

Balto: Father

Nov 30, 2008

This story takes place in between the events in the first part of Balto II: Wolf Quest.

Kantu, Dakarai, Nightfall, Mulu, Inaya, Kanto, The Falling Leaf Tribe and this story belong to Xaqtly and may not be used, copied or altered without my permission.

All other characters belong to Universal Pictures.

Author's note: As I became a father myself a while back, many of the passages in this story are drawn from my experiences as a father. The love a father has for his son is profound, and it will make you see the world in a whole new light.

Prologue: The Present

"S-so c-c-cold," he hissed through clenched jaws. His paws had long since gone numb and he could feel his legs beginning to freeze. "C-can't... can't..." His eyes were sealed shut against the blizzard threatening to freeze him solid and tear him limb from limb. How long had he been traveling like this? He didn't even

know any more. It seemed like an eternity, a white hell from which there was no escape.

"M-must... have to m-move," he whined. His brown and tan body was covered with snow and shivering violently, and the force of the blizzard was pushing him back, keeping him from going anywhere. The small leather pouch slung around his neck and shoulder flapped violently in the wind, and he prayed that its strap would hold. A particularly vicious gust of wind and snow hit his muzzle straight on and he cried out, turning his head away. "Aaagh!" He coughed and spit blood onto the whitened ground in front of him, gasping for air and losing the battle.

The edges of his vision began to darken as his world became unbalanced and he fell over into a snowdrift. "No!" he cried out, weakly. "N-not yet! not... yet..."

The darkness engulfed Balto as he silently screamed in protest, knowing this was his last chance. As his mind screamed and thrashed in defiance, his body shut down. In the last pinhole of light that remained, his final word broke free.

"Kodi..."

###

Chapter 1: One Week Ago

Balto woke up as the sun rose above the mountains to the East, blanketing his boat in dawn's gentle embrace. These days it was hard for him to go to sleep at night because he was so excited to wake up the next morning. His pups were four weeks old now, and he couldn't wait to see them every day. He yawned and sniffed the air, noting that it was getting a bit warmer, and stretched his legs.

He looked over to see Boris still asleep in the corner, and smiled. "See you later, Boris," he whispered. He padded outside to the deck and jumped off, breaking into a steady run towards the town. As he ran, he savored the warmth of the sun on his fur and took in the smells of Alaska in springtime. He could smell new life everywhere, and his pups were no exception.

His pups. "Wow," he thought. "I never thought I would have my own pups. I'm a father!" His face broke into a wide grin as he ran the familiar path towards Jenna's house, eager to see Jenna and his children again. He had been a father for a month already, but the idea that he was a father never got old. He had never known his own father, and Boris had been the closest thing to a father he ever had. The chance to be a father, to give his pups everything he never had when he was a pup, was exhilarating for him. He wanted to love his children and play with them every day, teach them right from wrong and watch them grow.

He finally had a family. A real family, with a mate who adored him and now a litter of beautiful pups. He could see his future before him now, as he guided and nurtured his sons and daughters to adulthood. He saw them become lead dogs on sled teams, he saw them all loved and respected by everybody in town, and he was so proud of them he couldn't contain himself.

He arrived at Jenna's house and ran around back to the shed,

slowing down only to open the door quietly in case his pups were sleeping. He stuck his head in the door and saw Jenna in her bed, sleeping. "Darn," he thought. "I was hoping they'd be up so I could play with them." He turned to leave, and the door creaked on its hinges as he pulled his head back.

"Mmm... Balto?" Jenna said sleepily.

Balto meekly stuck his head back inside. "It's me, Jenna... I'm sorry, I didn't mean to wake you."

Jenna smiled. "You can wake me any time, my love. Come in and see your children."

Balto happily entered the shed, and padded over to where Jenna was lying in her bed. Their pups were all asleep against their mother's belly, rhythmically breathing in and out. He leaned over to kiss her, and she kissed him back. "Mmm... why can't I wake up like this every morning?" Jenna said with a grin.

Balto nuzzled her face. "You know I would be with you every moment of every day if I could," he said quietly. "I love you."

"Oh, Balto..." Jenna kissed him deeply and nuzzled his neck. Balto saw some movement out of the corner of his eye, and turned to look at his pups. Two of them had woken up and they were beginning to crawl around, causing the other pups to wake up and whimper.

"Look at them," Balto whispered to Jenna. "They're so beautiful." They watched the pups together, smiling as they bumped into and climbed over each other and began to play.

"It's a little crowded in here for that," Jenna said as she began to

pick the puppies up and deposit them on the floor outside her bed. The pups began to roam around and yip at each other, walking unsteadily around the floor near the bed. They watched as Aleu tackled one of her brothers, and Jenna chuckled. "She's your daughter, my love. There's no denying that."

Balto laughed. "I guess not, huh?" He smiled and watched as the pups continued to roughhouse and flop around on the floor, yipping and growling. "Come on kids, time to play with papa!" he said as he stretched out on the floor near his pups. The pups all stopped what they were doing and ran over to their father, yipping and trying to climb on him. He could feel tiny paws and little bites all over him, and all he could do was laugh. He licked his children's faces and watched with amusement as they growled and stumbled around.

The runt of the litter, a smaller red and white pup, wobbled up to his father's face and yipped, then started licking him. Balto nuzzled him gently. "I love you too, Kodiak. You're a very special pup, and you will grow up to do great things someday."

A while later, the pups had all gone back to their mother for feeding, and Balto lay down behind Jenna and put his head on her shoulder. "Thank you, Jenna," he said quietly. She turned to nuzzle his face. "For what?"

"For giving me a family," he said. "I have a real family now, for the first time in my life. You and the pups..."

"We're your family," Jenna soothed. "And you're our family too. Don't forget how important you are to us, my love."

"I won't," Balto said as he nuzzled Jenna lovingly. "I won't ever forget."

###

A lone wolf stood at the top of a snow covered cliff at the edge of the forest, looking out across the valley below. He was young, not more than a year old, and his reddish-brown coat was covered by a light dusting of snow. His muzzle and paws were black, and his dark eyes were framed by black circles. He sniffed the air, searching for something just out of reach, a trace of something that had come through this way mere hours ago.

He shook himself to dislodge the snow that was beginning to collect on his head and back, and began to make his way down the cliff to the valley below. Game was sparse, and he hadn't caught the scent of anything else all day, so he didn't have a choice. He had to track this elk and bring it down so he would have something to show for his extended absence from the pack. The sun was high in the sky but he was far from home. He knew he didn't have much time left if he wanted to get back to his pack by nightfall.

He reached the bottom of the cliff and raised his muzzle to the sky. The scent was stronger here, the elk hadn't gone very far and the wolf was able to track him at a faster pace. "Getting close now," thought the wolf. He tracked the scent through the valley, noting that the elk he was tracking was moving slowly. He rounded a hill and spotted his target in the distance, lumbering along at a leisurely pace. He began to sneak up on the elk, taking care to move silently and swiftly until he was downwind, and in a position to strike.

