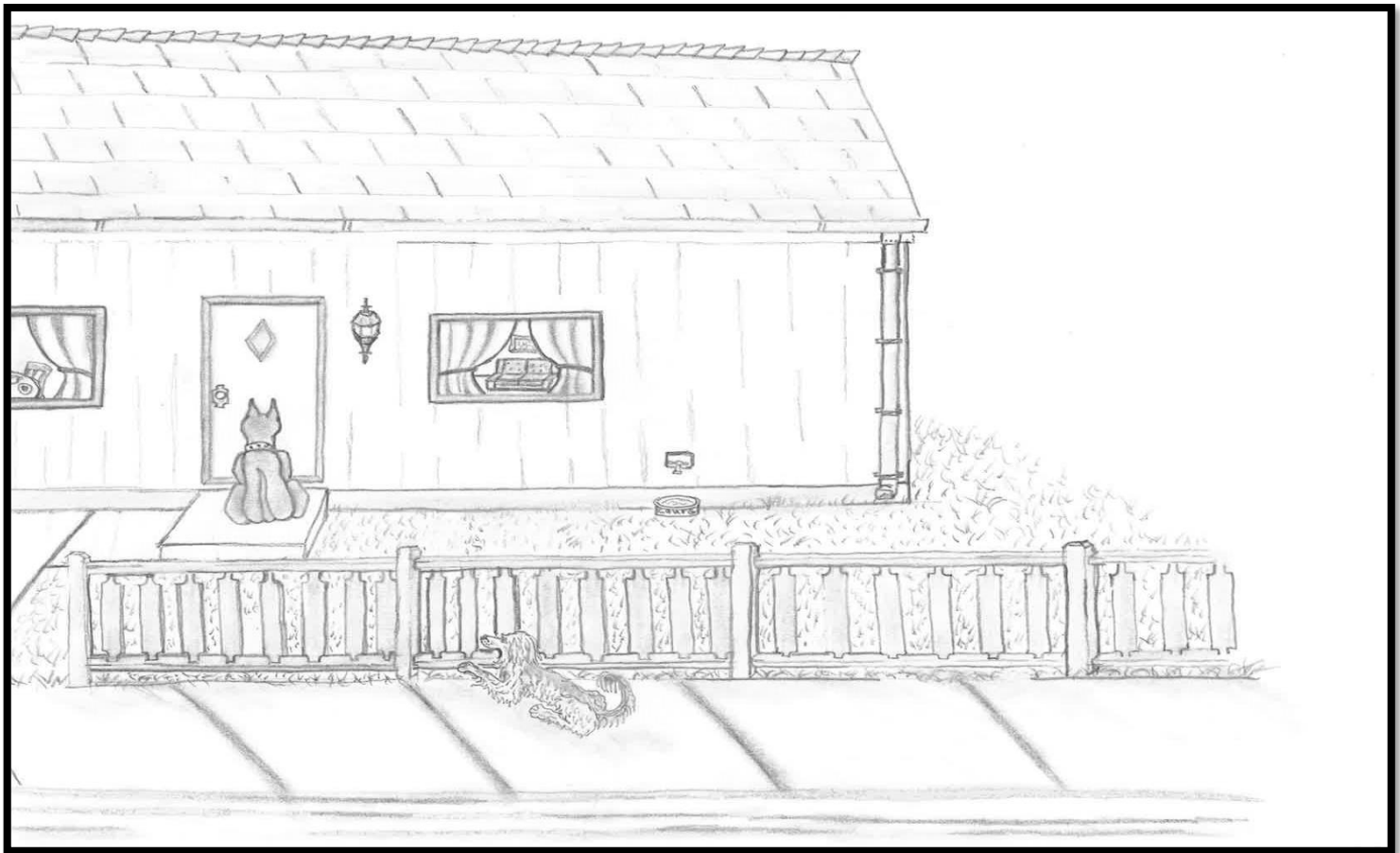
"I can already see the expression on mein master's face when I jump over the fence," he barked happily.

Before Von Schnitzel left for home, Courage gathered all the dogs together to give directions to Stonehill and also how to find his house once they were in town. He was hoping for a few visits in the future.

Saying goodbye to her bodyguard was the hardest thing Apple ever had to do. With tears swelling in her eyes and a high-toned whimper escaping from her throat, Apple gave Von Schnitzel a huge bear hug. Then, a warm smile formed along her face as she watched him anxiously cross the street and make his way home. Not moving an inch, she observed his every move as he easily jumped his front fence and disappeared behind his home. "Goodbye my guardian," she whispered.

Saying goodbye to the last remaining members of the Howlers was no easy task, however, these best of friends knew they would see each other again. Don Garbage, Don Barbecue and Tracker promised to venture out and visit Stonehill in the future.

Courage and Apple sat in the park watching the trio scamper off towards downtown, Tracker was already in the lead sniffing out their next meal.



## CHAPTER 31

### FULL CIRCLE

**A**nd then there were two...

Just the mere thought of reaching Stonehill filled Courage's heart with anticipation. The last time he saw his family was so long ago that it now seemed like someone else's memory, or a faint song he heard once in a dream. A reality he needed to see once again to believe it was true.

Courage was now a canine homing pigeon zeroing in on the unmistakable scent of his far away home. Knowing his snout would point it out, he allowed for his canine intuition to take the lead. "I can already taste the table scraps!" He barked at Apple while they scampered along a dirt trail running parallel to the highway that led away from town.

Apple only knew of one type of master, the type that punished you with sticks and left you out in the cold backyard all winter long. “Are you sure they’re going to take me in?” she asked, trotting alongside her beau.

“Apple Pie,” he replied. “When they see us arriving together, they’ll be too happy to have any complaints. They must have thought I was a goner up in the mountains. Besides, you’re so darn pregnant, no loving family with children of their own would ever turn you away. Not my family at least. Trust me.”

Avoiding the highway, perhaps more out of instinct than anything else, the two adventurers moved up into the nearby hills, yet, they always kept the road within sight.

Storm clouds forming in the distance foretold of a coming rain, forcing Courage and Apple to search for shelter of any kind. They journeyed another few miles, unsuccessfully trying to outpace the storm when an old wooden bridge appeared in the distance covering a large creek that passed underneath. At first, just a few drops from above raised tiny wisps of dust from the dirt around them. Then, as if a hole had been punched in the sky, a summer rain fell skirt-like from the underbelly of the dark clouds, pouring hard against their faces. By the time the two hounds reached shelter under the leaky protection of the old bridge they were drenched.

Safely hidden from the storm, they greedily drank from the creek as its cold, nurturing water raced off towards faraway lands. Darkness fell upon the land bringing with it an ambivalent chill that nipped at their fur and an unrelenting rain that showed no sign of faltering, Mother Nature had clearly decided they would travel no further on this night.

There is something calming about storms that interrupt progress. Scratching out a nest in the dirt that was stony and cold, they cuddled together, sharing in each other’s warmth while enjoying a break from their travels. With an occasional hum from the traffic above offering a Truepaw reminder of the civilized world, the two lovers watched the rain dance upon the slow moving creek until sleep overtook them.

The sun peeked out from behind gray clouds, sharpening the frosty morning with its brightness to find Courage standing like a statue in the icy waters with his legs submerged in the shallows. For over fifteen minutes he waited, hoping his breakfast would soon forget he had intruded. Holding his mouth inches above the waterline, Courage’s eyes darted back and forth along his unmoving head as if they were looking for an eject button while he intensely searched the clear water. With his neck cramping, nose itching, and legs like icicles in the water, he stood in the current unmoving. Eventually, a silvery image approached. Then, at just the right moment, he sank his canine teeth deep into the water with lightning speed. Biting hard, he trapped an unsuspecting fish in his mouth. Quickly, Courage then jumped out of the water with an enormous fisherman smile wrapped along his snout. He dropped the sea bass in the grass next to the other three before running over to wake Apple.

