

Balto: Son

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Prologue

Long before wolves roamed the Alaskan tundra, long before any corporeal life forms were intelligent enough to mark the passage of time, the spirit world thrived and was home to thousands of benevolent spirits whose purpose it was to oversee the development of all life's creatures in what we consider to be our mortal plane. These spirits were each assigned to create a species as part of the grand design, to place them in balance with one another, to create an ecosystem of living beings in which they all could exist and survive.

One such spirit held great hope for her species, a noble, powerful race of creatures destined for more than mere survival or living off the pickings of others. Her species were nameless, as all species were nameless during the process of creation. She knew that whatever she chose to name them during the final stage of creation, it would be a word of power drawn from her own being. She created, formed and molded their essence over a millennia, infusing her own life force into their very souls that they might carry her strength, power and wisdom across the divide into the mortal realm unlike so many other species.

She gave of herself into these creatures that they might do more and be more than part of the circle of life. She wanted nothing

less than greatness for these, her children. Though she knew her children were not destined to be the dominant beings within the mortal plane, she would give them a gift that was unparalleled by any others, something that would assure their rightful place amongst the other species.

She would give them a guide, bound to this earth by birth and to the spirit realm by design. A leader to unite all his brothers and sisters, born of our world as a bridge between the two planes of existence that they might live as one in harmony with each other and the spirit world.

It was something no other spirit had ever done before, because none of them had ever wished to become mortal. Why would you choose to take a mortal form, when in the spirit world you exist outside of space and time? There is no death, no hunger, no fighting for survival. There is only peaceful existence and observance of their creations across the mortal divide.

"I have decided," she said with a voice that echoed through the expanse of the spirit world, resonating like an ethereal chorus, "I will give them a son."

###

Chapter 1: Revelations

Balto's feet kicked and twitched as he slept, dreaming of leading his own dog team through the mountain pass back to Nome. He could feel the cold mountain air rushing into his lungs, his

powerful shoulders pulling the sled forward with every pounding step through the powdery snow.

"Come on guys, mush!" he yelled back to his teammates, grinning broadly. He felt a sense of purpose, an excitement that sparked his actions as he exploded forward with a burst of speed, running for all he was worth. He ran tirelessly through the mountain pass and down into the forest, savoring the crisp smell of pine and freshly fallen snow as he expertly navigated the sled around trees and boulders, taking the line that would grant them the fastest passage.

They broke through the forest and entered the plains, and Balto poured on the speed, running the fastest he had ever run in his life.

"Ahhwoooooooooooooo!" Balto howled with pure joy as the mountains in the distance became a blur and the snow beneath his feet atomized under his relentless assault, becoming slush in his wake. He closed his eyes and felt the rush of air against his face and breathed deeply. He felt so alive, and he knew this is what he was born for, his unique blend of husky and wolf combining to make him the best lead dog there had ever been.

As he slept, Balto smiled, and his legs twitched again. "This is what I was born to do," he thought as he lead the sled team with lightning speed and pinpoint accuracy back home to Nome. As they hit the home stretch into the city, Balto noticed a dark shadow overtaking him on the ground. He gasped in surprise, and looked up to see a raven flying overhead.

"Mother...?" He stared at her and wondered why she was flying over his sled team and what it might mean, when time began to move in slow motion. He turned back around to look in front of

him, and he saw he was headed straight for a large snowdrift sitting just outside of town. He tried to change direction, but it was no use, he couldn't stop sliding towards the drift. He slid past the small familiar signpost that read "Nome, Alaska" as he began to collide with the snowdrift. Time began to move even slower as he tried to go over the drift but went through it instead, spraying snow everywhere. And just before time seemed to stop completely, something caught his eye behind the drift. He stared at it and tried to see what it was, and just as time came to a stop, he saw it.

It was a small brown and tan puppy, not more than 2 months old. It was looking directly at Balto.

Balto yelped in surprise and suddenly woke up into darkness, panting and disoriented, his heart beating so hard his whole body throbbed in time. His eyes darted around but he saw nothing, and he began to calm down.

"Ugh," he said as he took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "If that raven was my mother, why did she do that? What was she trying to tell me?" He slowly stood up and stretched, then walked over to his water bowl for a drink. "It must still be the middle of the night, I don't see any signs of daylight," he thought as he drank. He finished drinking and walked back to his blanket, exhausted. He lay his head down on his paws and fell back into sleep, wishing he could lead that sled team again.

Balto woke to the sound of the polar bears yelling for Uncle Boris to come out and play, and Boris yelling for them to go somewhere else. Balto chuckled and got up, feeling rested despite having woken up in the middle of the night. He yawned and padded out to the deck to sit in the morning sun, where he could see Boris on the beach being smothered by the polar bears.

"Get off, you giant balls of fluff!" Boris yelled. "I am goose, not squeeze toy for bears!"

"Sorry, Uncle Boris," said Muk as they let Boris go. "We love you!"

"You love to sit on me," Boris mumbled under his breath as he hopped up onto the deck of the boat to join Balto.

Balto watched the bears splash around in the shallow water as Boris tried to straighten out his feathers. "No respect for their elders, Balto", Boris grumbled. Balto grinned at him and shook his head. "Come on Boris, you know you're their favorite uncle."

"I'm their only uncle," Boris replied, waving his wings at them. "These bears are crazy!"

"You love them too Boris, admit it," Balto said, and nudged him with his muzzle.

"You, I love," Boris said and put a wing on Balto's shoulder. "Bears, I tolerate."

Balto shook his head and smiled. "I'm going into town to see Jenna," he said, stretching his legs. "Be nice to your nephews."

"Ever since Aleu left, bears will not leave me alone!" he lamented.

"They're lonely, Boris. Be a good uncle and play with them." Boris lowered his head and sighed.

"Look, if I see Dingo or Kodi in town I'll ask them to come out here and play with the bears for a while. All right?"

"All right, Balto," said Boris with resignation. "I play with bears for now. You go see Jenna."

