

MILAN VANDERMEULEN

*Paws of destiny*

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*First edition*

*ISBN: 9789403784977*

*To my wife, the love of my life:  
Your unwavering belief in magic and endless support made this  
book possible.  
Thank you for every story shared. This is our adventure—always.*

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# Foreword

he journey of writing this book began with a simple idea: to explore the enchantment of imagination. The act of creating fantasy worlds has long provided readers with an escape, and for me, it offered the thrill of crafting adventures that mirror our own hopes and challenges.

Within these pages, you'll find a realm shaped by courage, friendship, and the resilient spark of hope—qualities I believe can guide us through even the darkest moments in life. Each character's trials echo the universal search for belonging and identity, reminding us that every victory, no matter how small, holds the power to reshape our future.

This foreword is an invitation: step into a land where magic can bloom in unexpected places and heroes can rise from the most unassuming beginnings. May these words ignite your sense of wonder and encourage you to embrace the extraordinary tucked away in ordinary days.

Welcome, dear reader. The story awaits.

# 1

## Chapter 1 - The Call to Adventure:

In a quaint town embraced by rolling hills and meadows that seemed to stretch on forever, there lived a spirited puppy named Hercules. His fur, a radiant golden hue, gleamed under the warm sun, and his eyes sparkled with a curiosity that hinted at the adventures waiting to unfold.

One ordinary day, as Hercules playfully dug for hidden treasures in the lush garden, his tiny paws unearthed something extraordinary—an ancient, shimmering artifact pulsating with a magical energy. When Hercules touched the artifact, a vivid vision flashed before his eyes, revealing a prophecy foretelling an imminent threat.

The artifact spoke of an encroaching darkness, a malevolent force named the Shadow Hound, poised to engulf the entire animal kingdom. Hercules, with his boundless energy and spirited nature, felt an unexpected weight settle on his shoulders. The prophecy had chosen him for a heroic mission.

With determination burning in his heart, Hercules resolved to embark on a journey to seek guidance from the wise elder dog dwelling atop the Misty Mountains. Legends spoke of this

venerable figure as the keeper of ancient knowledge and the key to unlocking Hercules' true potential, the very potential needed to thwart the looming threat of the Shadow Hound.

Leaving behind the familiar comforts of his home, Hercules ventured forth into the great unknown. The meadows whispered encouragement with every step, and the wind carried the sage advice of a wise old owl perched high above.

As Hercules and Luna, a clever cat with an agile mind and a penchant for mischief, traversed dense forests and crossed babbling brooks, their friendship deepened. Laughter echoed through the woods, and the bond between them became as unyielding as the Misty Mountains they aspired to conquer.

Under the enchanting glow of the moon, Hercules and Luna reached the foothills of the Misty Mountains. The ascent ahead was daunting, but within Hercules surged a newfound courage, and the call to adventure resonated with undeniable force.

Little did Hercules know that this journey marked only the prologue to a tale destined to test his mettle, unravel ancient mysteries, and force him to confront the shadows threatening to cast the world into an eternal night. The destiny of the animal kingdom rested on the shoulders of a spirited puppy, his heart as brave as any legendary hero from the stories of old.



## 2

### Chapter 2: The Journey Begins

The sun dipped low in the sky, painting the horizon in hues of orange and pink, as Hercules and Luna ventured further from the only home Hercules had ever known. The path before them was unfamiliar, winding through thick forests and open meadows. But Hercules felt a strange pull in his chest, like an invisible thread guiding him toward his destiny. Luna padded beside him, her sharp eyes scanning their surroundings with a mix of curiosity and caution.

As night began to fall, the pair found themselves standing at the edge of the Enchanted Woods, a forest so dense and mysterious that few dared to enter. The trees were twisted and gnarled, their branches reaching out like skeletal fingers, and the air was thick with a sense of magic and danger. This was no ordinary forest—it was alive with ancient energy, and every rustle of leaves and distant call of a creature seemed to whisper secrets.