“Breakfast is ready!” Courage joyously whispered into Apple’s ear as he licked her face into wakefulness. “I’ve got some fresh food for you. There’s nothing better than cold fish in the morning,” he joked.

After breakfast they continued on towards Stonehill where another day of traveling placed them on the outskirts of town.

With evening approaching, Courage and Apple stealthily crept onto a corn farm, keeping a wary eye out for farm animals. “Feel like a little dumpster diving?” Courage asked.

Finding a rubbish heap alongside the front barn, the two marauders dug their noses into a mish-mash of foods in search of edible leftovers. Later, with bellies full of scraps, they scampered off the property leaving behind a yard full of trash in their wake. *Sorry*, thought Courage imagining an unhappy farmer cleaning up the mess he left behind. *But, thank you for the leftovers!*

Nearing the city, they paused to sniff the air and caught a whiff of a sweet, familiar scent that brought a rush of memories back to Courage. Recalling his safe, warm doghouse, the three wonderful children he greatly missed, memories of home washed over him like a warm summer's rain.

Passing through the streets, Courage, now a tour guide, pointed out every detail he knew about his hometown. Stonehill was a small community of friendly people, where most everyone knew each other by name as well as their dogs. This tight-knit community had little crime and no dog catcher. The few times Courage managed to break out of his yard and wander about, a friendly neighbor always found the time to walk him home.

Feeling like a war hero proudly parading through town after serving his country, Courage confidently strolled along the streets with his head held high and Apple in tow. Happily trotting past the stores and shops of the central district, Courage kept an eye out for familiar faces. *What a surprise this is going to be!* He thought to himself as he imagined seeing his family once again.

Watching him intently, Apple saw the smile on that big, scarred snout grow bigger with every step he took. Taking a left at the Post Office, Courage immediately began galloping down the street, leaving Apple in his wake. “Wait up Scarface!” she barked. “I’m still pregnant, you know!”

Courage slowed a little, to let Apple catch up, but he had already caught the unmistakable aroma of his back yard and his progress could not be halted. “I could do this blindfolded!” he bragged to her while crossing another street.

Finally, he turned the last corner and couldn’t believe his own eyes. “They’re home! Oh sweet Apple Pie, I bet the whole family is here!” he barked with excitement seeing the family suburban parked in the front driveway.

Eagerly running up to the house, Courage hurdled the front picket fence with his massive Great Dane legs as if he were a rabbit simply jumping from place to place.

Apple shyly laid down on the sidewalk in front of the stylish picket fence. She watched Courage through the wooden slats as he barked incessantly at his home from the front lawn, quite unconcerned that the whole neighborhood could hear his ranting.

Little Judy opened the front door and was immediately slimed with Courage's big wet tongue. "Courage, you're alive!" she yelled with streams of tears running down her face.



## CHAPTER 32

### HOME

**C**ourage's family welcomed Apple into their household with open arms, just like he knew they would; she loved her new home and her new family

Later that same month, Courage and Apple were blessed with six extremely cute, Great Afghan puppies. In the backyard, Courage's new, oversized dog house was just big enough for Apple, all six newborn puppies, and for Courage himself.

One day, Courage discovered painting supplies in the garage and a leftover can of blue paint. Bringing the can over to the doghouse, he and Apple worked together on a little project. Just above the entrance, they painted four letters from the alphabet that Apple had learned from Knowledge. She wrote the word, HOME.

Their puppies were named Ironcoat, Bashful, Grumpy, Dopey, Sleepy, and Strength. One day, they would become GoMan Warriors like their father.

The whole family lived happily ever after, until one day...

# GLOSSARY

**Destiny:** The predetermined course of events that are yet to happen in one's life.



**Companion:** 1- A close friend who is attached to another by feelings of personal regard or familiarity.

2- One who is frequently in the company of another.

**Canine:** 1- Pertaining to or characteristic of dogs.

2- Referring to the four pointed teeth, prominent in dogs, situated on each side of the jaw, next to the incisors.

**Order of Bastet:** A league of wild felines who have waged an endless war against man and domesticated animals since the time of the first Pharaohs.

**Feline:** 1- Belonging to or having characteristics of the cat family.

2- Catlike; sly, stealthy or treacherous.

**GoMan Arts of Tooth and Paw:** An ancient fighting craft first developed by a monkish breed of hounds called Tibetan Spaniel's who combined their spiritual beliefs with defensive fighting maneuvers mastered by the Tibetan Mastiff's, a primitive clan of warrior-hounds. Originally conceived during the War of Bastet for use in combat, this fighting technique is an ancient art founded upon the manipulation of canine energy and the defensive use of strikes and grappling as counter-moves against an aggressor.

**GoMan Warrior:** A disciplined student of the GoMan Arts who has sworn an oath to battle the Order of Bastet through the learning of spiritual enlightenment, the manipulation of canine energy, and the use of defensive fighting techniques.

**GoMan Master:** A skilled practitioner, whom through a lifetime of training has mastered the abilities of the GoMan Arts. These abilities vary in capacity by breed from longevity of life, quickness of speed, everlasting stamina, superb strength, telepathic communication, and dream casting.

**GoMan Elder:** The oldest and wisest of all GoMan Masters.

**Dream Casting:** During a period of deep meditation, the ability of a GoMan Master to pass a series of mental images through one's mind, providing the opportunity to gaze into the future.

**Dog Script:** An ancient canine language created by the Tibetan spaniels and hidden from all other races to protect its existence. Originally crafted by using a series of symbols and picture-based text that proved to be the simplest format for canines to comprehend.

**Ancient Book:** A multitude of scrolls which have recorded the major events and history of the canine since the most ancient of times.

**Channeling:** An exceptional ability possessed by GoMan Masters which allows them to communicate over great distances solely by using their minds: canine telepathy.

**Foretellers:** An ancient bloodline of canine magicians who possess the ability to see into the future by crushing, boiling, then drinking the root of their most-blessed tree, the Lotus Blossom; a process known as “Future Vision.”

**League:** A unit of distance equal to about 3 miles.

**Gods of Canis:** Ancient, spiritual, and all powerful founders of the canine race whose principles of power, wisdom, and goodness are the foundations by which the Council of Canis adheres to.

**Netherworld:** A mythical realm of astounding beauty where fallen GoMan Warriors are summoned their demise to rest forever in a state of gleeful serenity.

**Spirit Animal:** The soul of a guardian being that protects its bearer and offers strength in time of need. This vision, which forms itself in the clouds nearest to the sun at midday can only be channeled by a true GoMan Warrior.

**Hidden Hound:** Canine born and raised in the Hidden City.

**Pawsteps:**

- 1- The mark of the paw, canine tread.
- 2- The distance covered by a step.
- 3- The pace of a dog.

**Paw Picked:** To select an item with a paw.

**Felinversationalist:** A feline who converses a great deal.

## FINAL LORE

From the moment you are born, destiny has chosen a path for you. This path can be filled with great adventures and purpose, but you need to have the wisdom to recognize its course when it is upon you and the courage to face your worst fears during the most strenuous of times. Searching out the true course of your own life; this is your Destiny.

You will find that your journey through life, although rewarding, is often difficult, for it is never easy to uncover your true self. Rest assured that you are never alone on this quest. Your forefathers, those who have come before you and whose blood lies in your veins, are forever standing by your side offering you quiet solace during times of need. During this journey you will discover that the true value of friendship and love is far more precious than any monetary gain. You may also learn that the pain of loss is an essential ingredient to this wonderful experience we call life.