"Just like papa taught me," he thought, and crouched down. He gauged the distance to his prey, and when the elk was in striking distance, he leapt up and attacked.

The battle had been difficult and the elk hadn't gone down without inflicting some damage of his own. The wolf nudged his back leg with his nose, and while it hurt, he could walk on it. He blinked as a drop of blood fell into his eye from a cut on his head, and he shrugged it off and prepared to bring the elk back to his pack.

The wolf arrived at his home a while after the sun went down, dragging the elk behind him. He was exhausted and sore, and his head was covered in his own blood. He was still limping from his leg injury, but it would heal. He dragged the elk into the feeding circle at the base of the caves that made up his pack's home, and howled a greeting to his fellow pack members. The wolves poked their heads out of their caves, then began to filter down into the feeding circle.

The alpha wolf, a bright reddish wolf with tan markings on his paws, tail and around his eyes, came down to see what the yearling wolf had brought back. The pack parted and made way for their alpha as he walked with authority towards the kill. He examined the elk and looked over at the yearling wolf, who was panting and covered with blood.

"You killed and brought the elk back on your own?" the alpha asked.

The yearling nodded, still breathing hard.

"Can anyone prove that he was not alone, or that he was assisted in any way?" The members of the pack all shook their heads.

The alpha walked closer to the yearling wolf, and took a close, hard look at him. "Didn't get him without a fight, did you?"

The yearling wolf smiled and shook his head. "He was a fighter."

The alpha looked at the younger wolf for a moment, and smiled. "You have done well, my son. I am proud of you." He turned to address the rest of the wolves. "As you should all be proud of him. He has completed the rite of adulthood, and is now a full fledged member of the pack and will be given all the rights, privileges and responsibilities thereof."

He turned to look back at the yearling wolf, who was now smiling broadly. "You have earned your place in the pack, not by right of birth, but by proving your worth through deeds and action. You are Kantu of the Falling Leaf Tribe, and on this night, we howl for you."

The pack erupted into a chorus of howls, long and clear, signifying their acceptance of Kantu into the pack as a full member. As the howls died down, the alpha nuzzled his son's face. "I am so proud of you, my son. I knew you could do it."

"Thank you, papa," Kantu replied happily.

"And now," the alpha addressed the pack, "the feast may begin." He walked to the center of the feeding circle and took the first bite, and nodded to the others to begin. The wolves descended on the elk, tearing it to pieces. Kantu watched from outside the circle, happy that he would finally be accepted as a full member of the pack, and proud that he was able to prove himself without his father's or anybody else's help. He had heard the muffled conversations, the hushed words that expressed doubt about his

ability to contribute to the pack. "It's only because he's the alpha's son," they said. "He wouldn't be able to complete the rite of adulthood."

Now he had left no doubt as to how well suited he was to be a part of the pack, and the hushed conversations would stop. He picked up some snow to try to clean his head, and an older female approached him. She was beautiful, and as black as the night sky. Her eyes shone like two bright blue diamonds from the recesses of her face, and she dropped a large chunk of meat at his feet.

"Thank you mother," Kantu said. The black wolf sat down next to him and began to clean him. "I was scared you wouldn't return, but your father assured me you would. I am so proud of you, and so glad you're okay." She leaned against him and nuzzled him.

Kantu nuzzled her in return. "I'm fine, mother. I'm just happy I was able to complete the rite."

"That you did, son," said the alpha wolf as he sat down next to Kantu on the other side. "Now eat the meat your mother brought you. You earned it." Kantu's parents both leaned in to nuzzle their son, and left him to eat in peace. "Thanks mother, papa," he said. They turned to smile at him and went back to the feeding circle.

Later that night, Kantu lay awake in the alpha's den as his parents slept nearby. He looked out at the stars and thought about everything he had been through in the last couple days to become a real member of the pack. "It was all worth it," he thought. He finally felt like he was pulling his own weight, and not just being carried along because he was the alpha's son. He sighed and stretched. His leg still hurt a little but it was healing. Life was good, and right now, Kantu was going to enjoy it. His eyes slowly

closed and he drifted off to sleep.

###

Chapter 2: Yesterday

"Jenna?" Balto asked quietly from the doorway. He nosed the door open and looked inside. Jenna was in her bed, licking one of the pups. Balto smiled and walked up behind Jenna and nuzzled her neck. "Good morning, beautiful," he said softly.

Jenna didn't respond, and she continued to lick one of the pups. "Jenna?" Balto was beginning to sense something was wrong, and he went around to the front of Jenna's bed to see what she was doing. She was licking one of the pups who had vomited, and he was just lying there.

"Balto, help me," she said. "There's something wrong with Kodiak."

"Kodi?" The pup was breathing, but he wasn't moving. Balto licked the pup's face and was surprised to feel how hot it was. "Jenna, he's got a fever," Balto said. "We have to get him to the vet."

"We need to get Rosy, so she can tell her parents," Jenna said.

"I'll get her," said Balto as he got up and bolted out of the shed. He ran up to the front door of Rosy's house, and barked loudly. He barked and scratched until Rosy came down to open the door. She was still in her pajamas, and she rubbed her eyes at seeing Balto.

"Balto? What are you doing, boy? Why aren't you with Jenna in the shed?"

Balto barked in response, and gently grabbed Rosy's sleeve in his teeth and pulled. "Balto, let go!" she said as she stumbled outside onto the porch. Balto let go of her sleeve and whined at her, turning towards the direction of the shed.

"Wait... you want me to come with you? To the shed? What's the matter boy, is something wrong with Jenna?"

Balto barked and ran to the shed. "Wait for me!" Rosy yelled as she ran after Balto. She got to the shed and walked inside, and Jenna looked up and whined at her.

"What's wrong, girl? Is something—" Rosy got close enough to see Kodiak lying motionless on his back, as Jenna licked him to try to get him to wake up.

"Oh no..." Rosy whispered. Jenna whined and looked up at Rosy again. "I'll be right back you guys, we'll get him to the vet." Rosy ran out of the shed and into the house. "Mom! Dad! We have to get one of Jenna's puppies to the vet! He's not moving!"

###

"He's sleeping now, but it looks like he has Parvo," the vet said after examining Kodiak. "It can be pretty serious, and right now we need to keep him separated from the rest of the pups because it's highly contagious. I'll keep him here for now, but there's more bad news."

"Balto... " whispered Jenna.

"I'm right here, Jenna," he said. Jenna leaned on him and buried her face in his fur.

"I don't have the antibiotics I need to treat him. I can keep him on fluids, but that's not necessarily going to cure the virus. The most I can do right now is to try to bring his fever down, but if I can't get rid of the virus..."

The doctor didn't have to say anything else.

"No, Balto... no," Jenna began to cry. Balto felt his heart shrink in fear at the thought of losing his son, and he nuzzled Jenna gently.

Rosy's father began to speak. "But isn't there any way to get more antibiotics?"

"I could telegraph White Mountain, they're the closest town that might have something like that. But we need it quickly, the first few days are absolutely critical for treating this virus. If he survives past three or four days, his chances of pulling through will be much better. If White Mountain doesn't have a mail run scheduled to Nome in the next three days, it will be too late."

