

King Arfer

an excerpt

Prologue

It was not a good time for dogs. There were no dinner-table scraps, no living room hearths, no cozy doghouses in the backyard...because there were no men. Neither were there women, nor children, nor anyone to take in the dogs, let alone feed them tidbits or spoil them with walks, bones, or toys. For Man had long ago disappeared from England, and dogs were left to scabble on their own, in the wreckage of Man's collapsed buildings, or worse, outside, in the wind and rain and cold. Wolves ruled the land; and they were vicious killers.

Camelot had fallen. King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table had grown old, then died, and no one had risen to take their place. In fact, it had been so many years now since the bright turrets of King Arthur's castle had collapsed -- two hundred years? three hundred? -- that Camelot had become the stuff of legend, rather than of memory.

And yet....

One sword lay silently half-buried in the desolation: the sword Excalibur, patiently awaiting a new Ruler to rise up and lead them all.

The Dogs

Arfer, a young border-collie

Malcolm, Arfer's cousin, part border-collie, part wolfhound

Sir Graham, an old basset hound

Ximena, a Spanish bulldog

Tobias, a strong German Shepherd

Lucy, a small Corgi

Duke, an aging Great Dane

Kleo, an Egyptian saluki

Pitt, a loyal pitbull

Chapter 1

Fighting by the Rules

Arfer screwed up his face into the most ferocious growl he could muster, and snarled his teeth into his best approximation of fangs which could be expected of a young border collie. Arfer was not yet a year old, and was still growing into his bones and jaws. "Grrreghk!" he managed, in as scary a voice as he could summon. He had hoped for something much more frightening, but his voice barely bounced against the crumbling walls of the little wooden cottage the dogs called their home.

Opposite him squared a sinewy half-breed with unsettling, shifty green eyes; a distant cousin of Arfer's: Malcolm by name; ferocious by reputation. Malcolm was only half-collie. His father had been a large Irish wolfhound, whose ancestors once upon a time had been wolves.

Malcolm leapt the distance between them, landing not on his four paws, but on the scruff of Arfer's neck.

"Not fair!" shouted Ximena the bulldog, "Malcolm didn't wait for the count off --!"

It was too late; Malcolm's sudden spring took Arfer completely by surprise, and onto his side he tumbled, with Malcolm's enormous paws pinning him down before he knew it.

"Let 'em fight, Ximena," harrumphed Sir Graham, an elderly basset hound, "Rules have their place, but Arfer needs to learn how to combat deceit if we are to stand a chance against the wolves!"

The two dogs rolled and twisted in the dirt. Malcolm's heavier weight gave him tremendous advantage over his much smaller cousin. "You might be bigger than I am, Malcolm," taunted Arfer, "but I'm twice nimbler, and four times smarter!"

"Smarter won't help in battle, cousin," snarled Malcolm.

"You're wrong there, and I'll prove it," said Arfer, and a cheer went up for the young pup.

"Kill or be killed!" shouted Malcolm, and clamped his teeth into Arfer's front right shoulder.

Arfer shrieked in horrible horrible pain. "He's drawn blood!!!" shouted Arfer. The pack gasped; that was not what was supposed to happen. This mock-battle served as a training-ground; deep injuries were not allowed.

Malcolm pulled back on his haunches, his eyes wide.

A murmur shimmered through the pack; even those who had cheered Malcolm's violating the rules for launching an attack before the first signal could not condone the drawing of blood.

"Unacceptable! Downright villainous."

"I'm -- I'm so sorry, Arfer!" he said, cocking his tail between his legs and dipping his shoulders in shame.

Arfer wheezed, "I forgive you, Malcolm. You can't help it if --"

But before Arfer finished his sentence, he leapt back onto all four paws, and gave a spring with such power that it startled everyone in the pack, especially Malcolm, who suddenly saw Arfer's claws mid-air, headed right for his face. Arfer's shoulder was completely unharmed after all.

"He was faking!" cheered Sir Graham. "Clever lad!"