Perhaps you will find that your true enemy is fear. Fear to chase your dreams or the fear of failure. Everyone will endure challenges in their lives, yet it is the strong ones who stand up and try again. Your journey will be unique, and if you don't back down in the face of fear, you will become the person you were destined to be!

During your darkest hour, even if you have run aground, never give up and never quit moving forward!

Two noble puppies were born, then separated at birth

One raised to fight, as the GoMan's right

One raised in the city, to a family's delight

Protectors of man, descendants of fame

One seeks adventure, Courage his name

Through mountains he travels from a land far away

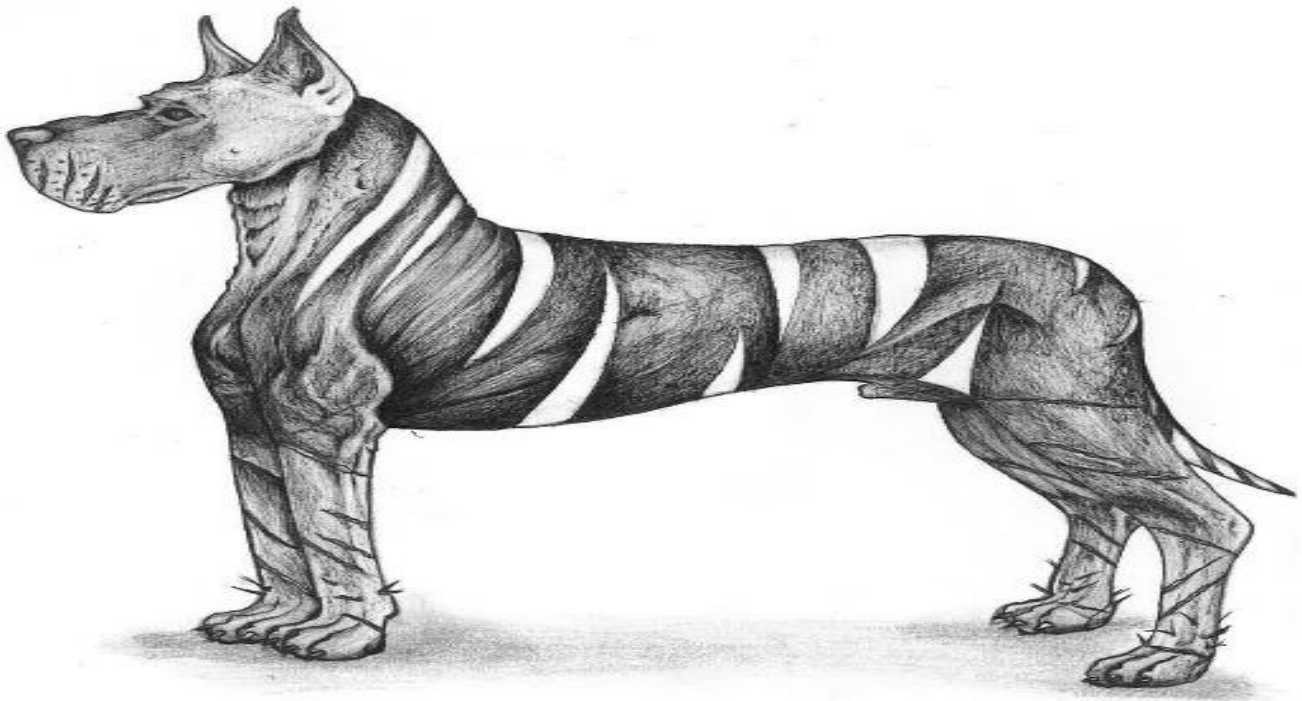
While the other trains for an epic fray

Great Dane warriors they become, seeking destiny's path

Until their lives entwine under the felines wrath

Together they prepare for the ultimate horror

Facing the most evil of all... the great cat, Terror



### **Duke Swiftail**

**Born:** King's Canyon

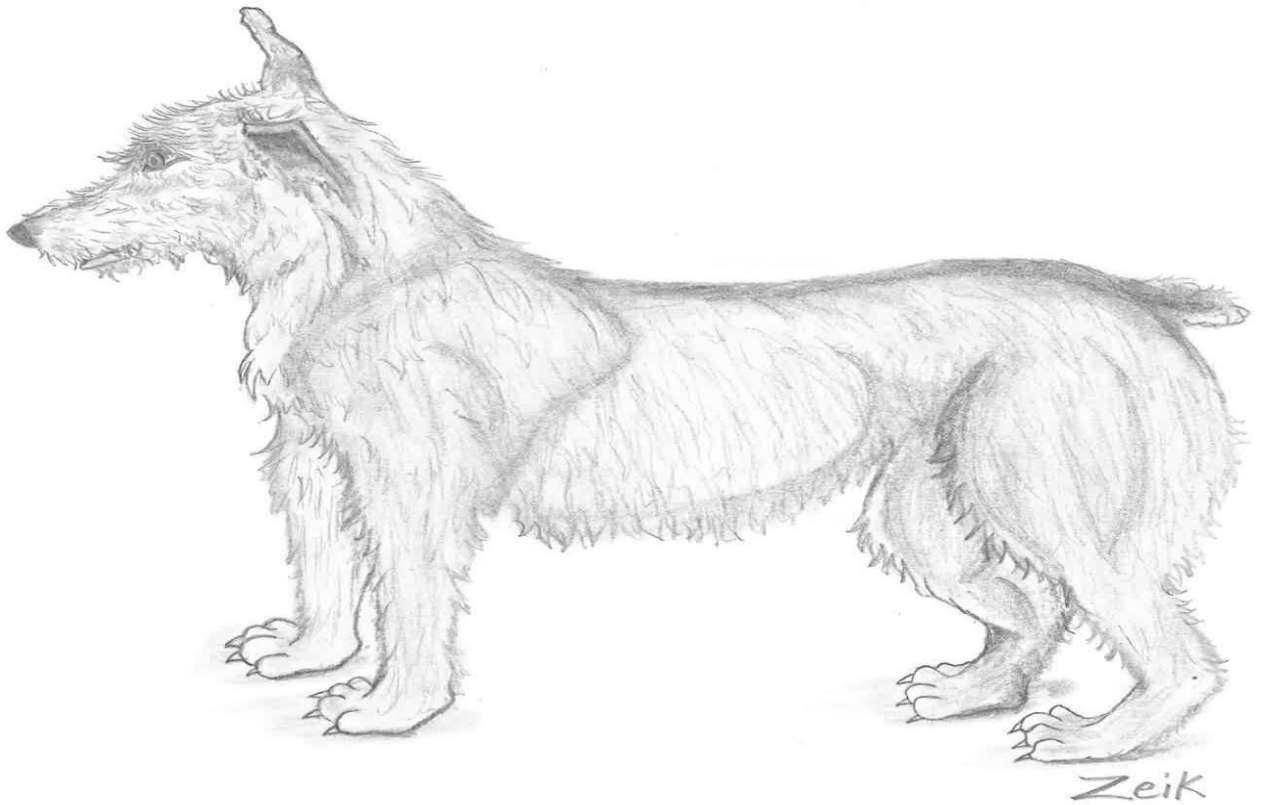
**Size:** 3 ½ feet tall, 155 pounds

### **Royal Scout**

**Breed:** Great Dane

**Color:** Irregular silver streaks on a black pelt like an unlucky Zebra

The second born male of King StrongPaw, Duke Swiftail was smaller in stature than his older brother, yet this smaller size gave him more innate speed and agility than the king. As the Royal Scout, Duke Swiftail was always far ahead of the main canine forces, scouting ahead. Protecting the king's heirs, Swiftail fought alongside his brother in their final battle, against Terror and his feline army.