Balto nodded at Boris, and jumped over the side of the boat. As he ran towards town, his thoughts turned to the dream he had last night. He couldn't get the image of the raven out of his mind, looking straight at him with those glowing yellow eyes. He might have thought it was just an odd dream if it weren't for the fact that he knew his dreams weren't always just dreams.

He arrived at Rosy's house and went around back to the shed where his pups were born, and where he and Jenna had spent many happy days and nights together. A smile appeared on his face as he opened the door, as it did every time he came to see Jenna.

"Hi Jen," he said as he walked in to see Jenna lying in her bed, licking her paws clean.

"Balto," Jenna said with a smile as she looked up to see him enter the shed. Balto walked over to Jenna and sat down next to her, and she lovingly nuzzled his face and kissed him.

"I missed you, Jen," Balto said as he closed his eyes and nuzzled her neck.

"You say that every time you come here," Jenna said with a giggle. "But I missed you too."

Balto smiled and nuzzled the side of her face, taking in her familiar scent.

"So what do you have planned for today?" Jenna asked.

"Nothing in particular, although I was going to see if I could find one of the kids to go out and play with Muk and Luk. Poor Boris is all uncled out."

Jenna smiled at that. "Dingo told me that he would stop by today, so maybe you can ask him then."

"Sounds good," Balto said. "Listen Jenna, do you have some time to talk?"

"Of course, love. Is anything wrong?"

"No, nothing's wrong. I just had a weird dream last night and I wanted to see what you thought."

"Oh? What was it about?" she asked, sitting up to listen.

Balto sat up and told her about his dream, how he felt so good leading the sled team and how right it felt, and how the raven appeared and he crashed into the snowdrift and saw that pup staring at him.

"It surprised me so much that I couldn't catch my breath when I woke up. What is my mother trying to tell me? And why would there be a pup... in the snow..."

Balto's face went pale as he realized what his mother had shown him. "Jenna... it was me. That was me in the snow."

Jenna gasped. "You? She showed you as a pup after she abandoned you? Why would she show you that, what does it mean?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. And he... I... was looking right

at me. It looked like he wanted my help. But that doesn't make any sense, does it?" Balto sighed and lay down at Jenna's feet. "I never was any good at interpreting my dreams."

Jenna leaned down to kiss Balto on the head. "If it really was Aniu appearing to you in your dream to show you that, then she must have had a good reason, right?"

"Yeah, but what? Wait... I recognized that area outside town, we've been by there plenty of times. Let's go check it out." Jenna nodded, and the two of them went outside. "It was this way," Balto said as he took off towards the outside of town.

Balto recognized the signpost he had seen in his dream, and walked past it to find the snowdrift, but there was none to be found. The landscape had changed in the years since he was abandoned here, but Balto still knew where it had been.

"It was here", he said. "I was right here." Jenna looked at the patch of ground at Balto's feet. "This is where your mother left you?" she asked quietly.

"Yeah. At least if what I saw in the dream was true. I don't remember it myself, and Boris never told me exactly where he found me." Balto sat down and hung his head. "Jenna, why would she do this to me? I had almost forgotten about being abandoned, my life is so good now. I'm in love with the most beautiful girl in the world and I have six beautiful children. Why would she show this to me now?"

Jenna smiled at Balto's compliment, and she leaned forward to kiss him. "I don't know, my love. From what we've seen so far though, there is always a reason behind the dreams that come from Aniu. There's no reason to assume that this is any different,

right?"

Balto looked up at Jenna and smiled. "What would I do without you, Jenna?"

"You'd be lost without me," Jenna said with a grin.

"You're right, I would be," Balto said as he sat up again. "Let's go home."

The two of them walked back to Jenna's home lost in thought. They lay down next to each other in front of the large iron stove that was keeping the shed warm, and Balto put his head on Jenna's shoulder. Jenna turned and nuzzled his face lovingly.

"Oh, Jenna," Balto said. "I don't know what to think. I haven't seen a raven outside today so I don't think I'm supposed to go anywhere. Maybe she just wanted to show me that spot so I could have some closure? I don't know. I'm already happy with my life, I don't think I need closure."

"If she's really trying to tell you something, you'll figure it out. I do wonder what she's trying to say, though," Jenna said.

"Me too," Balto agreed. After they lay together for a while, Balto decided he should be getting back to his boat. "I should be getting back, Boris is probably wondering why I haven't rescued him yet."

Jenna chuckled. "All right, my love. I'm always here for you if you want to talk about the dream some more."

Balto smiled and got up, stretching his legs. "If you see Dingo or Kodi, will you send them out to the boat?"

Jenna nodded in response. "They should spend some time with Uncle Boris and the bears anyway, it's been a while." She stood up and kissed Balto deeply. "I love you, Balto."

Balto returned her kiss. "I love you too, Jenna," he said as they pulled apart. They had been mates for over two years, and still her beauty never failed to leave him speechless. As the light from the window filtered into the shed, he took in the view in front of him and smiled. His love for her was still as pure as it was the first time he told her he loved her, and it always would be.

Jenna looked away shyly and smiled, seeing Balto staring at her again. "You are the most gorgeous creature I have ever seen," he said, unable to tear his eyes away.

Jenna blushed. "Oh, Balto..." She kissed him and gently pushed him down onto his back. "You always know just what to say to a girl, don't you?" she asked, smiling down at him.

"It's the truth, Jenna," he said as he looked up into her deep brown eyes. She looked down at him adoringly, and her smile faded as she lowered her muzzle to kiss him passionately.

"You're so beautiful," he whispered. "I love you..."

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Balto's legs twitched under his blanket. He was leading his team again, through the mountain pass and into the forest, dodging tree stumps and boulders, going faster and faster until they broke out

into the open, and Balto once again began to run so fast that the scenery blurred and he could feel his powerful wolf heritage coming to the surface as he howled, fueling his strength and endurance.

Just as he hit the home stretch into Nome, he saw a dark shadow overtake him. He looked up to see the raven circling overhead, then instinctively looked for the snowdrift he had seen last time he had this dream. And just as before, time began to slow down and stopped just as Balto caught sight of himself behind the snowdrift.