"Please do what you can, doctor. If there's any way to save little Kodiak, we have to do it."

The doctor nodded, and went to put on his coat. "I'm going to the telegraph office right now," he said. "I'll let you know when I hear back from them." He put his hat on and left, leaving Rosy's family, Balto and Jenna alone with Kodi.

"My baby," Jenna wept into Balto's fur, and a tear slid down his nose as he nuzzled her. Rosy sat down to hug them both. "He'll be OK, you guys," she said as she petted them. "I know he will."

"Come on Rosy, let's go home. There's nothing else we can do but wait," her father said. She gave Balto and Jenna one more hug and stood up to leave.

"Are you coming, girl?" she asked Jenna. Jenna whined in response and nuzzled Balto. "I understand. You can stay here with Kodi, I'm sure the doctor won't mind, right dad?" Her father nodded approval. "We'll see you later then, girl. Don't worry, Kodi will be fine," she said as they went out the door.

An hour later, the telegraph operator stopped by the vet's office to give the doctor a reply from White Mountain. Balto and Jenna's ears perked up as the doctor began to read the telegram.

TO VETERINARY OFFICE NOME - STOP - WE HAVE ANTIBIOTICS BUT CANNOT DELIVER - STOP - BAD STORM APPROACHING WHITE MTN - STOP - CANNOT RISK SLED TEAM - STOP - WILL SEND WHEN STORM CLEARS - STOP -

Jenna gasped. "No! Balto, it will be too late if they wait for the storm to clear!" Balto nuzzled her. "I know, Jenna."

He looked at Kodi lying on a blanket next to him, sleeping but breathing in shallow, labored breaths. "I won't let anything happen to my son. I won't. I don't care what I have to do."

The doctor put his coat on and went to leave. He stopped at the door and looked back at Jenna and Balto. "I'm going to your owner's house to deliver the telegram, do you want to come?"

"Come on Jenna, we need to see what Rosy's father is going to do," Balto said as he got up and walked to the door.

"O-okay, I'm coming," she sniffed. "We'll be back soon Kodi, we love you," she said sadly as she kissed Kodi and nuzzled him before getting up to leave.

They left the office and followed the doctor to Rosy's house, where he gave the telegram to Rosy's father. He read it with a frown on his face. "But if they can't send the antibiotics until the storm blows over, that could be days!" he said.

"I know," the doctor said somewhat dejectedly. "I'm sorry. I'll do everything I can to keep little Kodi alive, but his chances are not good without those antibiotics to fight the virus."

Jenna tried to fight back tears, and she looked at Balto with desperation in her eyes.

"Balto..."

Balto closed his eyes. "I know, Jenna. I know what I have to do."

He stood up and barked at Rosy's father. "I know boy, I know," he said. "We just have to hope Kodi pulls though, the doctor here will

do his best."

Balto barked louder this time, and pulled the telegram out of the doctor's hand. He dropped it on the porch and stepped on it, and barked again.

"What the..." the doctor said in surprise. "What's he doing?"

Rosy's father looked carefully at Balto. "This may sound crazy doc, but I've suspected for a while that Balto can actually understand us. I know, I know. That's ridiculous, right? But this has happened before. I mean think about it, how do you explain how he ran off on his own to find Steele's team and bring back the anti-toxin? Anyway, watch this."

He turned and crouched down to address Balto. "Balto, are you saying you want to go to White Mountain to get the antibiotics?" Balto barked excitedly and nuzzled his hand, tail wagging frantically.

"Well I'll be..." said the doctor, astonished.

"I think we have our answer, doc," Rosy's father said with a smile. "Wouldn't you want to do anything to save your son if it was you? And Balto is the most capable dog in Nome, there's no doubt about that. If anybody can do it, Balto can. Isn't that right boy?"

Balto yipped and nuzzled him. "And he has far more reason to save his own pup than he did to save the children of Nome."

"This... this is amazing," said the doctor. "You really want to do this, Balto? You understand what you need to do and where to go?" Balto barked at the doctor in reply and wagged his tail. "Okay, well in that case I need to write a prescription for what

Kodiak needs so you can deliver it to the vet in White Mountain. I need to go back to my office to do that, and I'll be right back," he said, and started walking back to his office.

"In the meantime, I think I know just what you'll need, boy," Rosy's father said. "We gave Rosy a small leather satchel to carry her schoolwork, but I think it might be just your size. That is, if Rosy doesn't mind."

"Of course not, dad," she said happily. "I'll go get it right now." Rosy went inside and emerged a minute later with a leather bag with a flap that fastened at the bottom, and a thick leather strap. She placed the strap over Balto's head and under his left front leg, and swung the bag so it sat on Balto's side. "How's that, boy? Can you run like that?"

Balto barked and licked Rosy's face. Rosy hugged Balto and whispered in his ear. "You be safe, boy. Get that medicine for Kodi and come back safe. You saved my life, I know you can save his. I love you," she said, and squeezed him.

Balto nuzzled Rosy and licked her cheek gently. Just then, the vet walked back up to the house with a piece of white paper in his hand.

"This should do it boy," he said to Balto. "It's a prescription for Kodi, and instructions for my colleague in White Mountain to give the antibiotics to you to bring back to Nome. As soon as you leave I'm going to telegraph them to let them know you're coming, so they should have it for you as soon as you get there." He put the piece of paper in the leather bag and fastened the flap.

"You know time is of the essence, right boy? Kodiak needs that medicine as fast as you can get it." Balto barked at him. "All right.

White Mountain is ninety miles away, and if a storm's coming... that could be a real problem. You'd better be on your way."

The humans watched as Balto turned to nuzzle Jenna lovingly, and she nuzzled him back.

"Balto, my love... please be careful. I can't lose you too," she said and began to snifle.

"I'll be fine, Jenna. I'll get that medicine and Kodi will be fine, you'll see." he nuzzled her chin so he could look into her eyes. "I promise, Jenna."

She kissed him, and it was a long, passionate kiss. "I'm going to hold you to that, my love," she said with a smile as a tear rolled down her face. "I love you. Remember what I told you about our family."

Balto nodded at her. "I won't ever forget." He stood up and looked back at the humans, and Rosy waved at him. "Good luck boy, we know you can do it," she said.

Balto barked and turned to leave. With one last look at Jenna, he walked off the porch, then began to run. Jenna and the humans watched as he started picking up speed running down the road and out of town. They watched until they couldn't see him any more, then Jenna lay down and put her head between her paws.

"It'll be OK girl," Rosy said as she sat down and hugged her. "Balto is amazing. He can do it."

The doctor shook his head. "If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes..." Rosy's father chuckled. "I know what you mean."

Jenna looked off into the direction Balto had gone. "Come back safe, my love..."

###

Kantu stood at the entrance to the alpha's den, taking in the scents of a new day. He liked to watch the sun rise more often now that he was a full member of the pack. It gave him a sense of hope and fulfillment, and today was a special day for him. Today was the day he was going to hunt with the pack for the first time since he had completed the rite of adulthood a few days before, and he was excited.