True that Malcolm was nearly twice Arfer's size, but Malcolm's bow of apology put him off-balance, and Arfer rammed him, smack in the shoulder with a crunch. Malcolm went flying, and tumbled against the remnants of a table against the far wall, catching a corner right in the ribcage.

The crowd roared its approval; suddenly everyone was rooting for Arfer; everyone, that is, except Ximena the bulldog, who protested in her loudest voice, "No one is obeying the rules! Chivalry is dead, dead, dead!"

Arfer taunted "I mean you can't help it...if...you're not as smart as I am!" He really wanted to say *you're stupider than I am*, but in spite of his orphan upbringing, he'd learned basic politeness along the way.

Malcolm *hated* losing, even in mock-battles where victory was proclaimed, not earned. But Arfer had humiliated him...By faking that shoulder injury, Arfer had tricked him, and made him a laughingstock. Worse, Arfer had made the entire pack believe that Malcolm he was the kind of dog who would break rules and draw his own cousin's blood. Well, Arfer must be made to pay for that. If they thought him capable of that, well...he just might do it for real.

Malcolm came after Arfer with an unsettling roar. It was not the kind of sound a border collie could make; it was the wolfhound surging now with a rage from the back of his throat which rattled the walls.

Arfer knew better now than to try to bodyblock Malcolm's superior size, and at the last second, slipped a deft sideways step like a cat. Malcolm skidded past him, even more infuriated now.

"Truce?" grinned Arfer, admittedly now a little frightened at the look in his cousin's eyes. Arfer turned to the great German Shepherd who was officiating the fight. "Can you just declare Malcolm the winner, Tobias?"

But before Tobias could weigh in, Malcolm had spun in his skid, and closed in on Arfer, his teeth wide open as a cobra's mouth.

"Look out, Arfer!" shouted Ximena the bulldog.

Malcolm caught Arfer's shoulder again -- the exact same spot as before -- and held it in his teeth, a terrible look in his eyes.

"All right, Malcolm, that's enough," said Sir Graham. "Tobias, tell them we have a winner."

But Tobias yellow eyes remained fixed on Malcolm's teeth, waiting, watching to see what would happen next.

Malcolm squeezed.

Arfer winced; kept his eyes shut against the pain.

Malcolm squeezed harder, and drops of blood spurted out of Arfer's shoulder.

Ximena the bulldog shouted: "Make it stop, Tobias. We have a winner, we have a winner...."

"Wait. Let me...finish...him..." panted Arfer.

Then an extraordinary thing happened. Although Arfer's shoulder remained pinned between Malcolm's terrible jaws, Arfer was nevertheless able to twist his neck behind him where there was an old broken stool with a jagged protruding leg. Arfer caught up the stool by its top, and swung it around with such a violent snap that the jagged leg caught Malcolm directly in the mouth, piercing Malcolm's cheek and plunging even into his tongue. There was a burst of blood, and Malcolm leapt back with a whelp. Then he fell over, his eyes dazed, his head swimming.

"NOW we have a winner," said Tobias.

Chapter 2

A Desperate Digging

Wolves twist with their jaws. They clamp onto a victim's bone or muscle, and with the massive muscles just behind their back teeth, they rotate their heads, and wrench their prey into submission and then death. Slobber usually follows, along with a wicked smile of pleasure, before feeding begins.

Despite their enormous size, wolves pad surprisingly quietly through a forest or muddy creek. They stalk, like cougars, slowly, unbeknownst to their victims, gently sliding one foot then the next without so much as a twig-crackle. This allows them to sneak up right behind an unsuspecting pup, crunch its neck, and sneak it away, to feed in silence.

Wolves are not well-liked.

They first starting taking over Britain within months of the collapse of Camelot. While King Arthur and the Knights still ruled the land, wolves hid in the shadows, uninvited into castles or homes, banished from resting at hearthsides, denied the pleasure of being scritchd behind the ears. They grew to resent this ostracizing, while other dogs were taken indoors, fed, pampered. But that changed when King Arthur died. The Knights of the Round Table began to quarrel amongst themselves, and the quarrels led to wars, and famine and death raged throughout the

land until there were no humans left; only dogs. The wolves considered it turnabout, and knew that their time had come at last. They made it clear that what rubble was left of the castles, homes, and hearths belonged to the wolves, and that dogs henceforth would need to scabble out of living out-of-doors.