"My son." The voice echoed across the entire landscape, sounding both distant and close at once. Shocked, Balto looked around as time stayed frozen around him, and the sled and the other dogs disappeared. Two-month-old Balto continued to stare at present-day Balto. He looked up into the sky expecting to see the raven, but instead was met by Aniu's gaze, looming above him as part of the great expanse of the heavens.

"It is time you knew the truth, my son," she spoke as her voice carried across the landscape, a warm blanket of sound that wrapped Balto in its embrace.

"M-mother?" Balto asked, both surprised at what he was hearing and grateful for this chance to speak with his mother. "What truth?"

"The truth behind your origin, little one. The reason you are here... and my own failure as your mother." Aniu's voice had a hint of sadness as it seemed to embrace him. He sat on the snowy landscape, stunned by what he was hearing.

"Your failure...? Mother, I don't understand."

Aniu drifted down from the sky and took shape as a large white wolf in front of Balto. She nuzzled him softly and he lay down and curled up against her.

"Then listen, my dear one," Aniu continued, "and I will tell you the story of what was meant to be, and what came to be." Her voice surrounded him and made him feel like a pup again, safe against his mother's body, and he closed his eyes to listen.

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Chapter 2: Love Over Destiny

Long ago, before time itself existed, I created your kind, my son. I shaped their essences and formed them in my image, giving them swift, powerful bodies and the ruggedness to withstand the harsh conditions on this world. I called them wolves, a name of power drawn from within me. I gave them my own strength and intelligence, and part of my essence is in all of them. They were destined to become one of the greatest species on the material plane, but somehow that was not enough for me. I wanted more for them, more than I could give them simply by divine creation.

This world and the harsh environment would cause my children to be separated, and split up into smaller packs. I had underestimated how even basic survival could cause rifts among them, even causing them to fight against one another at times. They had lost their way and had no one to guide them back to the

path.

I had foreseen the need for a guide among them and was prepared to give them a gift the likes of which a spirit had never given her creations before. I would become mortal and give them a son born of this earth, one who would form a bridge between this realm and the spirit realm, and who could unite and lead all the wolves down the path they were destined to walk.

Balto gasped in shock. "You - I - That was me? Or supposed to be me?" he asked in disbelief.

"Yes, my son," Aniu said calmly. "But I was not prepared for what awaited me in my mortal form."

To become mortal, it was necessary for me to start at the beginning, as an unborn pup in my mother's womb. My birth was difficult and I did not realize how harsh the conditions would be in this mortal realm. Spirits do not know such things as pain, heat, cold, hunger, even though we know they exist. To experience them myself was almost too much for me, and I very nearly gave up, but I was determined. I was born an only child, a pure white cub from parents who were colored dark and light brown. They saw me as a miracle, and they named me Aniu, as I was destined to be named.

I grew quickly as all wolf cubs do, and I had a lot to learn. The range of emotions I felt overwhelmed me. Happiness, fear, sadness, anger, all of them were new to me and I didn't know how to control them. As young as I was, I had no choice but to continue growing and learn to accept them. As I grew older I was able to begin to hunt and fend for myself. I had to learn to fight, and how to run away from a fight I couldn't win. I had to survive long enough to mature and give birth to a son who would become

the great uniter, a leader among leaders.

A year passed quickly, and I was rapidly maturing into an attractive female. I had already chosen my mate, a strong wolf named Nilak. He was all black and was a natural leader, a good father for my destined son. Despite my hardships in adjusting to life as a mortal being, my plan was still in place, and Nilak seemed more than willing to accommodate my needs. The mating season was rapidly approaching and all was going as I predicted.

"But I could not have foreseen what was going to happen next," Aniu said quietly, as she paused in her storytelling.

"Mother? Are you all right?" Balto asked timidly and looked up at her.

Aniu smiled at him. "Yes, little one. Retelling this story rekindles emotions I have not felt since I was mortal as you are," she said wistfully. "Some are good and some are bad, but they are all worth feeling again."

Balto lay down again and nuzzled his mother's soft, snow white fur. She smelled clean, like the air in winter. He thought about how much he missed his mother, and he shut his eyes tightly as a tear ran down his face. Aniu lovingly licked the tear from his face and nuzzled him, and he began to tremble with sadness.

"It's all right, little one, " Aniu said softly. "I am with you always. You are my son, and I have never abandoned you." Her voice covered him like a warm blanket, and soon his trembling stopped. Aniu lay down and wrapped her tail around him, and continued to tell her story.

It was a day like most any other, and I had been assigned to hunt

and bring back food for the pack. I strayed far from the pack in search of game, but I was distracted. The mating season was approaching and I was beginning to feel urges I had never felt before. Primal, base urges I knew I could not deny for much longer. My mortal form made me just as susceptible to those urges as any other creature on your world, and I could not resist them.

I saw movement in the corner of my eye and I focused my attention on it. I began to sneak towards the movement and I caught sight of a deer feeding on the leaves of a nearby shrub. I was concentrating but I was still too distracted. I stepped on a twig that snapped, and the deer bounded away. I cursed my lack of concentration and ran after the deer.

The deer was fast, but I was faster. I was catching up when we burst out of the forest and into an open plain. I was momentarily surprised by the sudden end of the forest, but I continued to chase the deer across the tundra. Suddenly I heard barking coming from my left, and I turned to see something I had never seen before in my time among mortals. It was a team of dogs pulling a sled, and a human standing on the back of the sled giving orders to the dogs. I was so surprised, I stopped chasing the deer and watched the dogs pull the sled past me.

I was mesmerized, watching the dogs work in unison to pull the sled. I thought about how that kind of unity was what I wanted for my wolves, a sense of united purpose among all my children. Then I looked at the lead dog and felt something I hadn't felt before. He was larger than the others, and was a beautiful combination of black and brown. He was powerful, so much power in that sleek husky body, and... I was drawn to him by a force beyond my control. I completely forgot about finding food, and I followed the sled at a distance to see where it was going. I

followed it to a small town near the ocean not far away, and I watched from afar as they took the sled to a barn near the edge of town. I saw the human unhook the dogs from the sled, and they all went into the barn together.