### **Ironcoat**

**Born:** King's Canyon

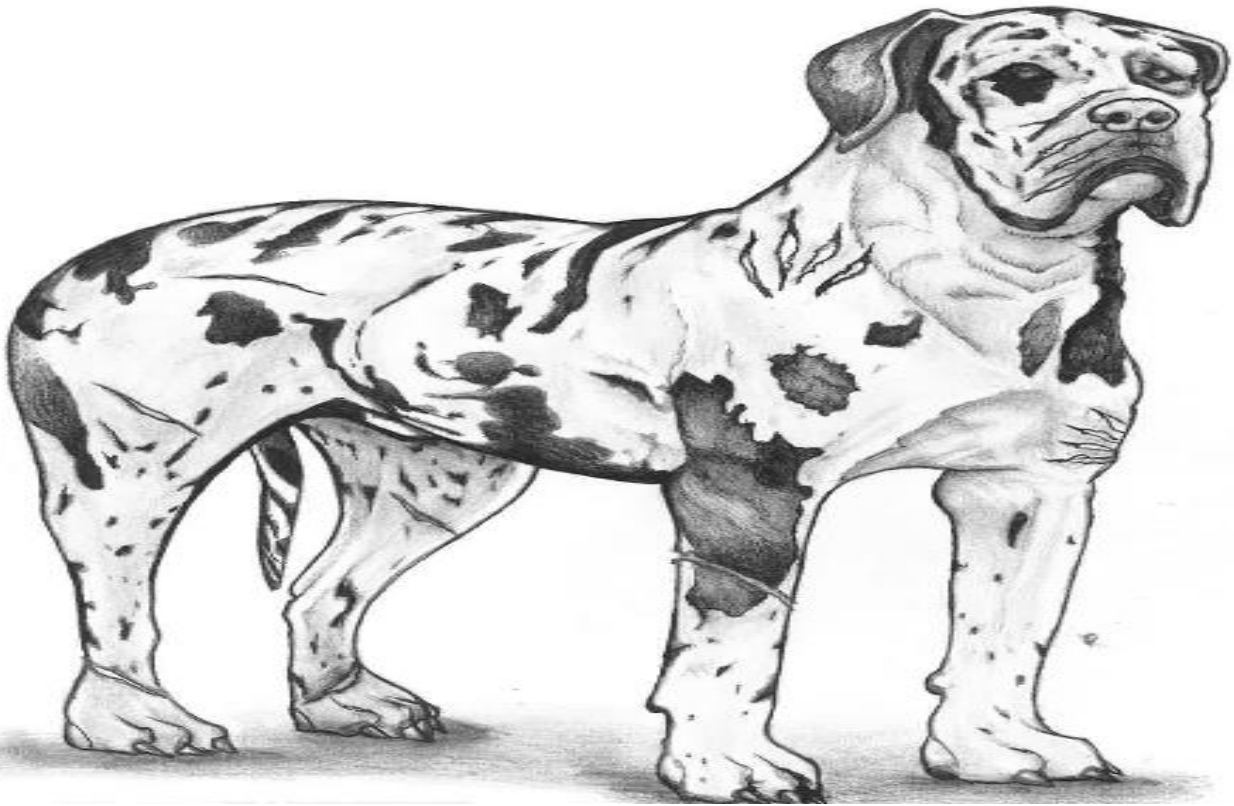
**Size:** 3 feet tall, 140 lbs

### **Noble Knight**

**Breed:** Irish wolfhound

**Color:** Grey pelt with long silvery strands

Raised in King's Canyon, Ironcoat grew up alongside young Prince Gallant and proved to be his most loyal hound in the final hours of Gallant's life. Following his king's command, Ironcoat carried the newborn princess Savior on the arduous journey to the Hidden City of Hounds where she lived in safety. Near the end of his days, Ironcoat travelled to the Dog Pound to await the arrival of Courage, as was foretold in his dreams. Ironcoat bravely risked his own life to ensure every dog's escape from the Dog Pound.



**King Gallant**

**‘The Bold’**

**Born:** King’s Canyon

**Breed:** Great Dane

**Size:** 4 feet tall, 190 pounds

**Color:** White with irregular  
black patches throughout (Harlequin)

His stronghold, StrongPaw Canyon, hidden deep in the desert where no man had discovered its whereabouts, was invaded by the felines, forcing him to flee just before dawn. Attempting to reach the Hidden City before the queen birthed to her royal litter, King Gallant, along with his finest warriors had no choice but to attack the pursuing feline forces. During the ensuing melee, he still managed to name his puppies, Savior and Courage, through telepathic communication with his queen.



### **Queen Truepaw**

**Born:** King's Canyon

**Size:** 3 feet, 150 pounds

### **'The Beautiful'**

**Breed:** Great Dane

**Color:** Black streaks on greyish-white like a Bengal Tiger (Brindle)

Truepaw fell in love with young Prince Gallant at an early age. Married to him for many years, it was rumored that her long-awaited pregnancy was near completion-causing the felines to attack with hopes of destroying the Great Dane Royalty. Queen Truepaw escaped in the early dawn with her king, the duke, and twelve knights, headed for the Hidden City of Hounds. She gave birth to twins under a huckleberry bush before reaching the city and with Ironcoat carrying her first-born to safety, the queen carried her remaining newborn deep into the city of man. Here they found new lives. Regular, ordinary, human lives.





**Courage Collins**

**'Scarface'**

**Born:** Huckleberry patch, on a hill outside of Girardeau

**Breed:** Great Dane

**Size:** 3 ½ feet tall, 160 lbs

**Color:** Black with white on his chest. Scars on muzzle and neck.

Raised by the Collins family, Courage always felt there was a greater meaning to his life. Grandpup to the great King Valor, and son of King Gallant, the Bold; Courage's destiny was waiting for him far beyond the small farming town of Girardeau. Following his nose, he led the Howlers to Papillion, a GoMan Master who in turn took them to the Hidden City of Hounds where he trained in the GoMan Arts under the tutelage of the Elder. With his sister by his side, the two Dane warriors commaned the GoMan Army into battle.



Terror

### **Terror**

**Born:** Hawk's Ridge Zoo

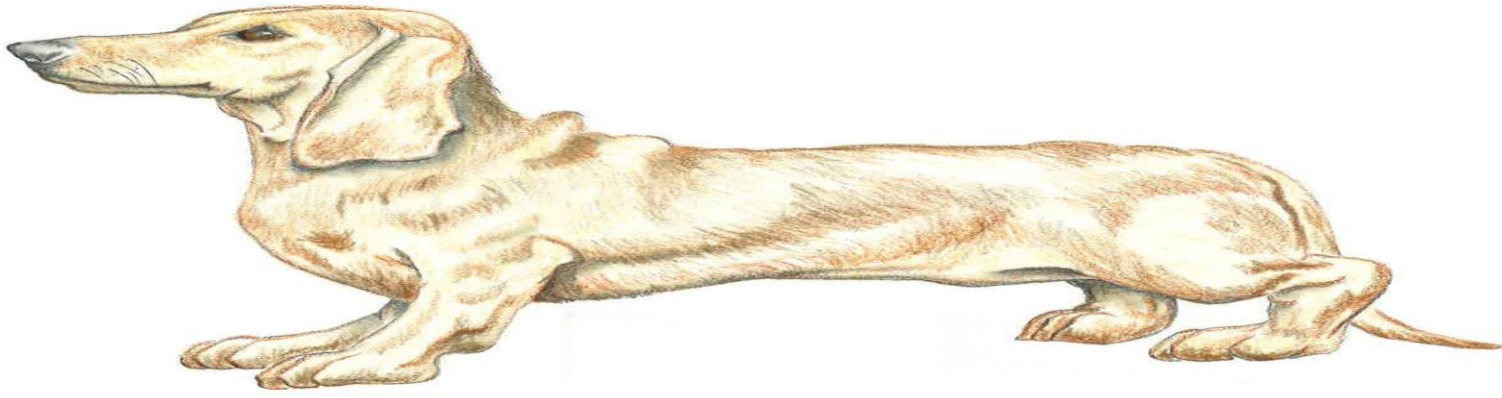
**Size:** 3 & ½ feet, 160 lbs

### **'The Evil'**

**Breed:** Black Panther

**Color:** All black with yellow eyes

Born in captivity, Terror was reared by his father, Venom, who taught him all about the wild feline's hatred of man. After years of living in a cage as a showpiece for the zoo, Terror led an escape into the wild where he formed his army of cats. Responsible for the death of Courage's father, he also inflicted serious damage upon Courage in a violent ambush. Rallying an army in Goblin's Tooth National Forest, Terror planned to make war upon Raventon by attacking all domesticated felines and the humans that harbor them.