For many years, this wasn't so bad for dogs. Man had abandoned hundreds of sheep and goat farms, cow pastures, chicken coops, and aviaries, all of which provided the dogs with plenty to eat for many years. But as the centuries passed and the buildings crumbled, the livestock shriveled and disappeared, and dogs began to starve. Winter crueld many a dog-pack first into desperation and then famishment. Those dogs who survived begged the wolves for shelter, but they were denied even an audience.

After the wolves consumed all the wild sheep and boar, they began killing and eating dogs. Dogs hid from the wolves, grateful whenever they stumbled on even the most ramshackled pile of stones and sticks which once had been a hut, happy to be out of wind and rain for once; happier to be out of sight and scent of the wolves. The worst pack of wolves roamed the south part of the lands, lead by a cruel, hardened wolf named Scratch with seething yellow eyes. Scratch had no mercy. He killed every creature which lay in his path; he wanted every shelter for his own. He sent out battalions with strict orders to kill anything they found, and claim every floor and roof for the wolves, in the name of Scratch.

Recently, fearing the oncoming winter, Scratch's battalions had been on the prowl again, seeking out the dogs' every hiding place.

In a tiny cock-angled abandoned fishing shack at the edge of a river, a frightened family of Corgis hunkered down, hiding from the wolves. "They won't find us here," whispered the smallest one of them, a little white Corgi named Lucy. "The wolves, I mean. We're safe here, aren't we, Mother?" Lucy looked uncertainly at the crumbling timbered walls around her.

"We're never safe, Lucy," said her Mother. "The moment you believe you're safe is when you are at your most vulnerable."

"I don't know what vunnerable means," said Lucy, "But if it makes us safer, why, then, I'll be as vunnerable as the day is long!"

"You have that backwards, Lucy," said Mother. "Now, shh...we mustn't be louder than a gentle wind, lest the wolves hear us."

"Aww, what does it matter if they hear us? They wouldn't want this old fishing place? Who'd want to live in this fishing place? It creaks, and leaks, and it stinks!"

Mother pursed her lips together tightly, and Lucy saw she'd hurt her Mother's feelings, which had not been her intention, not in the slightest. She loved her Mother, and her Father, and especially her twin sister, and to a lesser degree her four brothers -- well, three of them...her oldest brother named Caul teased her unmercifully, so a part of Lucy delighted in the fact that Caul had to live in a stinky creaky place, and it served him --

Suddenly the wolves attacked.

No one had heard them coming; not Lucy's mother, nor father, nor the twin sister, or any of the four brothers. A pack of wolves shouldered through the rickety door; how many Lucy never knew, for all she saw was a blur of black, white, and grey, and gnashing yellow teeth, wrenching and twisting her family by their necks.

A rotted wall saved Lucy's life. As a wolf pounced for her, Lucy instinctively leapt backwards. The wall was more rotten than Lucy was tiny, and it gave way, sending Lucy hurtling outside, tumbling down the riverbank. The wolf snarled and pressed after her, ramming himself at the hole through which she had just slipped, splintering it into a thousand spikes. He pursued her down the bank of the river, angered that she had slipped away, determined to have revenge and dinner at the same snap of his jaws.

The riverbank here was gnarled with roots, but it was muddy and slippery, and Lucy could not get sufficient traction to clamber up. The wolf hurdled two strides towards her, foam flicking at his jowls. Three more strides and he would be upon her!

Lucy glanced back at her family's fishing hut. Had anyone survived? Would anyone come to her rescue? No. She was on her own. She pressed down her panic, and saw a possible escape. If there is one advantage a Corgi has over a wolf, it's that...a Corgi can *dig*! She squeezed between two thick roots, her front paws extended as a windmill, driving the mud from in front of

her, slopping it away behind her. She carved out the thinnest of muddy tunnels, into which she pushed, continuing to dig, dig, dig. She felt the wolf pound up to her, and swipe his great paws at her. He swatted her hind legs just as she tucked them between the roots.