"You're up early again, son," came the pack alpha's voice from behind him.

"Sorry papa. I couldn't sleep any more, I'm too excited."

Dakarai chuckled. "Look, Nightfall. Our son is ready to take on the world."

Nightfall yawned and looked out at Kantu, her piercing blue eyes shining out from the darkness of the cave. "Be nice, my alpha," she said with a smile. "You remember your first day hunting with the pack, don't you?"

Dakarai laughed. "Okay, you got me there. Son, I was just as excited as you are on my first day hunting with the pack. I even got up with the dawn and watched the sun rise like you did."

Kantu grinned. "I can't help it, papa. I know I can hunt and help the pack to find food. I just can't wait to be a part of it."

"You will do fine, my son," said Nightfall reassuringly. "Your father has trained you well, and you have proven yourself already. Now go and prepare to join the hunting party, you will be leaving soon."

"Thank you mother, thank you papa," Kantu said as he got up to leave, his reddish-brown coat glowing in the new sun. "I won't let you down."

"We know you won't, my son," Dakarai said. "We're proud of you and we love you. Now go and give your mother and I some time alone," he said with a grin, as Nightfall kissed him.

Kantu chuckled to himself as he leapt down from the alpha's den, ready to start the hunt as an equal member of the pack. He had been waiting for this day for months, ever since his father had begun to train him in the ways of the hunt. He idolized his father, and wanted to be as important to the pack as he was.

"Ready to go, Kantu?" asked the leader of the hunt. "Yep!" Kantu answered, trying to contain his enthusiasm.

"All right, let's go. We'll be hunting on the northeast side today, one of our scouts spotted some caribou in that direction last night."

A few hours later, the hunting party still hadn't found any caribou. They continued to search through the northeast, but they didn't find so much as a scent. Kantu began to doubt whether they would find anything to bring home tonight, but he dutifully followed the hunt's leader, determined to do his part for the pack.

The hunting party entered a small clearing in the woods and stopped to rest for a few minutes. Kantu sniffed the air and didn't smell any game, but he could smell a storm coming. "Do you guys smell that?" he asked. "It smells like a storm... a big one."

"He's right," said the leader. "We need to find a kill and get home as soon as we can. It's time to split up so we can cover more ground. I'm putting you in groups of three, and if you don't get a kill before night falls, you're ordered to return home. Hopefully one group will find something to bring back to the pack."

They split into groups of three, and each group left in a separate direction. To make up for his inexperience, Kantu was grouped with two of the more seasoned wolves, a large grey wolf and a smaller brown one, and they went north into the forest. After traveling for a couple hours with nothing to show for it, Kantu was beginning to get discouraged. "Shouldn't we have found something by now?" he asked the larger grey wolf.

The grey wolf smiled at him. "Not every hunt is a successful one, Kantu. Sometimes there is just no game to be found. At times like these, we just hope that one of the other groups found something to bring ho—"

"Shh!" The smaller brown wolf suddenly tensed up and Kantu and the grey wolf fell silent. They put their noses in the air, and there was something... something elusive nearby. Kantu didn't know if it was game or not, he couldn't tell. The wind had begun to pick up and they couldn't identify it, or where it was.

The brown wolf moved slowly and quietly forward, and Kantu watched him intently to see if he could spot whatever it was they were smelling. The wind had turned against them and it was hard to smell anything. Suddenly there was a roar, and Kantu saw the

large grey wolf to his left get thrown against a nearby tree like he was a toy. Kantu's eyes widened as he sat in shock at what he had just seen. He turned to his left and saw a huge grizzly bear lumbering towards him.

"Move!" shouted the brown wolf, as he leapt towards Kantu, pulling him off to the side. Kantu snapped back to reality and started running. "Wait! what about—" "No time! Run!" shouted the brown wolf back to him. He looked back to see the bear turn around and go back to where the grey wolf had been.

"No!" he shouted. "We don't leave our brothers behind!" He turned around and began running full speed back towards the bear.

"What— Stop! Come back!" shouted the brown wolf, but it was too late. "\$^&*#" he thought, and turned around to help Kantu.

Kantu arrived to see the bear about to deliver a killing blow to the grey wolf, and he jumped as high as he could and landed on the bear, clawing and biting. The bear roared in surprise and pain, and turned around trying to dislodge the wolf from his back. Kantu held on and bit the bear's upper back, causing the bear to roar in pain again. He clawed his way up and delivered a vicious bite to the bear's neck, hitting the jugular vein and causing the bear to become enraged.

Blood began to shoot out of the bear's neck as he spun around trying to grab Kantu, and the brown wolf watched in amazement as it looked like he was going to take the bear down. The bear backed up against a tree to try to get Kantu off his back, but Kantu saw what he was doing and leapt off the bear's back before he made contact with the tree.

"Get him away from here!" he yelled to the brown wolf, as he

jumped down and began to lead the bear away from the area. "I'll draw the bear away, get him to safety!" Kantu sprinted away from where the grey wolf was struggling to get up, and the bear lumbered after him. The brown wolf ran up to the grey wolf and began to help him up, and they both turned to see Kantu slip on a patch of ice and slide back towards the rapidly approaching bear.

The wolves looked on in horror as they saw the bear reach Kantu as he was scrambling to regain his footing. With a mighty roar, the bear grabbed Kantu by the leg and threw him against a tree. Kantu cried out in pain as the bear picked him up again and in his fury bent the wolf backwards.

The two wolves heard his spine snap from where they were sitting, and Kantu fell lifeless to the ground. "Oh great Aniu, no..." whispered the grey wolf. The bear roared one last time as he began to lose his balance, faint from loss of blood. He grunted and fell to the ground, as blood continued to flow out of his neck wound.

For several excruciatingly long moments, the two wolves sat and stared at Kantu's unmoving form, not believing what they had seen. The bear's wheezing breaths slowed and eventually stopped as they sat watching, shocked into submission. The grey wolf eventually looked away, and a tear rolled down his face.

"Call them," he whispered.

Without a word, the brown wolf lifted his muzzle to the sky and howled with all his might. After a few moments, they heard a response. The others would be there shortly.

The hunt leader was the first to show up with his group. They arrived and saw the bear in a pool of blood and began to cheer,

until they noticed the grey wolf standing over the carefully moved body of the alpha's only son, Kantu. "What - what happened?" asked the hunt leader.

The grey wolf spoke with his head bowed down. "He saved my life. He saved both our lives. And he killed the bear."

"I've never seen anything like it," continued the brown wolf. "He jumped on the bear and ran up his back. He took a bite out of his neck before the bear could throw him off, then he jumped off and lead the bear away from us. And then..." he hesitated as the sound of Kantu's body breaking echoed in his mind. "And then he slipped on some ice and the bear caught him before it died from blood loss."

All the wolves that had arrived listened to what happened in silence. They knew what this would do to their alpha.

"I will carry him home," said the grey wolf. "I owe him my own life, a debt that now can never be repaid. It's my fault that the alpha's son is dead, and I will take the blame."