### **Hans Von Strudell**

**Born:** Weisbaden, Germany

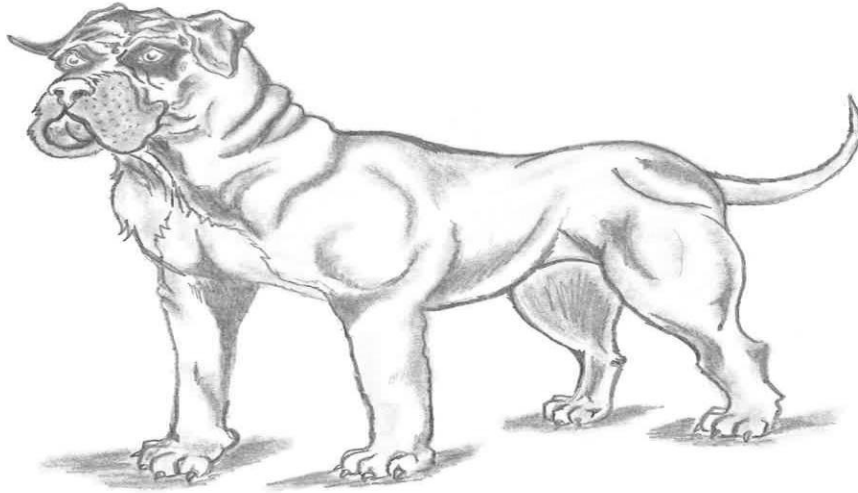
**Size:** 1 foot tall, 10 lbs

### **‘The Hotdog’**

**Breed:** Dachshund

**Color:** Black with grey on his  
head like a crown

Born in Germany to an upper-class family, Hans moved to America when his owners retired and moved to the American Wilderness. One day, his owner, who never took him on walks, left the front door open and Hans happily escaped to explore this new city. He spent four wonderful days wandering around the town until he was caught by the Dog Catcher and sent to the Dog Pound. At Two Bear’s Dog Pound he was cellmates with Courage, providing him with much needed encouragement. After the Great Escape, Hans ran directly to his home and into the loving arms of his family.



### **Don Garbage**

**Born:** Back alley of Raventon

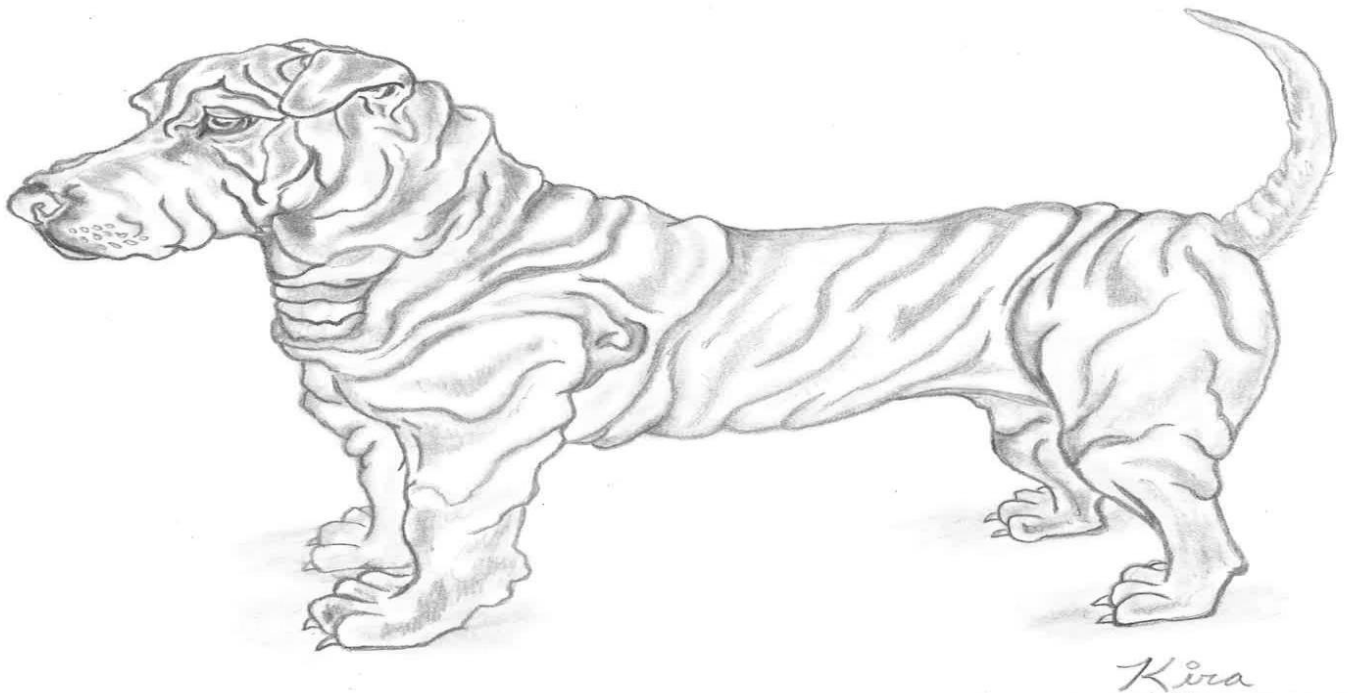
**Size:** 3 feet tall, 180 lbs

### **'The Powerful'**

**Breed:** Bull Mastiff

**Color:** Dark tan with a black muzzle and ears

Don Garbage grew up amongst the rough, city streets of the Raventon. At an early age he discovered where the best place to find food were: garbage cans. He used his massive size and street skills to form his gang of hounds where together, they ruled the back alleyways. Don Garbage quickly formed a bond with Courage in the DogPound and steadfastly remained by his side through all of his ensuing adventures.



## **Kira**

**Born:** 61-671 Kam Highway, Raventon

**Size:** 21 inches, 65 lbs

## **'The Treacherous'**

**Breed:** Shar-pei

**Color:** Dark tan with a wide  
Hippopotamus muzzle

Kira grew up in the streets of Raventon where she developed her fighting skills at a young age. Eventually forming a gang of Sharp-pei fighting dogs, they were the only dogs dumb enough to challenge Ironcoat at the Dog Pound. They proved to be no match for the great GoMan Master. After the Great Escape, her gang was roaming the back alleys in search of loot when they came upon an opportunity to ambush the Howlers—which again proved to be an ill-advised course of action.



**Don Barbecue**

**‘The Plunderer’**

**Born:** City Park, in Raventon

**Breed:** Rottweiler

**Size:** 2 & ½ feet tall, 160 lbs

**Color:** Black with tan markings

Don Barbecue grew up in the parks of Raventon where survival meant foraging for food. Early on, he discovered that human picnics with meaty barbecues were the best foods to be plundered. Eventually, he formed a gang of dogs who roamed the city parks together and feasted heartily on these tasty barbecues. After being caught by the dog catcher and sent to Two Bear’s Dog Pound, he kept all the dogs in order and helped to organize the “Great Escape.” Don Barbecue became a valued member of the Howlers and helped Courage in his search for the Elder.