The wolf howled in anger.

She was not safe yet. Had he the patience and the determination, the wolf could work away at the roots with his claws and teeth, and pull her out of her muddy enclave. She must dig further in, and further in still; she must not stop digging until the wolf realized he had been outmaneuvered, and his lunch had escaped him.

Lucy dug for what seemed like hours.

She hit a main trunk, and burrowed to the right, then further in, working her way around the trunk, and creating a zigzaggery of tunnels and tributaries, until the soil turned less soggy, and more like clay. Here she widened the hole and made a resting place for herself where she could turn around, grow quiet, and listen to see whether the wolf had given up and gone away.

Instead of the sounds of giving up, however, she heard squeals, and crunching, and shouting. Was it her family? Had they come to her rescue? Should she come back out the tunnel she had dug to protect them? But what could she do, little Corgi that she was? *Think, Lucy, think! How can you help!?* She realized she was shivering: out of fear, exhaustion, and excitement.

Then she heard a shuffling, a shifting. Someone was in the tunnel, coming towards her!

She put her back to the wall, to face whatever or whoever it was. *This is it*, she thought. *I can't dig my way out of this.*

The shuffling sound turned to a sniffing sound. Then suddenly she saw a pair of little pink nostrils appear at the bend of her tunnel, sniffing its way into the open chamber. The pink nostrils extended further towards her, and Lucy saw they were attached to a black and white snout. Behind the snout appeared another set of nostrils, and a third, and fourth, and more, and a trembling family of badgers appeared in front of her.

"You saved us," they said. "The wolf would have scraped us out of our holes, but you burrowed further than we ever could have in time. We owe you our lives."

Lucy shook her head. "I just...dug...is all."

"But your digging saved us. One day we will repay the favor. You call for us, and we will be there for you."

Lucy looked at their sweet grateful faces. "Thank you," she said, but then added, "T-tell me, badgers...is my...did any of my family survive the attack?"

The badgers nodded no.

Lucy bent her head and began to cry.

Chapter 3

Dreaming of Camelot

"One day we'll find Camelot again! I know we will!" said young Arfer, wagging his tail.

"Phrrumph!" said old Sir Graham, trying to scratch his left ear with an arthritic paw which would *not quite reach high enough* anymore. "Don't waste your breath, Arfer. Camelot's a myth, a fairy tale! Camelot never existed." Although Sir Graham's long basset hound ears drooped onto the ground, it was the *top* of his ears which itched. In his youth he could scratch, oh how he could scratch, and run and smell and howl! But his scratching days were behind him, and he was crotchety and everything bothered him; especially young pups who believed in a past that never existed.

"Aww, let the pup dream, Sir Graham!" said Ximena the bulldog, her fine white and brown coat dusty from so many months of deprivation and poor shelter, "Look how happy it makes him!" She ran a couple circles around Arfer, crowing, "Huzzah for Camelot! Trr-trr-trr-tahh!" Ximena relished her role as the pack's optimist, keeping everyone's spirits high with a joke or prank or cheer. "Come on," she said to Sir Graham, nudging him with the tip of her brown nose, "What harm can a little dreaming do?"

"Harm!?" growled Sir Graham. "Dreaming will lead to his running off to search for a place which doesn't exist, prowling around a forest he doesn't know, why, he might run into snakes or boars, and that'd be the end of young Arfer!"

"I wouldn't just run off," said Arfer, "We'd go together, as a pack. In search for better shelter!"

Even Ximena had to admit that their shelter was, indeed, pretty awful. Three hundred years ago it had been a merry little woodcutter's cottage with charming Gallic furniture and a fireplace just right for the curling up, but not any more. Only a buckling portion of the roof remained, and the walls howled with draughts; the wooden doors crumbled. The dogs shivered at night; shivered in the day.

"Yes," barked Ximena, "let's all go search for better shelter! Lead the way to Camelot, Arfer! Trr-trr-trr-tahh!"

"Quiet!" hissed Malcolm, keeping watch by the door. "No one make a sound...."