The wolves carefully placed Kantu's body on the back of the grey wolf, and a number of the other wolves began to drag the bear home. After a long silent journey, the hunting party finally made it back home. Night had fallen, and the rest of the pack had just started to wonder where they were when the wolves dragging the bear arrived and dragged it into the feeding circle.

The pack gathered around the kill, and Dakarai made his way down to inspect it. "A grizzly! There's enough meat on him to feed us all very well," he said. "Who's the brave one that took this beast down?" The members of the hunting party could not face him, and hung their heads.

As Dakarai turned to ask the hunting party who it was, the grey wolf appeared behind them, bearing Kantu's body. He slowly walked towards Dakarai and bent down, gently placing Kantu's body on the ground in front of his father. Dakarai stared at Kantu's unmoving form, then slowly at the grey wolf.

"My alpha," the grey wolf began with great sadness in his voice, "Kantu saved me from certain death. I was careless and allowed the bear to approach me undetected, and Kantu came back to save me. It was the bravest thing I have ever seen in my life. It was he who took the bear down, by himself."

Dakarai was visibly trembling now. "I owe him a debt that I cannot repay, my alpha," the grey wolf continued. "I am not worthy of the sacrifice your son made for me, and I am sorry to my very soul for the loss of your only child. My life is yours to do with as you wish." He lay down flat on the ground and placed his head between his paws.

There was complete silence, as no one dared to move or speak. Dakarai was shaking violently now, and tears were beginning to roll down his face. "No... Kantu! Kantu!" Nightfall's voice came from behind the alpha. She ran up next to Dakarai and began to lick her son's face. "Kantu... please..." she began to sob. "Please come back to us my son... please..."

She dropped to the ground and buried her face in her son's fur and cried and cried. Dakarai could not contain his sadness any longer as he lay down next to his mate and sobbed into her neck, devastated at the loss of his only child. The two of them wept over the loss of their son, and the rest of the pack remained silent and motionless, heads bowed down in respect.

The grey wolf remained where he was, with his head between his paws. "I'm sorry, Kantu," he thought. "I should have died, not you. Now look at the pain I have caused." He flattened his ears against his head and closed his eyes, and listened remorsefully to the sounds of his alpha and his mate crying over the loss of their son.

Finally, Dakarai wearily sat up. He wiped his face with his paw and sat there for a moment, then he turned to address his pack. He spoke softly, and his voice cracked as he spoke. "The least we can do right now is to honor my son by feeding the whole pack with his kill." he lowered his head. "I'm... not hungry. You may begin without me. Please do my son this last honor and... and..." he turned his head, unable to say any more.

One by one, every wolf in the pack lined up to pay their respects to their alpha and his fallen son before eating. As they walked past Kantu's body, each one of them nuzzled their alpha as a sign of respect and a gesture of comfort. Not a word was spoken as they paid their respects, then took part in feeding. Nightfall was inconsolable and would not leave her son's body.

The grey wolf had not moved either. He remained in a position of submission, unwilling to show the slightest sign of disrespect. Dakarai saw this, and walked over to him. "Mulu, please eat," he said gently.

"My alpha, I am to blame for your son's death," the grey wolf said without raising his head. "I do not deserve to eat from the bounty he provided for us."

"I don't think he would see it that way, Mulu," Dakarai said. "He died defending another member of my pack, and he wouldn't want you to blame yourself for what happened." He sat down next to Mulu and nudged him with his nose. "I don't blame you either. He

did what he did for his love of you, me, and our way of life. We don't leave our pack brothers to die."

"He told us to stay there while he drew the bear away," Mulu said sadly. "If... if I had gone after the bear instead, then maybe..."

"Then maybe you would both be dead," Dakarai said, more harshly than he intended. He closed his eyes and sighed. "I'm sorry, Mulu. I don't blame you. My son was my beautiful shining star, but he knew as well as you do that in my pack every wolf's life has equal value. And you know that if given the choice I would also gladly give my own life for any one of yours, just as he did. We are too few in number to believe any differently if we are to survive."

Dakarai got up and turned to sit in front of Mulu. "He died doing what he had to do, and that's enough for me. It should be enough for you too."

Mulu looked up at Dakarai, and saw the pain in his eyes. "Yes, my alpha," he said meekly, not willing to push the matter any further. He got up and approached Nightfall, who was still quietly sobbing into her son's coat. "I am unable to express how sorry I am, my lady," he said. "I owe your son my life. I will never forget what he did for me."

Nightfall didn't respond, and Mulu lowered his head and walked over to the bear. He wasn't hungry either, but he tore a chunk off with his teeth, then slowly walked back to his den as the first snowflakes of the oncoming storm blew through the air.

###

Chapter 3: Late Last Night

Balto had been running for almost eight hours, and he had been slowed down by the increasingly bad weather. He was very tired now, but refused to slow down or rest. He knew he couldn't rest in White Mountain either, because his son's life was at stake. He was close though, and he pushed through his exhaustion and the snow flurries to finish the last stretch into White Mountain.

Finally he saw the lights of White Mountain in the distance, and ran for everything he was worth against the storm to get there. At long last, he had arrived. His only thoughts during his journey there had been of Jenna and Kodi, and he was determined to save his son at any cost. He ran into town and down the main street, and found the vet's office. There were no lights on and the door was locked.

Balto began to panic, as he wasn't planning on waiting until morning for the vet's office to open. He began to scratch the door and whine, and then he began to bark. After barking for a minute, he saw a light moving around inside the office. The door opened, and an older man with white hair and a beard stood there with a lamp in his hand.

"Balto? Is that you?" he said as he brought the lamp down to get a better look at the dog sitting on his doorstep. "It is you, isn't it? You are one amazing dog, my boy. Come in, come in. I've been expecting you." He stood aside and motioned Balto to come

inside, and shut the door behind him.

"Now, I want you to come over here and lie down. You must be absolutely exhausted." Balto whined, and pawed at the man's arm. He slid the leather bag off his neck and picked it up in his mouth, holding it towards the vet. "What's this?" the man asked. He took the bag and opened it, and read the prescription and the note the vet from Nome had written.

"Uh huh... uh huh... all right," he said as he read the note. "Don't you worry my boy, I'll get you what you need. But in the meantime, you lie down here on this bed. I've been waiting for you, and I've got some nice hot food for you. You lie down and I'll be right back."

Balto licked the man's hand, and he scratched Balto's head in return. "You're a good dog, Balto, and a good papa to do all this for your pup." He went into the other room, and Balto lay down on the bed. It felt so good to lie down after running for so long, and he allowed himself to close his eyes for a moment. He was woken up by the smell of something hot and delicious under his nose.

"There you go my boy, a nice bowl of beef stew for you. This will help get your strength back for the trip back to Nome." Balto was suddenly very hungry, and ate like he hadn't eaten in days. The vet rubbed Balto's head and back while he ate. "You're a very brave dog to come all the way here in the middle of a storm," he said and continued to rub Balto's back and shoulders. "But doing crazy things for your children, this is something I can understand. I would do anything for my kids. We're not so different are we, you and I?"