Do

### **Don Ristorante**

### **‘The Sneaky’**

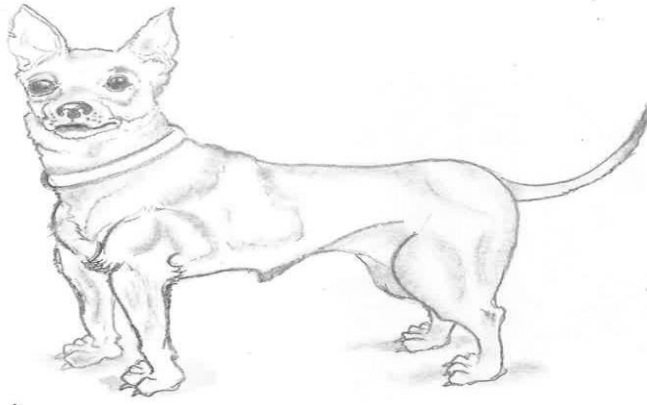
**Born:** Alley behind Pallino’s Italian Restaurant

**Breed:** Bulldog

**Size:** 3 feet tall, 140 lbs

**Color:** Tan with a crooked back that rumped his fur into one direction

Born behind an Italian restaurant, he was raised by his father, Rigatoni. Rigatoni taught him how to survive on the streets and how best to get food from Italian Restaurants. Don Ristorante is a tough, little dog who keeps a very low center of gravity while fighting his enemies. He formed his gang of dogs and concentrated their efforts on stealing food from restaurants during delivery times. A valued member of the Howlers, he also helped Courage in his search for the Elder.



*Tam*

### **Don Tamale**

### **'El Grande'**

**Born:** Tamale Plantation, Raventon

**Breed:** Chihuahua

**Size:** 8 inches tall, 6 lbs

**Color:** Brown, suntanned hair and small, pointed ears, with a gold collar

Don Tamale grew up on his parents Tamale plantation on the south side of Raventon where he worked as a guard dog, keeping a vigil over his families land and warning of any intrusions with his bark. Don Tamale eventually formed his gang, called, "The Vatos." Being the wealthiest of all the southern dogs, he earned the respect to be their leader. He and his gang of hounds helped to formulate the escape from the Dog Pound. After the great escape, he and his vatos made their way south to his families Tamale Plantation.





### **Don Noodles**

**Born:** Red Dragon Restaurant, Chinatown

**Size:** 20 inches tall, 75 lbs

### **‘The Ninja’**

**Breed:** Chinese Chow

**Color:** Beige with huge lion-like mane

Don Noodles grew up in his family’s Chinese restaurant in China Town. He was given Chinese food to eat by his masters and never once had to eat plain dog food. Don Noodles was an expert on noodles and would describe to his fellow hounds at Two Bear’s Dog Pound the wonderful tastes of Chinese Noodles. Growing up, he proved to be a tough fighter and eventually formed a gang of Chow’s which led to him becoming the don of Chinatown. He hated being forced to eat dog food at the pound and was eager to play his part in a successful escape. After escaping, he ran straight to his family at the Red Dragon restaurant.



**Sergeant Tank**

**'The Strategist'**

**Born:** Fort Carson Army Base

**Breed:** German Shepherd

**Size:** 30 inches tall, 115 lbs

**Color:** Camouflaged tan and brown,  
with black on his back and head

Sergeant Tank was raised by the military under their “Dog Soldier” program. He was trained in non-lethal combat and mine sniffing, but he excelled with the injury removal unit where he would rush into battle to retrieve injured soldiers. Sergeant Tank moved in with a loving family after his handlers retired him from service however, the first time he had a chance at real freedom, he took advantage of the opportunity and ran away. Sergeant Tank masterminded the great escape from the dog Pound and remained by Courage’s side through all of his adventure’s.



### **Tracker**

**Born:** Exotic Hunts, Louisiana

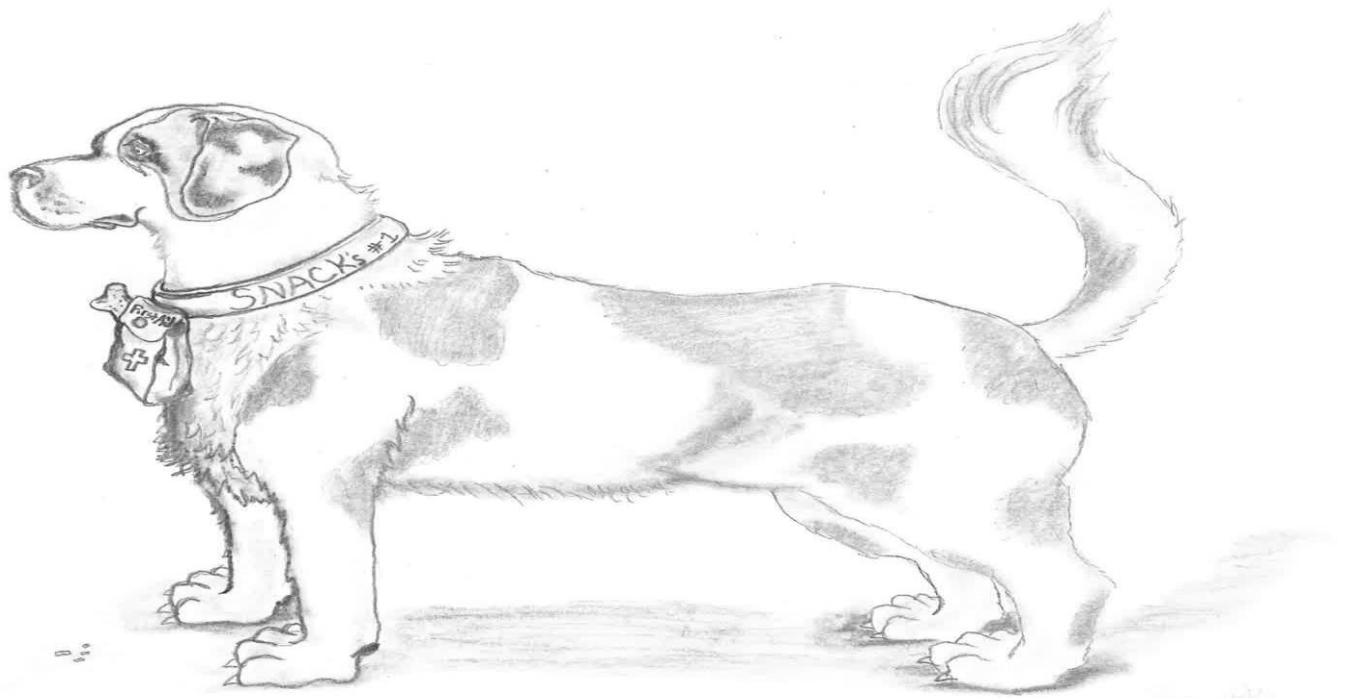
**Size:** 28 inches, 120 lbs

### **‘The Howler’**

**Breed:** Bloodhound

**Color:** Brown with black shading  
along his forehead.

Tracker was raised in a hunting farm in Louisiana. With his mighty nose, he could hunt down any animal. Tracker was sold to a hunting family and moved to Raventon where he was kept chained up in the backyard. Don Barbecue heard him howling one day and came to his rescue. Working together, they were able to set him free and he joined in with Don Barbecue’s gang afterwards. At the DogPound, Tracker initiated the escape plan with his immense howl and became a valued member of the Howlers.