There were only seven dogs in the pack (Arfer; Sir Graham the basset hound; Ximena the bulldog; Malcolm the half-breed collie and wolf; the brawny Shepherd Tobias, currently sleeping in the corner; and two mothers with six puppies between them) but they all knew when Malcolm hushed them that they had to be silent. Malcolm's ears were the most acute of all of them, and everyone depended on him to hear when danger was imminent.

"What is it?" whispered Ximena, "What do you hear, Malcolm?"

"I don't know. A rustling; a footpadding."

Sir Graham pointed his nose at the ground six inches in front of him to the left, and made a long, slow, sweeping semi-circle arc to his right; then he turned about-face and traced another arc along the ground. This was Sir Graham's way of taking in smells from every direction ("The *Sir-cle!*" Ximena had mocked one day, and the word stuck). Though Malcolm's ears were more acute than anyone else in the pack, it was Sir Graham's nose on which they most relied to know when danger was approaching. Basset hound as he was, Sir Graham had been known to smell a smoldering ember four miles away, or an adder-snake which was forty feet underground, across the river, and upstream by a half-a-day's walk.

Everyone was quiet; tense; all looking at Sir Graham. His nostrils opened, closed, opened, closed. They quivered. His eyes grew rheumy. "I -- I --...." He trailed off, then drooped his head. "I'm afraid I don't smell anything."

Arfer's ears pricked up. "But that's good, isn't it!? No danger."

"No, I mean...I don't smell *anything*. I've -- I've grown old, Arfer. Breaks my heart...but I think I've lost my sense of smell."

There was a howl of disagreement. "Not true!" shouted Arfer.

"As young as a whelp! As young as an unhatched robin's egg! As young as the buds in spring!" said Ximena (though in reality she pitied poor Graham and his rheumy eyes, and was grateful for her own health, fantastic beauty, and abundant modesty).

"Now, now," said Sir Graham, "I've had my day. It's time for someone else, and that's as it should be. Arfer...do you smell any danger?"

Arfer leaned forward into a hunting-pointing tilt, squeezed his eyes shut...and smelled. *Nothing.*

"No," said Arfer. "I smell only my cousin Malcolm."

Everyone laughed. "Well, of course we all smell Malcolm!" said Sir Graham.

"Who doesn't smell you? The most rank of the pack!" said Ximena.

"What else, lad?" Sir Graham urged Arfer, for there were many many smells in the air; surely the young collie pup could catch *some* of them! "What else do you smell?"

Arfer snuffled; whiffled; and sniffed. "Nothing."

Sir Graham took himself into a corner, and sat down, dejected. *Ah, young Arfer*, he thought. *So much to learn still. Nothing; he smells nothing??* Dank soil; moisty rotting forest leaves...some distant sheep, squirrels, badgers, pheasants...a whiff of tomorrow's fog. Then, a shifting of the

wind. That was reassuring to Graham. He had always taken pride in his ability to smell when the wind changed; not every dog could catch the subtle differences between the odors brought on the back of a northwest wind and those on a north-northwest wind. But to Sir Graham the basset hound, who once was known for being able to smell a butterfly a county away, it was the difference between smelling an open plain directly to the north, or a cave many miles to the west. With the wind came all kinds of news. Graham could smell a gathering rain, and whether it was headed their way or whether it was going to swing past them. Graham could smell whether the sheep had yet had their lambs, whether the wild horses had had their colts. Suddenly Graham twitched at something new. He could smell...*Graham could smell wolves!* He leapt up.

"Wolves! Headed our way!" Graham ran over to Arfer and Ximena. "The wind has shifted, and I smell them."

Ximena's ears swiveled backwards. She ran to the puppies and the two young mothers.

"Everyone quiet! Wolves!" The pack hushed.

Arfer asked, "How many, Graham? How far away?"

Sir Graham sniffed. His eyes grew large. "Dozens! Twenty? Thirty! And oh...oh, they're much closer than I thought!"

Malcolm took charge. "Is there time to flee?"

Graham's nostrils flared. "They'll be upon us in minutes!"

Malcolm said, "We must fight them."

"Fight!?" said Arfer. "We can't win against wolves."