“We should be careful here,” Luna warned, her whiskers twitching. “This place is full of tricks. It’s not like the quiet woods back home.”

Hercules nodded, his tail lowering slightly as he peered into the darkened undergrowth. “We’ll be fine. We just have to keep moving. The elder dog is on the other side of this forest, and we can’t turn back now.”

With a deep breath, Hercules took the first step into the Enchanted Woods. As soon as his paw touched the forest floor, the ground beneath him seemed to shift, like the forest itself was watching, waiting to test the resolve of the young adventurers. The deeper they went, the stranger the woods became. Trees whispered in voices that only hinted at their meaning, and the air seemed to hum with a faint, eerie melody. Moonlight barely pierced the thick canopy above, casting odd shadows that danced on the ground. Hercules and Luna pressed on, navigating around roots that twisted like serpents and ducking under branches that hung low, draped in moss.

Suddenly, a flicker of light caught Hercules’ eye. He turned to see tiny orbs of light flitting between the trees—fireflies, glowing with a soft blue luminescence. But these were no ordinary fireflies. As they moved, they formed patterns, guiding the way deeper into the forest. Intrigued, Hercules followed them, his eyes wide with wonder.

“Hercules, wait!” Luna called, but her voice was lost in the growing chorus of forest sounds—chirps, rustling leaves, and the distant call of some unseen creature.

As Hercules followed the lights, he soon realized they were not leading him forward, but around in circles. He found himself back at the same twisted tree he’d passed minutes ago, its trunk marked with deep claw marks. The fireflies, it seemed, were playing a game, leading him astray.

Luna caught up, her tail flicking with annoyance. “We’re not getting anywhere like this. The forest is trying to confuse us.”

Hercules frowned, his ears drooping slightly. “Then how do we find our way? We can’t see the path anymore.”

Luna sat back, her eyes narrowing in thought. “The Enchanted Woods are known for their illusions. We can’t trust what we see. We have to rely on something else.”

Just then, a soft, melodic sound drifted through the trees—a faint tune, like the chiming of bells. Hercules perked up, his ears twitching. It wasn’t just a random noise; it was deliberate, almost like a song. The sound was calming, unlike the confusing whispers of the forest.

Luna listened too, her head tilting. “That’s it,” she said softly. “That’s how we’ll find our way. We follow the music.”

The two friends walked carefully, following the faint melody that seemed to guide them through the dense forest. As they moved closer, the music grew clearer, and the tangled woods seemed to part before them, revealing a clearer path.

Finally, they stepped into a small clearing bathed in moonlight. In the center sat a strange figure—a creature that seemed part dog, part spirit, its fur shimmering like the stars. It played a small harp made of silver branches, each note resonating with magic.

“Welcome, travelers,” the creature said in a voice like a soft breeze. “You are brave to enter these woods. Few make it this far.”

Hercules stepped forward, cautious but determined. “We’re on a quest to find the elder dog. We need guidance to defeat the Shadow Hound.”

The spirit-dog’s eyes gleamed with ancient wisdom. “The elder dog is wise, but your journey will not be easy. The path is filled with challenges, some that will test your strength, others that will test your heart. But remember this: not all light leads

you forward, and not all darkness holds you back.”

With a final, haunting note, the spirit-dog vanished, leaving only the faint echo of its music behind. Hercules and Luna looked at each other, a renewed sense of purpose filling their hearts. They had faced the first of many challenges, and though the road ahead was still uncertain, they knew they were on the right path.

As they continued their journey, Hercules felt a mix of fear and excitement. The Enchanted Woods had tested them, but they had come out stronger, more united. And though the darkness ahead was vast, Hercules was ready. His mission was just beginning, and nothing would stop him from fulfilling his destiny.

# 3

## Chapter 3: The Trials of the River Styx

As dawn broke, casting golden rays through the foliage, Hercules and Luna set off from the clearing, their spirits lifted by the mysterious melody they had heard. The Enchanted Woods behind them now seemed less foreboding, yet their journey was far from over. Their path soon led them to a wide, fast-flowing river with a surface that gleamed like polished silver.