I could not overcome my curiosity, nor could I deny the feelings I was experiencing at that moment. I quietly made my way to the barn and leapt atop some crates to look inside a window. Inside I saw the human petting the dogs and telling them how well they did, and he gave them all food and water. Again my focus drifted to the lead dog, who had finished eating and was lying on the floor near the back, preparing to sleep. I could not take my eyes away from him as my desire for him became so strong it was all I could do not to howl out loud.

In my mind, I knew this would undo everything I had planned. The new leader of the wolves, the one who was to unite all the wolf packs and become the bridge to the spirit world had to be pure wolf, and only I could give birth to such a leader. I had planned for so long and endured and lost so much to give this gift to my children, how could I abandon it now?

I had made a terrible mistake in my planning. I had not anticipated how fully and completely my mortal form would be subject to all the natural needs and desires that come with being a wolf. I had thought that I would be able to retain some control over myself and filter these feelings out in order to do what had to be done, but I was wrong. Now I was in the throes of my mating cycle, and my mind had all but relinquished control to my body's needs. I no longer wanted Nilak, and at that moment didn't even remember him at all. I could not force myself to leave the window, and I lost track of time as I sat there watching the lead dog sleep.

I don't know how long I sat there, but it was dark and all the dogs

and humans were asleep as far as I could tell. I climbed down off the crates and moved silently towards the barn door. I nudged it open with my nose, and slipped inside quietly, not wanting to wake these dogs who would surely chase me off into the night. I was being foolish by even attempting to enter the barn, but the ability to make rational decisions had left me hours ago.

I approached the lead dog without waking any of the others, and I stood there in front of him, admiring his sleeping form. I made no sound as I gazed at him, but somehow he knew I was there. He woke slowly, and raised his head to look at me.

Suka the lead dog raised his head to see a beautiful, slender pure white wolf staring at him silently. "What—" he began to say, as Aniu quickly placed her paw over his muzzle.

"Please," she whispered. "Please don't wake the others. I don't mean you any harm. I just... I just wanted to..."

"Who - who are you?" Suka whispered in return. "Why are you here, what do you want?"

"I will tell you everything you wish to know, but not here. Will you follow me outside?" Aniu asked hopefully.

Suka studied her face and felt that she was speaking truthfully. She had risked her life just walking into that barn, and besides, Suka was bigger and stronger than she was. If it came to a fight, he would win. He followed her outside, and they walked together away from the barn and to a secluded area just outside of town. They stopped under a tree and Aniu sniffed the air to make sure they were alone. She turned back to look at Suka and smiled shyly.

"I'm here, I trusted you. Now will you tell me why you're here?" Suka asked somewhat impatiently.

"I - I suppose I should start by telling you my name. I am Aniu."

Suka visibly relaxed a bit at hearing her name. "Hello, Aniu. My humans call me Suka. They told me it's their native word for 'fast'." He smiled at her.

"Thank you for trusting me, Suka." Aniu said humbly. "I am sorry for appearing before you like that, but I didn't know what else to do." She sat down to face Suka and began to recount the events that had led her to this point.

"...and after I saw you, I couldn't stop thinking of you. I saw you enter the barn, and I watched through the window as you slept. And then I had no choice, I had to try to talk to you."

Suka's eyes widened with realization. "You're in - but that means - but you can't - we can't—"

Aniu lowered her head. "I know, Suka. This is as difficult for me as it must be for you, and it was certainly unexpected for me. My pack doesn't know I'm here, they don't even know where I am right now. I'm disobeying my Alpha and I didn't bring any food back to the pack. And worst of all, I'm failing in the one thing I was created to do." She shut her eyes and turned away. "But I can't deny what my heart and body are telling me. I am in love with you."

Suka just stared at her, noticing for the first time how the moonlight shone off her pure white coat and made her look as though she was imbued with spiritual energy. She lowered her head even more as a tear rolled down her cheek and fell into the

snow below. "I'm sorry, Suka," she sniffed. "I know this can never be, but at the same time I cannot fight my own body and desires. I'm sorry to make you follow me out here for nothing."

"Aniu..." Suka whispered as he moved closer and licked the tears from her face. Aniu turned her head to nuzzle Suka, and she closed her eyes and took in his scent and felt his powerful body against her own. "You are as beautiful as the lights in the sky, and I am honored that you would choose me above any of your own kind. And the truth is..." he lowered his head. "I - I think I'm in love with you too. I started feeling this way the moment I saw you standing in front of me. You were so beautiful, I thought you were a great spirit come to see me in the flesh. I would have followed you anywhere."

Aniu raised her head to look into his eyes. "Suka..." she breathed, and kissed him.

When I finally arrived home the next day without any food for the pack, I was punished for it. I was made to do menial tasks around our home and was not allowed to hunt for a week. But when my punishment was over, I resumed my normal duties as a hunter for the pack. Nilak approached me a number of times to mate with me, but I refused, to his confusion. I didn't blame him for being confused, but I had already mated with Suka, and even then I could feel the first stirrings of life within me.

I continued to sneak back to Suka's home when I could, and the two of us would just lay together under the stars, helplessly in love, my purpose for being here temporarily forgotten as my heart dictated my actions.

After a few weeks, my belly was starting to show evidence of your existence, little one. I kept to my duties without saying a thing, but

the other wolves began to talk. They knew I had not mated with Nilak, and it was becoming clear that I was with child. I knew I had failed in my only task upon this plane, which was to deliver to the wolves a leader born to them and of them. I cursed my mortal form for failing me in this task; I cursed myself for being too weak to overcome my natural urges.

As the days went on and your arrival came ever closer, I worried less and less about giving the wolves a new leader and guide. It was still something that needed to be done, but my time upon this earth had tempered my priorities. As a mortal I found it increasingly difficult to maintain the perspective of a spirit, as so much of my life was dedicated to day-to-day survival. I began to accept that you were a gift all your own. Even though you would not be the one to unite the wolves and lead them as one, you would be born out of love, not duty. That small difference alone was worth everything I had endured during my time here.