"We have no other choice," said Malcolm. "Tobias! Someone wake Tobias!"

The mothers prodded the great German Shepherd Tobias who awakened with a greater German Shepherd snort.

Malcolm shouted, "Tobias! The wolves are attacking! Ximena, help me push this table against the door; that will buy us a few moments, perhaps."

Sir Graham hung his head. "I'm sorry, everyone," he said. "I should have smelled them sooner."

Ximena nipped at him. "Tsssh!" she said. "You've smelled them before any of us could have."

"Not soon enough!" sighed Sir Graham.

"Time for quibbling later," said Tobias, shaking the sleep from his head. "Once the front door is blocked, I'll lead the mothers and pups to slip out the back."

Arfer scowled. *Something wasn't right.* "If we block one door, there will be only one remaining way out."

"No time to argue, Arfer," said Ximena, pressing her flat forehead against the table, alongside Tobias and Malcolm, pushing it inch by inch across the floor towards the door. "In the last year, the wolves have taken over nearly every home and shelter in the land. We can't let them have this shack, however leaky and pathetic it is!"

"But -- but -- " protested Arfer, "if the wolves come in through the back...."

Sir Graham hushed, "Arfer, you have won precisely one single fight in your life. Don't let it go to your head."

Arfer scowled, "I don't understand. H-how could the wolves know we're here? How could they have found out our hiding place? If Sir Graham couldn't smell them, how could they have smelled us?"

Malcolm said, "Someone must have tipped them off, cousin...."

It was a strange thing to say. *Tip off the wolves? Who would have tipped off the wolves, and why?* Arfer wondered why his cousin Malcolm would have concocted such an idea, unless, unless he had had the idea himself. *But why?*

"So, the plan?" asked Ximena. "What's the plan, Tobias?"

Tobias hung his head. "I'll lead the pups over the riverbank. Ximena, Malcolm, Sir Graham, and Arfer, you must fight them,."

Ximena shook her head, "I don't want to fight. Let us sit calmly and speak with them; show them we mean them no harm."

Tobias roared, "Of course we mean them harm! They're wolves. We shall kill them all defending our home, if we must."

Sir Graham groaned, "A battle?! With my aching bones! I'm too old for this..."

Then everyone heard a soft footpad outside the door. The wolves had arrived.

Tobias whispered to the mothers and puppies, "Quick, follow me out the back." They obediently fell into a silent line, and trod behind him, trying to be as quiet as they could.

Arfer's eyes went wide. He whispered maniacally, "I'm telling you, I think it's a trap! I think want us to slip out the back, where they are waiting to pick us off one by one. Our only chance is to do what they're not expecting, and bolt out the front!"

Sir Graham said, "Hush now, Arfer."

But Ximena said, "I think Arfer's right. I think they're ambushing us out back, and there's only a few of them out front; we can surprise them and run right past them and --"

Tobias reared back and said in a low, fierce growl, "Ximena Bulldog; answer thee now. Do you escape with me and the pups, or do you take counsel from this puppy?"

Arfer gasped. *This puppy?*

Ximena said, "There isn't time to argue."

"I agree!" snarled Tobias. "Who's with me?"

Arfer shook his head. *This couldn't be happening! Tobias was dividing the pack, just when we need to unite!* He watched as Ximena hesitated, still standing near Sir Graham and Arfer. "I don't know..." she stammered, "I don't know --"

But the moment of actual decision never came, for the rotted table collapsed and the front door crumbled inwards, clawed down by three ravenous hounds, their green eyes flashing, their yellow teeth spitting splinters and spittle.

Ximena the bulldog swung into action before any of the other dogs, her lightning-quick reflexes kicking in. She rammed her broad head recklessly into the first of the three intruders, literally sliding him back across the threshold, outside.

The second wolf charged Sir Graham, his jaws sprung open wide like a pterodactyl's, aiming to bite off his head with a single munch. Sir Graham, a veteran of a thousand battles, had seen this maneuver a thousand times before, and deftly slid a dainty step to the side, leaving the wolf to pass right under the basset hound's long floppy ears, like a bull under a matador's cape. The wolf, who had prepared for impact, suddenly caught nothing but wind, sending him tumbling headlong into the nearby wall.