Balto, who had finished eating, turned to nuzzle the doctor. "I didn't think so," he said with a smile. He patted Balto's head and

picked up the bowl that was now empty. "You rest now, my friend. I'm going to get the medicine ready for you." Balto lay his head down between his paws and relaxed. The bed was so comfortable and warm, and he felt so good he could barely keep his eyes open long enough to watch the vet take the antibiotics and put them into the leather bag, then put the bag down on the floor near Balto's head.

"Good night, my friend. I can see now why you're called the hero of Nome. You're something special, and they're lucky to have you."

###

"Please come back to our den, my love," Dakarai implored his mate. Nightfall had not allowed anyone to touch her son's body, and she refused to move from him. The storm was in its full wrath now, and the temperature had dropped to a deadly low. She and her son's body were covered in snow and visibility had degenerated to almost nothing.

Dakarai lay down next to his mate. "Please, my love. You can't stay out here, you'll die."

"Better to die than to live without my son," she said with a bitterness that Dakarai had never heard in her voice before. Taken aback, he looked at her with pain in his eyes. She would not meet his gaze.

"Nightfall... I have already lost a son today. I can't lose my mate,

too. I won't." She lowered her head at hearing this. "Please... please come back to our den." His voice was strained from crying. "I... Kantu's death is hard enough on me as it is, I don't think I can face it without you."

Nightfall turned to face her mate. "I... I'm so sorry, Dakarai." she wept. "I didn't think about how hard this is for you too." She nuzzled his face. "I will come back, but we have to bring our son with us. I will not leave him out here alone."

Dakarai got up and went to the mound of snow that was covering his son, and he put his head under Kantu's body and lifted it onto his back. He shut his eyes against the storm and struggled back to his den with his mate at his side.

When they arrived back at their den, Dakarai placed Kantu's body on his bed against the back wall where it would be safe from the storm. Nightfall sat down next to her mate and lay her head on his shoulder. They sat quietly together as they watched their beloved son's motionless body lying on his bed as though he was just sleeping and might awaken at any time.

Dakarai sighed and went to lie down on their bed of furs in the back corner of the den. "Please, my love, come lie with me. We both need to get warm, and I need to feel you near me." Nightfall responded by going to their bed and curling up inside her mate's embrace. "I'm sorry, my love," she said as she nuzzled his face. "I wasn't thinking about anyone but myself. I am ashamed of how I spoke to you."

"It's all right," he assured her. "As long as you're with me now, that's... that's all that matters," he said as the tears he had been holding back began to come to the surface. "It's just the two of us now, and we have to... have to stay close to each other. I miss my

son so much," he began to sob. "I - I only wanted to tell him how much I loved him one more time."

Dakarai cried into his mate's fur. She began to cry with him, as they held each other. The storm continued to rage outside, growing more fierce with every passing moment, with winds that threatened to blow through their caves and freeze them all. And yet for all the storm's fury, there was not a member of the Falling Leaf Tribe who did not hear their alpha's howls of sorrow that night.

###

It was a warm, sunny day, and Balto was running around on the beach with his children. The pups loved the sand and the water, and they alternately ran between Balto and the ocean, attacking each with equal vigor. Balto laughed as he watched his pups splash around and attack his legs. He walked back up to the warm sand and lay down, letting his pups climb all over him, yipping and growling. He loved this feeling, the feeling of being a father. There was nothing like it in the world, and he couldn't be happier.

He closed his eyes and felt his pups climbing over and around him, and he laughed. Suddenly he stopped laughing and listened. He could hear whining coming from his boat house just down the beach. He got up, focused on the boat and listened intently for any other sounds. He leapt up to the deck and looked around,

then turned into the cabin and saw Kodi, lying motionless on his back on the floor.

Balto gasped and ran to his son. Kodi turned and looked right at him.

Papa, help me! I'm dying papa... save me...

Balto woke with a yelp, his heart beating so hard his whole body could feel it. "Kodi!" He scrambled to his feet, slung the leather bag over his neck and shoulder, and ran to the front door. It was closed, so he ran through the house looking for a back door. "How long was I here? How could I have let myself go to sleep?" He found a back door that had a doggy door built into it and he burst through it, running full tilt out of town and back towards Nome through the pitch darkness of night, in the middle of the worst snow storm he had seen in months.

"Kodi has to be okay. He has to be," Balto thought worriedly to himself as he sprinted as fast as he could go through the blinding snow and the blackness of night. He was making his way back to Nome on memory alone, because he couldn't get his bearings visually. He was sure he was going the right way, because his mind was clear and focused after the rest he had gotten. He just hoped his nap wouldn't cost him his pup's life.

He ran for hours, narrowly avoiding trees and rocks, using every sense he had to try and divine the correct direction. He was slowing down as the storm and low temperatures were beginning to take their toll on him. He could feel the freezing cold seeping past his fur, and he was beginning to lose the feeling in his extremities.

"This is bad," he thought. "I'm not even halfway back yet, and I'm

slowing down. I might have to—"

Balto yelped as he dodged a boulder only to slam into a tree next to it. It knocked the wind out of him, and something in his belly began to hurt. He lay on the snow gasping for air, and the possibility that he might not make it back to Nome suddenly became very real. He struggled to his feet and winced at the pain in his stomach, and took a few steps forward. It wasn't too bad, but he was starting to feel dizzy. "Must... keep moving," he thought as panic slowly began to set in. He was moving as fast as he could, but there was no way he could run now.

The wind grew stronger and Balto had to fight against it to move forward. The collision with the tree had disoriented him, and now he wasn't sure he was heading in the right direction. He had to hope that he would come across a recognizable landmark, but he was miles away from anything in any direction. His dizziness suddenly became worse, and he vomited blood and whatever was left in his stomach into the snow. He gasped for air and fell over onto his side. "N-no," he thought, as the image of Kodi lying motionless on his back flashed through his mind. "Must get up... must keep moving."

He struggled to his feet and shakily began to move forward again against the wind.

"S-so c-c-cold," he hissed through clenched jaws...

###

Chapter 4: The Present

"Awaken, Dakarai of the Falling Leaf Tribe."

Dakarai jumped in surprise and was on his feet, disoriented. He had heard the voice in his mind, it didn't come from anywhere inside his den. He was breathing heavily and looking around wildly, and he wasn't sure what had just happened.

"What is it, my love?" Nighfall asked sleepily.

"I thought... I thought I heard a voice," he said, unsure of himself now.

"It was I who addressed you, my son," said the ethereal voice he had heard before, only now it was coming from the entrance of the den.

Nighfall was suddenly wide awake. "I heard it too this time," she said. "Who could possibly be here at our den in a storm like... this..."

Her voice trailed off as they saw a form begin to take shape at the entrance to their den. Amidst the swirling white snow, the shape of a tall, pure white wolf emerged and walked purposefully towards them.

Dakarai and Nighfall watched with their mouths agape as the white wolf approached them, glowing with internal light. "Great Aniu," Dakarai whispered in quiet reverence, as he lay down at

her feet with his head between his paws. "To... to what do we owe the honor of your visit, great spirit?" he asked timidly.