Finally my time was near, and the other wolves were demanding to know who the father was. They had already determined it was nobody from our pack, and they were becoming suspicious. I would not be able to hide your pedigree from them once you were born, so I was forced to tell them everything. I told them how I fell in love with Suka and how we consummated our love, and how I was happy to bear a pup conceived out of love, despite the fact that he would only be half wolf.

My pack, the family I was born into, banished me without a second thought. I was cast out and left to fend for myself with only a week or two left before you were to come into the world. I was beginning to have trouble moving, and I knew I needed to find shelter quickly. I searched far and wide for many days until I found a small cave tucked into the base of a mountain, far away from my home. It was safe and would do for what I needed. With

my last days before the birth, I hunted for as much food as I could find, and prepared for your arrival.

Then it was time, and the birth was very long and difficult. I bore the pain for many long hours until finally you arrived. I bit the cord and pushed you to my underbelly where you began to feed, and I lost consciousness from exhaustion. When I awoke I found you sleeping against me, content and warm. It was the happiest I had ever been in my short life on this earth, and I wept tears of joy to see you alive and well. You were beautiful, little one, and you still are.

Balto began to tear up again. "I love you, mother," he said quietly.

"And I love you, my son," Aniu replied with a voice that rolled over him like a warm breeze. She nuzzled his face and gently comforted him.

After a while, Balto sat up and looked at Aniu. "What happened after I was born, mother? Why was I alone in the snow when Boris found me and took me in? All these years I thought you abandoned me, at least before I knew you were Aniu."

Aniu closed her eyes. "I will tell you what happened, little one. These memories are painful to recall, but you must know the truth."

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Chapter 3: An Angel Fallen

The first few days with you were the happiest of my life. I had managed to hunt enough food to last me a little while before giving birth, so I didn't need to leave the cave right away. But even in the cold of winter, meat only lasts so long before it goes bad, and before a week had passed I needed to hunt for more food. I built a small pocket in the back of the cave with leaves and pine needles. When I needed to hunt for food I would feed you and wait until you were asleep, then put you in the pocket and cover you with the leaves while I went out.

Survival was difficult and terrifying. Every time I left the cave, I wondered if it would be the last time I saw you. I could not take my time to hunt properly, I had to do it quickly and take what I could get. My heart would race with terror every time I came back to the cave with my kill for fear of finding you gone, or worse. But every time I came back, there you were sleeping in the leaves.

As the wolf spirit, all wolves are my children. I gave life to all of them, and each of them carries a small part of my essence. I thought I knew what it was to be a mother, and to care for your children as I did as a spirit, but I was wrong. Nothing I experienced in the spirit world compared to giving birth to a cub from my own body, and being a mother to my child. The depth of emotions I felt far surpassed anything I had anticipated, and I was finally able to better understand why my wolves were so passionate about life, and how their conflicts and separations came about. It was something I couldn't comprehend as a spirit, because passion and conflict of that nature simply does not exist in the spirit realm.

After two weeks filled with happiness and terror, worrying about

whether you would still be there when I got back from hunting, you opened your eyes and began to roam around the cave. I knew I couldn't keep you hidden for much longer because you were going to start wandering around outside the cave while I was gone. I continued to wait until you were asleep to hunt, but one day when you were a month old, I came back from the hunt to find you awake and howling for me. I was overjoyed to see you safe, but it seemed that I would not be able to keep you hidden any longer.

All I could do was wait until you were asleep, then hunt in smaller sessions, and closer to the cave. I had to hunt more frequently that way, but it was all I could do. After another few weeks had passed, you were able to come with me when I hunted for us. Without having to worry about whether you were safe or not, I was able to go on longer hunting trips for better game. It was on one of these days when you and I had strayed far from our cave that our troubles began.

I was tracking a doe through the woods and getting closer to her when I smelled something familiar to the north. I was downwind and was sure I wouldn't be detected, so I moved north to see what it was, when I suddenly recognized the smell. I looked over, and in the distance I saw a large black wolf moving slowly behind the trees. It was Nilak, hunting very far from home with two other members of my former pack.

"Nilak," Aniu whispered in surprise. She was frozen, not knowing whether to run while she was still undetected, or approach him and beg forgiveness and mercy. She still wanted to rejoin her pack with her son, to see her own mother and father again, to share the joy little Balto had given her. She knew Nilak had been very attracted to her, and she decided she should take the risk, hoping to appeal to Nilak's softer side.

She moved steadily through the forest towards Nilak until he caught wind of her and snapped around.

"Aniu...?" Nilak looked at her in surprise, and then he saw Balto and his expression changed to disdain. "So, you've brought your half breed spawn with you. Have you taught him to fetch yet?"

The two other wolves with Nilak burst into laughter, and Aniu opened her mouth in shock at the hatred in Nilak's voice. "Nilak, how could you say such a thing? He is my son, and he's beautiful."

"He is an abomination," Nilak hissed, lowering his head threateningly towards Aniu. Balto yelped and scurried behind his mother's legs. "You were to bear my pups, Aniu. Instead, you ran away and mated with the first dog you saw," he spat viciously. "Not even a wolf, just a common human pet. How dare you dilute our bloodline like that, Aniu? And how dare you deny me my pups after you had promised them to me?"

The three wolves began to circle Aniu and Balto, and Aniu felt the cold chill of terror creeping into her heart. "I have no pups now because of you. I must wait another year to extend my bloodline," he said slowly and deliberately. "You have shamed me, and our entire pack by extension. We were told that if we ever saw you again, we were to kill you on sight." He looked down at Aniu's legs. "And your half breed child as well."

Aniu gasped, and the two other wolves began to growl quietly. She made one last desperate attempt to appeal to him. "Nilak, please... It's me, Aniu. Don't you remember me? We grew up together, we played together in the summer when the forest was green and peaceful. Didn't... didn't you love me, Nilak?"