"Ha!" shouted Sir Graham, but that was followed by a squeaky "Ooooch" as his ancient arthritic hips caught a twist in a particularly pinchy way. *Why didn't I retire last summer like I promised myself? I'm too old for this.*

The third wolf was headed straight for Arfer.

Chapter 4

Bone Fight

"I shall dig you up a bone, Master Duke!"

Duke came from a long line of Great Danes. His ancestors had been royalty, a long long time ago, and everyone assumed that if Camelot were ever found to be real, then Duke would sit upon its throne and be Ruler of All the Land. That seemed ridiculous to Duke. First of all, everyone knew there was no such thing as Camelot (never was, not now, never will be), and even if Camelot did exist, it would have become just a tangled gnarl of overgrown boulders...hardly worth the ruling over.

Hence, it struck Duke as just plain silly to have a "servant." But there he was: Pitt! digging for a bone or something to give to his "master." Pitt, being a pitbull, was short, stocky, and had developed an strange habit of always hanging his head, looking at you from underneath.

"Ever the loyal Pitt!" said Duke. "How many times do I have to tell you that I'm perfectly capable of snuffling bones all by myself...."

"Yes, Master Duke," said Pitt, waving him off with a paw, and digging with another.

"Looking for *this*?" said a calm, sultry voice. Duke looked up: Before him was a tall elegant Egyptian Saluki, somewhat resembling a greyhound except where long strands of hair spun out into silly curls, such as the tufts of her ears. Between the saluki's teeth was a bone; a raw, wonderful, newly-dug bone.

"Where'd you get *that*!?" shouted Duke.

"Right between your paws! Look down!" Sure enough, Duke saw a newly-dug hole directly between his front paws; Kleo had slyly dug up the bone from right underneath him; *right underneath him without his noticing!* She shook her merry tail, wagged her long, shaggy ears, and crouched into a "come chase me!" position. She dropped the bone at Duke's feet, and bounded circles around him. "For you, your Majesty! Now catch me; catch me!"

"I'll not give you the time of day," said Duke, "if you insist on calling me Your Majesty."

"Not *my* Majesty," said Kleo. "*Your* Majesty."

"I'm just a Duke."

"That out-ranks me!" she said. "But I'll bet you can't *outrun* me!"

Well, of course he *could* outrun her, as two of his Great Dane strides covered the length of three of Kleo's saluki strides, and about a hundred of Pit's waddles. "There will be no chasing today,"

said Duke. "We have no shelter for the night, and we must stay close by each other's sides before --"

He stopped up short, for there, right in front of him, was a lone, angular wolf, with orange eyes and grey fur the color of ashes. It was one of the wolves from the Southern wolves pack, the worst of the breed. "I'll be having that bone from you," said the wolf in low tones, dulcet like a cat, but fearsome like a panther.

"Over my dead body!" said Pitt, galumphing between the wolf and Duke. "You'll have to fight me for it."

"That would only increase my pleasure, Pitt," seethed the wolf. "You're on!"

Duke shook his head. "You fight him, you fight me, too, and you know you wouldn't win that battle. The bone stays with me."

The wolf grinned a snarling, lopsided smile. "You're assuming I'm alone. But the instant you attack there will be a hundred of my brothers upon you."

"I'll fight *two hundred* brothers who try to take a bone from my Master!" taunted Pitt, chittering up and down like a squirrel. Pitt loved a good fight.

Kleo serenely picked up the bone in her teeth, and spat it over to the wolf. "Not worth the dander," she said. "Come on, Duke; come on, Pitt. Leave the beggar with his bone."

The wolf's brow descended deeply down over his nose in contempt. *Kleo had beaten him somehow. Although the bone belonged to him now, Kleo had beaten him. He hated that.*

"You're a coward!" he snarled after her, as she turned her back and lead Duke and Pitt away.

"The Saluki is a coward!"

Pitt hated walking away from a fight. "Let's go back! The wolf is alone. We can take him!"

Kleo said calmly, "Those who win a fight with words are the true victors."