“This must be the River Styx,” Luna said, her eyes widening as she gazed at the turbulent waters. “According to the legends, this river is enchanted and guarded by a tricky spirit. We need to cross it to continue our quest.”

Hercules took a deep breath, peering into the swirling depths of the river. The water moved with an almost hypnotic rhythm, and dark shapes darted beneath the surface. He could feel the weight of the prophecy pressing on his shoulders, and he knew that crossing this river was not just a physical challenge but a test of their resolve.

Suddenly, a figure emerged from the mist above the river—a spirit with a flowing robe and a face obscured by shadows. Its eyes glowed with an unsettling light as it floated above the

water.

“Greetings, travelers,” the spirit’s voice was smooth and melodious, but it carried an edge of danger. “To cross the River Styx, you must prove your worth. Only those who can answer my riddles may pass.”

Luna’s whiskers twitched with anxiety. “Riddles? We’re not exactly experts in riddles.”

Hercules stepped forward, his determination hardening. “We’ll do our best. Ask your riddles.”

The spirit’s eyes glimmered with satisfaction. “Very well. Here is the first riddle:

‘I can fly without wings. I can cry without eyes. Wherever I go, darkness flies. What am I?’”

Hercules thought hard, his brow furrowing. He and Luna huddled together, whispering their thoughts. “It has to be something that moves through the air and affects darkness,” Hercules mused.

Luna’s eyes lit up. “I think it’s a cloud. Clouds can drift through the sky and block out the sun, making it dark.”

Hercules nodded. “Yes, that’s it. The answer is a cloud.”

The spirit’s eyes shone brighter with approval. “Correct. Here is the second riddle:

‘I have cities but no houses, forests but no trees, and rivers but no water. What am I?’”

Hercules and Luna exchanged glances, both lost in thought. “This one’s tricky,” Luna admitted. “But it sounds like something that has all the features but none of the physical aspects.”

Hercules snapped his paws together. “It’s a map! A map shows cities, forests, and rivers but doesn’t actually have them.”

The spirit nodded solemnly. “You are correct again. Now for the final riddle:

‘I am taken from a mine and shut up in a wooden case, from which I am never released, and yet I am used by almost every person. What am I?’”

Hercules and Luna pondered this last riddle, their brows furrowing in concentration. After a moment, Luna’s face brightened. “I think it’s pencil lead. It’s mined, encased in wood, and used by people every day.”

Hercules agreed. “Yes, a pencil lead is the answer.”

The spirit’s eyes glowed warmly, and it smiled for the first time. “You have answered all my riddles correctly. You may cross the River Styx. But beware—this river tests not only your intellect but also your courage.”

With a wave of its hand, the spirit summoned a narrow, sturdy bridge made of vines and wooden planks, stretching across the river. Hercules and Luna carefully made their way across, the bridge swaying slightly with each step. The river’s surface churned beneath them, but they focused on the path ahead, determined to succeed.

As they reached the far side of the river, they felt a sense of accomplishment. The trials had tested their wits, but they had overcome them. However, the journey was far from over, and they knew there would be more challenges ahead.

Beyond the River Styx lay a vast, open landscape dotted with hills and valleys. The sky was a brilliant blue, but dark clouds loomed on the horizon, hinting at the trials still to come. Hercules and Luna pressed forward, their resolve stronger than ever.

Their next destination was the Cave of Echoes, a place known for its eerie, haunting echoes that could drive even the bravest adventurers to despair. But Hercules was ready. He had faced his first true challenge and emerged victorious. With Luna by

his side, he knew they could face whatever lay ahead.

As they journeyed toward the Cave of Echoes, the sun began to set, casting long shadows over the landscape. The world seemed to hold its breath as they approached the mouth of the cave, the entrance dark and foreboding. Hercules felt a shiver of anticipation. The next trial awaited them, and he was determined to face it with bravery and heart.