Nilak stopped and a pained expression came over his face. "Yes," he said, his voice cracking with emotion. "That's why it hurt so much when I found out what you had done. You had forsaken me, and it broke my heart. I was devastated when you were forced to leave, but as time passed my sadness was replaced with hatred. Hatred for what you had done, for the disgrace you brought upon our pack, and most of all, for the casual manner in which you tossed my love aside, like it was a stick that you had become bored with." Nilak was yelling now, angered beyond reason.

Balto began to whine, and Nilak glared at him. "And this, this thing," he spat. "This is the largest affront of all. Neither one of you deserves to live, for your crimes against me, our pack, and against our entire race."

Aniu knew there would be no changing his mind then, especially with the two younger wolves watching what he did. The three wolves continued to circle her and she knew they were about to attack. She slowly bent down and picked Balto up in her mouth, watching Nilak for an opening, and when she saw one, she took it.

She watched for one of the wolves to move in front of an open path through the forest, and she jumped over him with all her might. He turned and snapped at her legs, making contact with her ankle and sinking his teeth in. Aniu yelped in pain as her momentum ripped her leg away from his jaws, tearing her flesh. She blinked the tears away and ran as fast and hard as she could away from the wolves.

I ran as fast as I could on my wounded leg, trying to put some distance between us. I knew I wouldn't be able to get away from them because I was leaving a blood trail, which was easy to

follow. Nilak was in his prime and the two younger wolves were full of endurance, they would have no trouble keeping up with me. I was ahead of them but not by much, and I knew I would have to do something drastic to get away from them. The only way to make my trail disappear was a river.

I remembered a river I had seen one day while hunting, and I sprinted in that direction. The others were slowly closing the gap between us, and I knew they would kill us both if they caught me. I ran harder than I had ever run in my life, desperation driving me to push past my pain and exhaustion. At long last I spotted the river in the distance, and I made a break for it. I heard the howls of the wolves behind me and ran in a straight line to the river, and jumped in.

The river was freezing cold and very rough, and I was swept away by the powerful current. I began to lose the feeling in my paws and legs as the river mercilessly slammed me against rocks and held me underwater. I was terrified that you would drown but I would not let you go. After what seemed like an eternity, the river calmed itself and slowly dragged me along with it. I was barely conscious and trying to stay on my back so that you could stay above water. I was almost completely numb and could barely hear your cries of fear any more. As long as you were crying, I knew you were alive, and I took comfort in that.

The river pushed me towards the bank where I tried to climb out of the water, but I was so cold and tired that I could barely move. I lay there in the water, listening to you howl with your tiny voice, hoping Nilak and the others were too far away now to hear it. I had escaped, but would not live to see another day unless I got out of that river. Somehow, I eventually managed to pull us both out of the water and onto the sandy bank. It was winter but the sun was shining high above us and I could feel its meager rays

beginning to wick the water away from my body.

There was nothing else I could do but lie there and hope the sun could dry and warm me enough to restore my limbs to working order. Once we were out of the water and lying on the sand, you curled up at my belly and tried to stay warm. I drifted off to sleep, hoping I would wake to see you again.

###

I woke as the sun disappeared behind the mountains, and a chill blew through my fur. You were still asleep at my belly, and my leg was beginning to hurt again. I hoped that was a good sign, as I tried to turn over and stand up. I was at least able to move again, and my legs would support my weight. You woke as I moved away from you, and you began to cry again. Even though I was injured and exhausted, your tiny howls and whimpers were the sweetest sound I had ever heard. I nuzzled you and spoke soothing words into your ears, and together we walked away from the river to look for shelter. The sky grew dark as I looked for a safe place to spend the night, but I wasn't able to find a suitable hiding place. Eventually I settled for a small group of trees in the forest, with enough underbrush to mostly hide us from sight. We lay there under the trees and slept through the night.

When dawn broke the next day, I thought about what I had to do. I could never go back to that cave or anywhere near my pack, as they would kill me on sight. It was too dangerous for us to stay in the area, so I decided we would keep going in the direction of the river's current, away from my home. So we found the river again

and traveled, catching small game when we could and sleeping under whatever shelter we could find. After many days of traveling like this, we came to the place where the river merged with the ocean.

I knew that we couldn't continue to live like this. You were a growing pup, and you needed a stable environment and safety from the wolves. I knew I had to find Suka. I was sure Suka and the dogs would be more tolerant of a half wolf pup, especially when it was his own son. I also knew that my time with you was coming to a close. If I placed you under Suka's care, I would not be able to see you again. Suka's humans would never allow a wolf like me anywhere near them, and I would have to run far, far away so I wouldn't be killed by my former packmates. Even Suka's barn was much too close to my pack's home, and I would be taking a terrible risk just trying to get there, but I was sure you would be safe if they agreed to take you in.

So we set off in the direction I thought would bring us to Suka's home, following the ocean along the coast, and staying out of sight as much as possible. We had been traveling for two days when I saw the first signs of a human town along the coast. Far off in the distance I could make out what looked like buildings and I could see smoke rising from the horizon. I was about to start running towards the town when I caught a whiff of something. It was a familiar scent, and it chilled me to my core.

"Nilak", she thought. "What is he doing all the way out here? Unless... unless he's been tracking me the whole time." Dread welled up in her chest and she looked at the human town, and back to the trees. Maybe she could make it to town before the wolves caught her, but then what? She was no better off in the town, the humans would kill her just as surely as Nilak would.

She caught Nilak's scent again, stronger now, and she knew she was out of time. He was almost upon her. She looked around in a panic and grabbed Balto by the neck and ran him closer to the town. She put him down behind a large snowdrift where he would be sheltered from the wind and close enough to the town to mask his scent.

"Balto, my darling son," she said, and began to cry. "You must be brave and stay here for me. Do not leave this spot, or your life will be in danger. Do you understand?"

"Yes mama," Balto said. "Why are you crying, mama?"