Duke lowed, like a cow. "And those who give away their bones to their enemies have no bones."

He sniffed. "I wanted that bone. It was a lovely gift, Kleo."

"Thank you," she said.

"What about, what about, what about *my* gift? I was ready to defend you! Did you see that?"

Putting my life on the line for you! Worth more than a bone --!"

A whoosh of swiping claws silenced Pitt -- from the shadows, the wolf pounced, gave the back of Duke's legs a great slash, and away he leapt with a howl! He had appeared and disappeared with such suddenness, none of the three dogs could ascertain in which direction he had vanished.

Duke heard a snap of one of the bones in his feet; he went down.

"Duke!" cried Kleo.

The wolf had fled before they could defend themselves. "Come back and fight! Stand and defend! Who's the coward now!?! " cried Pitt, sweeping from left to right, with vague hope that his words were trailing after the wolf, and not just bounding diminishingly into the dimming forest.

"I'm all right," said Duke, rising. But his left ankle gave way, and he collapsed again. "Oh dear. Might've broken it."

"We should've fought him, when we had the upper paw!" said Pitt.

"He wasn't alone. There were others ready to join," said Duke. "Wolves aren't so foolish as to risk fighting three-on-one. Kleo was right to walk away."

There was a flash of lightning, followed by a rumbling clap of thunder.

"Come on, friends," said Duke, "We must find shelter before the rain comes."

"But your leg!" said Pitt.

"I think it was a twig that snapped, not my leg. Anyway, shelter first. Food next. Ankle after that."

It began to rain. The three dogs turned southward, hoping to find something, anything, which would keep them dry for the night. As they plunged deeper into the fell of the forest, Pitt snurfed to himself, "Should've fought 'em...."

Chapter 5

Ambush!

Tobias knew he had little, if any time, if the puppies were to stand a chance. He pushed them out the back door, whispering, "Dig under the wall!"

There were six puppies, three months old only, but strong enough to dig.

"But Mother says never dig under the --"

"Do as I say!" snarled Tobias. "And don't make a sound. Your life depends upon it." The puppies galloped to the wall, and started digging. Then Tobias saw that he had made a fatal mistake. Hunching just outside the back door, ready to pick off the dogs, one by one, was a pack of nearly twenty wolves! Arfer had been right; it was an ambush.

Tobias knew immediately he would not survive.

But the puppies might. If Tobias could distract or outmaneuver the wolves long enough, the puppies might, just might, be able to run to the wall and dig under it, hiding on the other side until someone could rescue them.

The first round of the battle went to the pups. The wolves at the back door had been expecting full-grown, larger dogs, and thus were not prepared to watch for six little wriggling things darting along the ground, shooting underneath them, right between their legs.

Those precious few seconds gave the puppies the narrowest of headstarts...just enough to dart to wall first, all six of them scrabbling to begin making a hole. But it was not enough extra time to dig underneath the wall. Tobias knew that the wolves would attack him first and then the mothers, and then turn to the puppies.

As the wolves stood a moment by the back door, confused, Tobias gave a great huge leap, up and over the wolves. He was, after all, a German Shepherd, larger than the wolves, and he was fit, strong, and powerful, and he bounded over after the puppies.

The puppies' mothers, however, did not escape the first attack from the wolves. They bravely faced the ravenous squadron, but they were no match, and it was soon over. The wolves killed the mothers, and then turned to Tobias, now at the wall.

Tobias shouted to the puppies, "Dig under the wall, then don't make a sound, not a single sound!"

The puppies dug frantically. The wolves leapt for Tobias. Surprisingly, Tobias turned his back to them. Then they saw that Tobias was himself digging! Instead of defending himself, Tobias was using the last moments of his life to give the puppies an escape.

Tobias had a secondary reason for digging -- he aimed his dirt-flinging through the air where it struck a few wolves squarely in the eye. Unable to see, they stopped in their tracks.

The puppies wriggled under the wall, momentarily safe from the wolves.

That was all Tobias could do for them, or himself. He stopped digging, and turned to face the pack of wolves which descended upon him and began to tear him apart.