### **Snacks**

**Born:** Pet Store, Cherry Creek Mall

**Size:** 3 feet, 185 lbs

### **'The Hero'**

**Breed:** Saint Bernard

**Color:** Thick brown with spots of grey along her shoulders and back

Snacks was raised at a pet store in the local mall where she was the youngest of eight brothers and sisters. One day she escaped when a lazy customer left the front door open for too long. Escaping from the mall, Snacks ran to the city streets where she eventually met Don Garbage and joined in with his gang. At the Dog Pound, she was the first digger to climb under the fence and reach freedom. Saving Knowledge from the current of a vicious riverway, Snacks proved her worth and remained a valued member of the Howlers.



## **Scrappy**

**Born:** Pet store, Spring Creek Mall

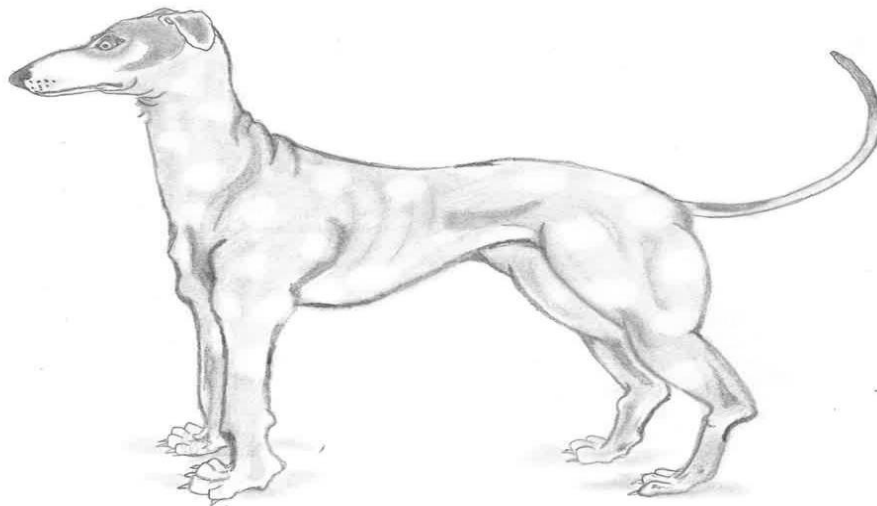
**Size:** 2 feet tall, 80 pounds

## **'The Playful'**

**Breed:** Boxer

**Color:** Mixed pelt of short,  
brown and black fur

Scrappy was bought from the pet store by an older family who had no idea just how energetic a boxer would be. Not fond of home life, he made an early escape and soon ended up at the Dog Pound where he joined up with the Howlers to help ensure his survival. After their escape from the pound, Scrappy suggested going to Canine Park, his favorite place, for their first adventure. During their many escapades, he proved to be a faithful and important member of the Howlers.



*Racer*

### **Racer**

**Born:** Mill Run Kennels

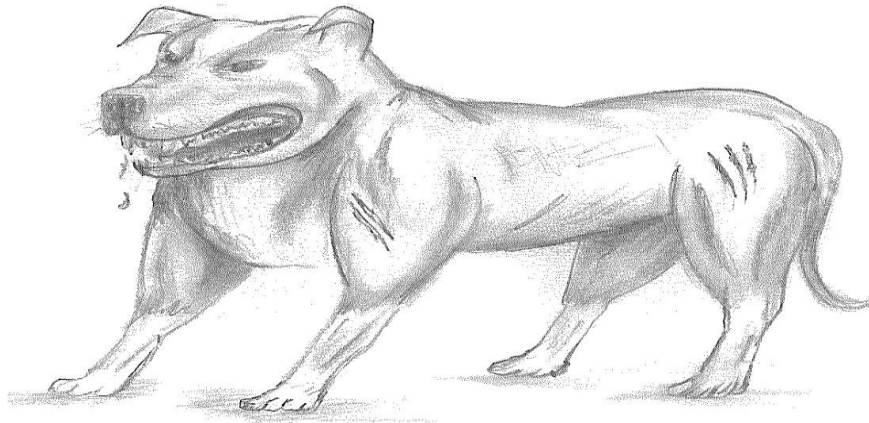
**Size:** 32 inches tall, 60 lbs

### **'The Swift'**

**Breed:** Greyhound

**Color:** Tan pelt with brown,  
irregular pattern (brindle)

Racer was raised on the race tracks of Denver, Colorado where his parents were famous racers on the professional circuit. Racer proved to be an excellent runner, winning many races in his day. After retiring he was sold to a wealthy family in the foothills outside of town. Escaping from his home, he spent years on the road until finally making his way to Raventon. After being caught by the dog catcher, Racer joined Don Ristorante's gang in the Dog Pound. He ran 'The Great Race' against Vixen, the cheetah.



### **J. D. Junkyard Dog**

### **‘Dump Truck’**

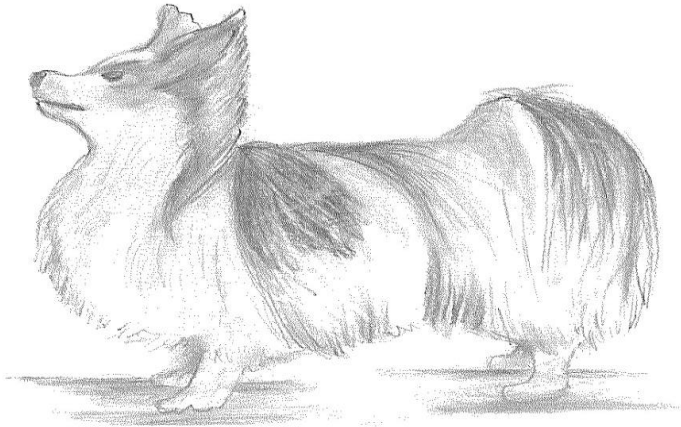
**Born:** Ray’s Junkyard

**Breed:** Pitbull

**Size:** 2 Feet tall, 70 pounds

**Color:** Dirty Grey

Born in a junkyard, J. D. learned from an early age that survival in this world was about being tough. Fighting amongst other junkyard dogs for food and survival, he learned how to fight from the toughest of hounds. Encountered by Don Ristorante when J. D. was hiding in his “home”—an old school bus, he was invited to join the Howlers and proved his worth by showcasing his fighting skills in defense of his newfound friends.