Aniu broke down into sobs at hearing her son's innocent question. This was her punishment for failing in her mission, she thought. This was the cruelest punishment of all, to have to leave her child without a mother, and without a family to call his own. She pulled Balto to her and hugged his body to hers, weeping openly into his fur.

"You- you remember what I said, my son. Stay here, and wait for me to return." She sobbed quietly into his coat, matting it to his skin. "Be a good boy, my precious son. I love you more than you will ever know." And with that, she placed him back behind the drift.

She looked back at her son one last time and turned inland toward the forest. As she began to run, she heard Balto's voice fading away as he said "I will, mama..."

She ran as hard and as fast as she could back to the forest, to lead her pursuer away from Balto. She cried the whole time, because just as giving birth to her son and watching him grow was the best thing she had ever experienced in life, leaving him

alone and afraid was the hardest thing she had ever had to do. She finally made it to a clearing in the woods and stopped. She sat down and howled at the top of her lungs, crying out in grief for what her choices in this life had forced her to do. Her son was an innocent, yet he was the one who would suffer for her choices.

She knew that ultimately she had done the right thing by having a child born of love, and that he was destined for greatness no matter what, because he was the mortal-born son of Aniu, the wolf spirit. That, at least, gave her a small measure of comfort. But to leave him abandoned and alone was too much for her to bear. She howled and howled, and waited for her pursuer to catch up with her.

"What a sad song, Aniu," said a voice from the woods behind her. "You should be happy now that you won't have to run any more."

"It doesn't matter what you do to me, Nilak," she said without turning to look at him. "My son is the only thing left of any importance, and you will never find him."

Nilak emerged from the woods and circled Aniu to stand in front of her. "No resistance this time Aniu? I didn't expect your spirit to break this easily."

Aniu snarled at that, and her eyes began to glow yellow. "Know this, Nilak. You may be doing what you think is necessary, and you may be exacting vengeance upon me for what I did to you. But killing one of your own pack will not be tolerated by the great wolf spirit, and you will face her for your crime when your mortal skin is shed."

Nilak was taken aback momentarily by the sudden change in Aniu's demeanor, but sneered at her anyway. "What would you

know of the afterlife? I don't even believe there is a great wolf spirit any more. And even if there were, she could not help you now."

Aniu's voice had taken on an ethereal quality, and her eyes had begun to glow brighter. She stared directly at Nilak. "It matters not what you do to me now, my time here is at an end. My son will continue my journey in my stead, as it was foreseen. Ending my life will not change the course of events to come."

The light faded from Aniu's eyes and her voice returned to normal as she hung her head and looked away from him. "All it will do is make you a murderer of your own kind."

Nilak grew wild with rage, and he lunged at her.

###

Blood coated Aniu's pure white fur all along her neck and chest, dripping down onto the snow and forming tiny red rivers that made their way down the hill, a deathly red halo circling her pure white body. She could no longer see it, as her lifeless eyes stared upwards towards the sky. Nilak sat nearby, trembling as his rage subsided. His paws and muzzle were covered with the same blood that darkened the snow around Aniu's motionless form, and he stood up and left without so much as a second glance towards her.

Aniu recalled the sensation of dying, the pain and then the darkness. It was not as bad as she thought it was going to be,

and now it was over. She watched Nilak leave, then shifted her focus to a snowdrift outside the nearby town. "I'm sorry, my son," she said sadly. "I did everything I could do for you, but in the end our time together was destined to be short lived. Not even I had the power to change that."

She looked closer to see Balto sitting dutifully in the snowdrift, waiting for his mother to return. Aniu began to weep, as the sadness of what she had been forced to do would not leave her. "I am so sorry, my little one," she cried. "Though I know that you will survive, I hope that one day you will forgive me for leaving you all alone."

She turned to fade into the light, but made her voice just loud enough for her pup to hear it. "I will always be with you, my son. You will never walk alone."

Balto heard his mother's words and thought he might have imagined them. He looked around to see if she had come back, but he didn't see or smell her. He sighed and turned back around to wait, and that's when he saw a goose mumbling to himself in Russian, walking towards his snowdrift and past a small signpost that said "Nome, Alaska".

###

Chapter 4: Closure

"Mother, I didn't know - I didn't realize how much you sacrificed for me so that I would live. You gave your own life for me. I thought you just abandoned me there," Balto said quietly. "I didn't understand."

Aniu looked into the distance. "Even as the wolf spirit, at times I am haunted by the memories of what I did to you, little one. To leave you there without your mother goes against everything I believe, and everything wolves stand for. All wolf children belong to the pack, so that they will never be without a family. I failed in providing this for you." She looked down at Balto and smiled. "But I would have given my life a thousand times to save you, so great was my love for you."

"I'm alive and well because of you, mother," Balto said and nuzzled her chin. "I have a mate and six beautiful children of my own now, and I would also give my life for each one of them. I love you mother, and I understand now."

Mother and son shared a few long moments of affection together, and a smile crept onto Balto's face. "The gift you were going to give the wolves, the guide and leader that I couldn't be - It's Aleu," he said with sudden realization. "That's why she's so much like a wolf, isn't it?"

His mother smiled at him and nodded. "I have chosen my granddaughter to be the leader I had originally thought you would be, before I met Suka," she said. "She is strong, and I have given her a guide to help her along the way. She is destined for greatness just as you were, little one."

Balto grinned. "She always was more wolf than I ever was, even as a pup. Thank you for watching over my little girl, I miss her and think about her every day."

"I understand how it feels," Aniu spoke soothingly. "She is stronger than you know, and she is becoming an excellent leader. I am proud of her, as I know you are. She carries her mother's gentle and even tempered disposition along with your wolf side, and it has made her wise beyond her years. As one who knows how to listen and not just act on impulse, she is uniquely suited to the task of uniting the wolves and ending the fractured relationships and in-fighting we have endured for so long."

Balto nodded, satisfied that his daughter was doing as well as he could have hoped. He wanted to ask something else but he began to feel as though he were burdening Aniu with a lot of questions, and he didn't know how much more time he had with her before he would wake up.

"I sense you have more questions for me, little one. You would like to know about your father."