"I am aware of all that you have suffered this day," she said, her voice coming from all directions at once, filling the room. "Yet despite the sorrow you feel for the loss of your beloved child, I must ask for your assistance."

Dakarai and Nightfall both looked over at their son's body, and Dakarai bowed his head. "I will do whatever you ask, Aniu," he said.

Aniu smiled at him. "You are a kind spirit and a strong leader, Dakarai. You have my thanks."

Dakarai looked up at the shining white wolf before him and felt peaceful, as though her presence was lifting the weight from his heart. "What must I do?" he asked.

Aniu turned to look out of the cave. "Not far from here, there is a half-wolf who is in need of your aid. His journey has been long and difficult, and the storm has claimed him. He fights to survive for the noblest of causes, something you are intimately familiar with." She turned to face Dakarai. "He clings to life by the thinnest of threads, sustained only by his love for his son and his family."

"His son..." Dakarai repeated softly.

Aniu gazed at him. "I chose you because I know you will understand when I tell you that his son's life is in danger. At only four weeks old, he has contracted a deadly virus that requires human medicine to cure. It is for this medicine that Balto has ventured out this night, on a long, hard journey to a faraway human town to retrieve it."

Aniu turned to look out into the storm. "Now he is trying to return to his home in Nome, but he has been injured and cannot continue. His body is slowly dying in the cold, but his spirit is fighting to survive. He fights so fiercely that I can feel him struggling even now."

She turned to sit in front of Dakarai, and caught his gaze. "He fights as fiercely as you would, had your roles been reversed."

Dakarai stared at her, and then understood her meaning. "No wolf should die if we have the means to prevent it," he said softly. "Even if he is not of our tribe."

Aniu nodded and smiled at him. "Your Kantu gave his life to save another, and he has been given an honored place in the spirit world. And now as thanks for your assistance, I give him back to you as your guide to find Balto. But you must hurry, as his time has nearly run out."

A shape began to emerge from behind Aniu, and took form in the light beside her.

"K - Kantu...?" Dakarai stared in disbelief.

"Kantu! My baby!" Nightfall cried, as she ran to him and nearly knocked him over. "My baby... my baby," she sobbed. She pushed her face into his chest and cried, breathing in his scent and feeling his soft reddish brown fur against her face.

"I miss you too, mother," Kantu said, nuzzling her. "I'm sorry, papa, I did my best to save Mulu."

"You - you don't have to apologize for anything, son," Dakarai

said with tears in his eyes. "You did save Mulu, and you killed the bear too. You're a hero." He looked into his son's eyes and nuzzled his face. "I'm proud of you," he said, his voice tight with emotion. "You did the best anybody could ask of you."

The three of them nuzzled together for a few long moments, and then Kantu spoke. "Father... time is running out for Balto and his son. Balto is a good father, and all he wants to do is save his son's life, even at the cost of his own. We have to leave before it's too late."

Kantu's words struck Dakarai to his very soul. He knew all too well what it felt like to want to give his own life in exchange for his son's. "All right," he said softly. "Let's go."

Kantu nuzzled his mother, and turned to leave the den. Dakarai followed him, and saw that Kantu's reddish brown coat was giving off light, enough to see his way out of the den and into the storm. "He's this way, papa," Kantu said as he broke into a slow run into the forest.

Dakarai could easily follow him despite the high speed winds, the dense snow and the dim light of early morning being blocked out by the storm. Kantu shone like a beacon through the trees, and within minutes, they had arrived.

"This is Balto," Kantu said, indicating a brown and tan half wolf wearing a leather satchel around his neck and shoulder, lying in a snow bank. It looked to Dakarai as though Balto wasn't moving, and he saw blood on his muzzle.

"Is he...?" he asked Kantu.

"He is still alive, but only just. We need to get him to safety so he

can recover enough to finish his journey home, before his body is too badly damaged by the cold."

Dakarai nodded, and he bent down to lift Balto onto his back. Kantu helped him to pull Balto out of the snow, and once he was on Dakarai's back, Kantu lead the way back to their home. As Dakarai carried Balto, he could hear faint whispers coming from Balto's muzzle.

"Kodi... I'm coming... hang on..."

Dakarai's eyes narrowed and he became determined to save Balto's life. "No wolf should die if we have the means to prevent it," he said, and doubled his efforts to bring Balto back to his den.

Dakarai and Kantu arrived back at their home a short while later, and Dakarai gently placed Balto on his own bed. He pulled some of the furs on top of Balto to keep him warm, and then stood back and sat next to his mate, who was nuzzling Kantu again. They watched in awe as Aniu gracefully moved to where Balto was sleeping, and lay down on top of him to help him warm up. She whispered into his ear, but Dakarai could not hear what she was saying.

He was not one to question Aniu, nor did he have any doubt as to her motives, but he couldn't help but wonder if she had a particular interest in Balto. She seemed to act as though he was familiar to her, and Dakarai watched in silence.

"You are wondering why she acts like she does towards Balto," Kantu said quietly. Dakarai's head snapped around to look at his son with wide eyes. "I didn't mean any disrespect," he said quickly.

Kantu smiled. "It's all right, papa. Balto is Aniu's son."

Nightfall gasped and Dakarai's mouth hung open. "Her - her son? But... but she's the great wolf spirit, how...?" Dakarai said in disbelief.

"It's a long story, papa. But Balto is her only son, and she loves him very much. Just as you love me," he smiled at his mother. "And just as Balto loves his son Kodiak."

"...and Aniu would do anything to save her son," Dakarai finished. "Just as I would do anything for you, Kantu."

Kantu nuzzled his father and leaned against him. "Just as Balto would do anything for his son. He risked his life and almost died trying to get that medicine back to Kodiak. His strength of will is so great that he was alive when we got to him simply because he refused to die. His body had already given up and was beginning to freeze."

Dakarai looked at Balto and Aniu with respect. Aniu gazed back at Dakarai and smiled. "You have done me a great kindness, Dakarai of the Falling Leaf Tribe," Aniu spoke with a voice that filled the den. "My beloved son lives because of you, and now his young son's life may also be saved through your actions."

She stood up and walked over to Dakarai, and a radiant light began to fill the den. "The Falling Leaf Tribe has my gratitude and my blessing, and I will watch over you all from this day forward. Just as Kantu has earned a place at my side in the spirit world, so have you and your mate Nightfall. When it is your time to join me, I will be waiting for you, as will your son."

Dakarai and Nightfall sat together in astonishment as they heard

Aniu declare her blessing upon their tribe. Dakarai lay down flat in front of Aniu and placed his head between his paws. "Th-thank you, great Aniu," he said with respect. "We will strive to be worthy of your blessing."

Aniu looked down at him with kindness. "You are already worthy, Dakarai. You set a shining example for your pack, and they have great respect for you." She moved to stand beside Kantu at the entrance to the den.

"When my son awakens, please show him the way back to Nome. He will want to leave as soon as he regains consciousness."

"I will do as you ask, great Aniu," Dakarai said humbly.