### **Papillion**

**Born:** The Hidden City

**Size:** 10 inches, 9 lbs

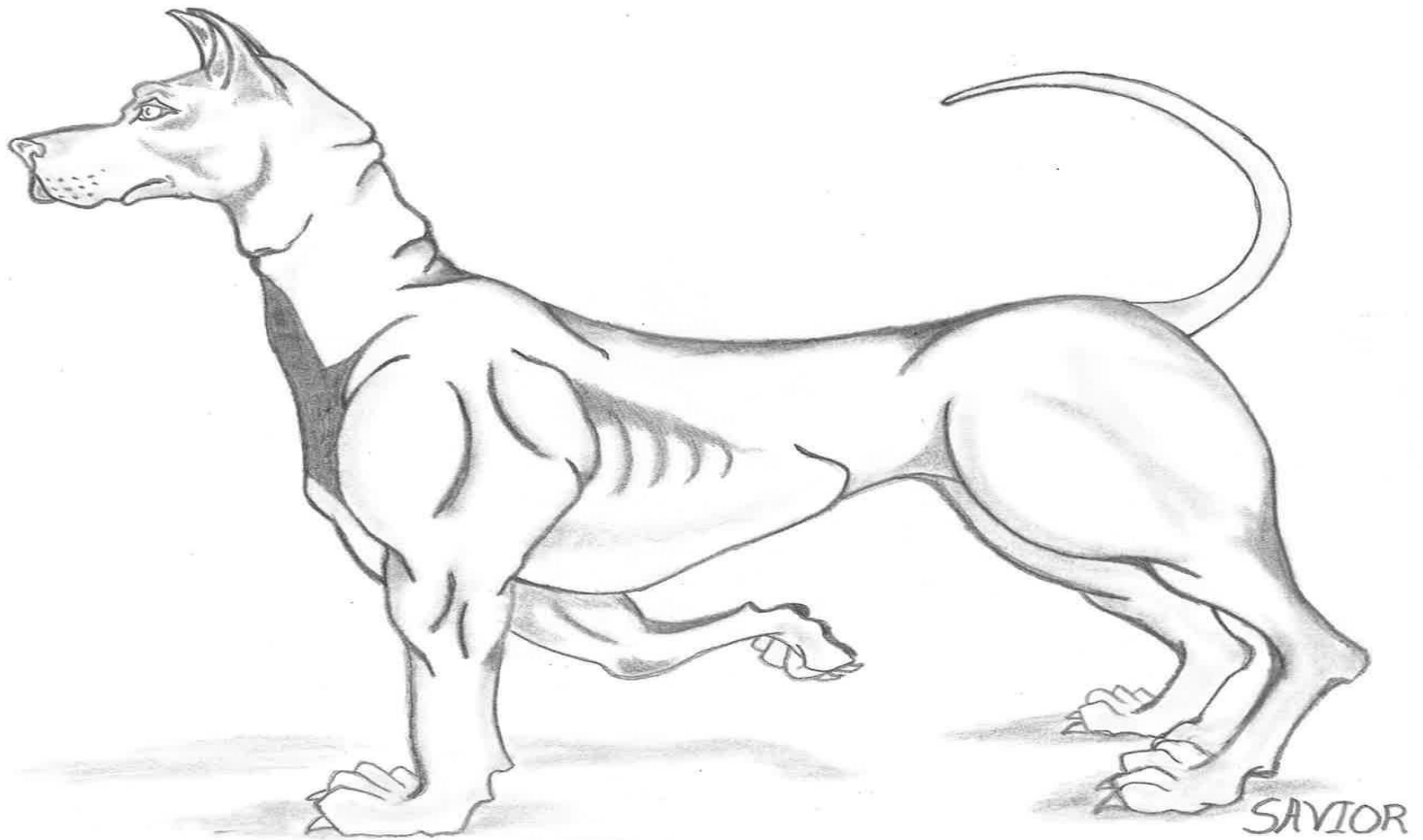
### **‘The Butterfly’**

**Breed:** Papillion

**Color:** Black and white with  
brown ears

One of the smallest dogs in the Hidden City. Papillion became a GoMan Master after many years of training in the arts. Her smallish stature allowed for her to easily traverse the high, rocky slopes of Goblin’s Peak where she was sent by the Elder to meet the approaching Howlers. Being the first GoMan Master to greet the Howlers, Papillion led the pack of hounds through the forest to her homeland, the Hidden City of Dogs.





**Savior**

**'Dutchess'**

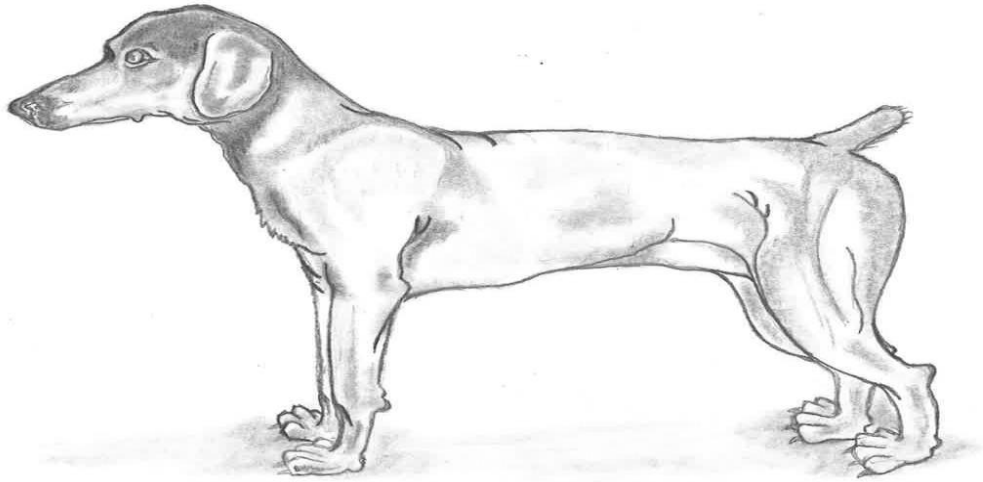
**Born:** Huckleberry patch, on a hill  
outside of Girardeau

**Size:** 42 inches tall, 160 lbs

**Breed:** Great Dane

**Color:** White with black on her  
chest

Savior, Grandpup to the great King Valor, firstborn pup to King Gallant, the Bold; was raised by the Elder inside the mountainous walls of the Hidden City. She was trained in the GoMan Arts of Tooth and Paw Fighting from her earliest day and alongside her brother, Courage, she led the great GoMan army off to battle. Gallantly stepping forward to challenge the monstrous Black Panther, Terror, she faces off in a deadly dual of dog versus cat, Great Dane versus Black Panther, and becomes the hero of the Hidden City.



### **The Elder**

**Born:** The Hidden City

**Size:** 24 inches tall, 55 lbs

### **‘The Elder’**

**Breed:** Pharaoh Hound

**Color:** Tan with grey edges

Born and raised in the Hidden City, the Elder’s parents were among the first hounds to begin settling and modernizing the city in which he now found himself leading. He is the oldest-known GoMan Master: The Elder. Spending the entirety of his life training in the GoMan Arts, the Elder was also the leader of the GoMan Army. Focusing his teaching upon Courage, he personally trained the Great Dane in the GoMan Arts, preparing him for his ultimate test—a duel with an evil Black Panther.



### **Doc**

**Born:** Raventon

**Size:** 24 inches tall, 55 lbs

### **'The Doctor'**

**Breed:** Dalmation

**Color:** White with black spots.

Raised in the main Fire-house of Raventon, Doc was taught the skills of fire-fighting and medical assistance by the town fireman. While relaxing on the front yard one day, he was approached by the Elder who was traveling through town in search of helpful hounds for his city. Convinced of the great need of his medical skills in the Canine City by the Elder, Doc agreed to leave with him that very day. As the canine healer, Doc used herbs and bandaging to heal the warriors after the Battle of Goblin's Forest.



Vixen

### **Vixen**

### **‘The sleek’**

**Born:** Goblin’s Tooth National Forest

**Breed:** Cheetah

**Size:** 32” tall, 120 pounds

**Color:** Black spots on a yellow pelt

The fastest cat known to roam the lands, Vixen joined Terror’s army of cats to help improve her own survival in the forest of her birth. Chosen by Terror to race against the fastest hound in the GoMan army, Vixen used her massive speed as she raced against the greyhound in the great race.



**I am the second born heir to King Gallant the Bold,  
Direct descendent of King StrongPaw the Wise.**

**I have trained in the Arts of Tooth and Paw Fighting.  
I am a GoMan Master like my father before me.  
Defender of man and canine alike.**

**Before you lies a tremendous quest, a tale of good versus evil  
between heroic canines and terrible felines. This story is about  
kings and queens and of hidden cities unknown to the eyes of  
man. This is a tale of survival, of love, of pals.**

**Within these pages is my story and how I first learned of the  
GoMan Arts of Tooth and Paw**

**My name is Courage, I am a Great Dane.**