Balto looked at his mother with hope. "Where is he? Can I go to see him? Does he know who I am?"

Aniu smiled and nuzzled his face. "I did not know it at the time, but Nome was not the town where your father lived. After I returned to the spirit world, I searched for your father and found him in a town the humans call Buckland. I was disoriented when we were running from Nilak, and I went the wrong way. Suka was hundreds of miles in the opposite direction."

Aniu paused and looked thoughtfully across the dreamscape at the mountains in the distance. "Your father is with me now, little one," she said. "He died when he and his team were caught in a blizzard not long after I returned to the spirit world. They froze to death in that storm."

Balto stared at her in shock. "No..."

"I was sad to witness the death of my beloved Suka, but he is here by my side now." Balto's eyes grew wide as he saw a shape begin to take form behind her. A large black and brown husky emerged into the light, and walked up to sit in front of Balto. He was darker colored than Balto, but the markings on his face and body were unmistakable.

"F-father?" Balto could not believe his eyes. "You - you're my father?"

Suka smiled kindly. "Yes, my son. I've been watching you alongside your mother since the day I was brought into the spirit world. I was overjoyed to see my Aniu again, and I had so many questions about our pup. Your mother was patient with me and answered all my questions. Imagine my surprise when I learned Aniu was the wolf spirit, the creator and guardian of all wolves! I was amazed that she chose me as a mate, but I'm glad she did."

Aniu smiled at Suka and licked his cheek.

"We watched you together as you grew to a strong adult, we saw the difficult times and the hatred you endured as an outcast, belonging neither to wolves nor dogs. It was hard to see the life you had been born into, as I had expected you would have grown up within the safety and family of your mother's pack."

Balto stared at his father, trying to familiarize himself with his father's features. He had the same lighter colored rings around his eyes, and the same lighter colored paws and forelegs. Balto's appearance was more wolf-like overall, but there was no denying the similarities between them.

"I am so proud of you, my son. I could not be a happier father. We saw you save the children of Nome, we watched as you were a good father to your own children, you are the fastest and most famous lead dog in Alaska, and you are the son of the wolf spirit herself!" Suka turned and nuzzled Aniu. "You are everything I could have wanted in a son, and my only regret is that I was not able to know you in life."

Balto sat in front of his parents, tears filling his eyes. "Come here, my son," said Suka gently. Balto approached his father timidly, and Suka placed his paws around Balto's shoulders and pulled him close. He cradled his son's head against his chest, as Balto wept. "We love you, my son. I love you."

"I only regret that I was not able to bring him to you, Suka," Aniu said softly. "He would have been safe with you."

"He would have," Suka agreed. "But perhaps it was better this way after all. I died mere months after you did, and Balto would have been left without a father in either case. And he wouldn't have become the hero of Nome if he had come to live with me, or met Jenna and had six beautiful pups."

Aniu smiled, and looked at Balto. "Perhaps it was destined after all. For all the hardships you have had to endure, you are now a hero, and you have a wonderful mate and children who are descended from the wolf spirit herself. It is as I told you when you were a pup, you were destined for greatness... and you have found it."

Balto's eyes were closed, and he wanted to stay like this forever, in the embrace of his long lost mother and father. He had often wistfully imagined what his father might have been like, and to

actually see him and smell his scent was better than he had ever dared to hope. He rubbed his head further into his father's chest.

"Dawn is approaching, little one," Aniu said as she looked out across the snowy plains, and through the dream into reality. Our time together is coming to an end."

"Again," Balto thought sadly.

"Always remember that I am with you every step of your journey, my son. Draw strength from your wolf heritage, as you are pure and untainted by the corruption and division of the wolves that your daughter is beginning to unite and heal."

Suka leaned down to kiss Balto's head. "I'm happy we had this time together, my son," he said gently. "I always wanted to tell you how proud I am of you. I love you."

"I love you too, papa," Balto said, his voice trembling. Suka gave his son one last hug and stood up to go. Balto sat up and looked at the two of them, one pure white and the other black with brown markings. His parents. He had been without parents for so long, it was strange for him to think of having parents at all.

"Goodbye, little one. I will walk with you always," Aniu said as she and Suka began to fade away.

"Goodbye mother, papa," Balto said quietly.

"Thank you for my life."

###

Epilogue

Balto awoke to the morning sunlight streaming into his boat. He felt refreshed, better than he had in a long time. He got up and walked out to the deck to look out at the ocean and think about his dream that wasn't really a dream. He yawned and watched the sunlight play with the waves, and thought about everything his mother had told him over the course of the night.

"Good morning, my love," said a voice from behind him.

"Jenna! It's so good to see you," Balto said happily. He turned and walked to her, and they kissed deeply and sat down together on the deck. "What are you doing up here so early? Not that I mind, of course." He nuzzled her face gently.

Jenna smiled and nuzzled him back. "Well... just a little bit ago I woke up because I thought I heard something outside. I looked out the window and I didn't see anything, but something in the sky caught my eye. It was a raven, Balto. It was circling above my house. I knew it wasn't a coincidence, so I went outside and followed her. I saw her fly out of town to your boat, and I knew what she wanted. So, why does Aniu wish for me to be here with you right now, my love?"

Balto smiled. "I had an amazing dream last night, and my mother knew I would want to tell you all about it. She likes you too, you know," he said. "She thinks very highly of you actually. She even said it was your gentle demeanor that is allowing our daughter Aleu to lead her wolf pack with wisdom along with the strength of

her wolf side."

Jenna stared at Balto. "She... she told you all that? When? How? Is Aleu all right? I miss my baby, tell me she's all right!"

"She's fine, love," Balto assured her. "Like I said, it was an amazing dream. Come here, and let me tell you all about it." Jenna lay down against Balto, and he lay down and curled up around her. He wrapped his front paws around her shoulders and lay his head down against her neck. Jenna sighed in contentment and licked his nose.

"It was incredible," he began. "I was leading my own sled team across the mountain pass and into the forest, and it was the fastest I had ever run before..."

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