"Take comfort in knowing that you have saved a good father from suffering the loss of his son, the kind of pain you know only too well." Aniu's voice seemed to reach out and caress his face gently as she spoke. "And you have saved my son by doing so. Kantu is proud of you, as am I."

"You've done a good thing, papa," Kantu said from beside Aniu. "I love you both. I will see you again when it is your time to join me in the spirit world. Until then, know that I will always be with you. You were the best parents I could have asked for, and I will always love you."

Nighfall broke into tears again. "Goodbye, my baby," she sniffed. "We love you so much, and we'll miss you." She buried her face in Dakarai's chest, shaking with sorrow.

Dakarai wrapped his paws around Nighfall and held her close. "Goodbye son," he whispered with tears in his eyes as Kantu and Aniu faded into the howling snowstorm behind them. "I love you."

###

The doctor pulled his stethoscope away from Kodi's chest and sighed. "He's not improving, I'm afraid," he said wearily. "But at least he's not getting any worse. I can't say for sure if he's going to pull through or not. He still has a pretty bad fever; I haven't been able to flush it out of his system yet."

Jenna sat and listened to the doctor explain to Rosy and her parents how Kodi was doing, and she felt the most alone she had ever felt in her life. She loved Balto with all her heart, but it was only now that she realized that he was a part of her, something she could not live without. She lay down on the floor and flattened her ears back on her head.

Rosy sat down next to her and gave her a hug. "It's okay, girl. Balto will be back with the medicine, I know he will. He can do anything."

Jenna shut her eyes, and a tear rolled down her cheek. "My love... where are you?" she thought. "I need you so badly now that you're gone. I didn't think... I didn't think I would miss you this much."

The doctor wrapped Kodi up in a small blanket and put him down in his bed, and Jenna got up and went over to him. She lay down next to the bed and began licking Kodi and nuzzling him. "It's all right, my son," she said quietly. "Your father will be back soon with your medicine, and then we can all be a family again."

She lay with Kodi until Rosy's parents had finished talking with the doctor. "Come on Jen," Rosy said from the doorway. "Your other pups need you too. Kodi will be fine here with the doctor."

"Goodbye Kodi," Jenna said softly. "I'll be back for you soon." She kissed him and got up to leave with Rosy.

They made their way back to their house, and Jenna went into the shed where her five other pups were still sleeping. She gingerly stepped into her bed and lay down next to them, being careful not to wake them. She settled down and closed her eyes, and Balto was all she could think of as she tried to sleep. She could practically feel him lying next to her, kissing her, nuzzling her, holding her in his big safe paws... she could smell his scent, and it was enough to make her cry with longing.

"Please, my love," she thought. "Please come back to me. I need you more now than I have ever needed anything. I don't know what I would do..." she sniffed. "Save our son, my love."

"Save me."

###

"Wha—" Balto woke with a start. He sat up and immediately wished he hadn't. His head hurt, his stomach hurt, his paws hurt, his legs ached, and he had no idea where he was. He lay back down and tried to figure out where he was and what happened to

him. "I'm... in a cave... on a bed?"

He closed his eyes as his last memories came floating back to him. He was hurt and freezing, and he fell over into the snow and lost consciousness. "Am I dead?"

"Not yet. Apparently it's not your time," said a voice from behind him.

"What - who are you? How did I get here?" Balto's vision focused and he saw a red and tan colored wolf standing in the entrance to the den, framed by the early morning light shining in from behind him.

"My name is Dakarai," he said as he walked towards Balto. "I am the alpha wolf of this pack, the Falling Leaf Tribe. You are here because it was the will of the Great Aniu."

"The great who?"

Dakarai stopped in surprise. "You don't know who Aniu is?"

Balto shook his head. "I'm sorry, I don't. I'm only half wolf, and I grew up among humans."

Dakarai nodded, but wondered why Aniu hadn't told her son who she was. "Aniu is the great wolf spirit, the one who created all wolves. She appeared to us and told us who you were, and showed us where to find you. I lifted you onto my back and carried you here so you could recover and finish your journey back to Nome with the medicine."

Balto blinked in surprise. "How do you know all that about me?"

"It is as I said, Aniu appeared to us and told us about everything, including the difficult journey you are making to save your son Kodiak."

"Kodi..." Balto said, and then stopped as he saw the body of a young, reddish-brown wolf lying against the back wall.

"That is... was... my son Kantu," Dakarai said quietly. "He died saving a fellow pack member from a grizzly bear last night. He... he was my only child."

"Your only son," Balto whispered, and flattened his ears back against his head. "I'm so sorry, Dakarai. If my son died, I don't know what I..."

"I know," Dakarai said softly. "It seems we are more alike than not alike, Balto. But while my son is with Aniu now, yours may still live and survive if you can get the medicine back to him."

"Dakarai... thank you for saving my life. I don't know how I can ever repay you. I don't mean to be ungrateful, but I have to get this medicine to Kodi before it's too late. I have to leave right now."

"You can repay me by saving your son. I would not wish the pain of the loss of one's child on anybody, and Aniu told us that you would want to leave as soon as you woke up. I am prepared to show you the way back to Nome."

Balto got up from the bed of furs, nudged the leather satchel into place on his side and followed Dakarai out into the morning sun. As they left the den, a beautiful all black female with bright blue eyes walked up to Balto.

"Good luck, Balto," she said. "Aniu is watching over you, and I'm sure you'll make it back to save Kodiak."

"This is my mate, Nightfall," Dakari said as he moved to stand next to her.

Balto turned to her and lowered his head. "I'm so sorry for the loss of your son, Nightfall," he said. "Thank you for saving my life and watching over me. I hope I can repay you someday for the kindness you have both shown me."

"Go and save your son, Balto," she said. "You must use this chance you have been given. The life of a child is precious," she said as tears began to fall from her eyes. "And you must save him if you can."

"My alpha," said a voice from behind Dakarai and Nightfall. Balto looked past them to see a large grey wolf sitting behind them with his head bowed down. "Allow me to lead Balto back to Nome in your place. With all that has happened, I do not wish you to be apart from your mate... or your son. Let me do this to try to make up for what I have done."

Dakarai smiled, and walked over to nuzzle Mulu. "There is nothing to make up for, old friend," Dakarai said gently. "But I will allow you to do this if it will help you to feel better. And..." he looked over at Nightfall. "I do not wish to be apart from my mate either."

Nightfall padded over to Dakarai and nuzzled him, and he nuzzled her in return. "Balto, this is Mulu, and I would trust him with my own life. You can trust him with yours. He will show you the way back to Nome."

Balto nodded and bowed down before Dakarai and Nightfall. "Thank you again for saving my life. I will find a way to repay your kindness somehow."

Mulu came up to stand next to Balto. "I could not save my alpha's son, but perhaps I can help you save yours. Nome is this way." He turned to leave, and Balto got up to follow him. He turned to look back at Dakarai and Nightfall, and saw that Nightfall had begun to cry again. He flattened his ears, saddened to see such pain. He was more determined than ever to save Kodi, and began to run.

The storm had mostly passed, and he could now easily see his way through the forest in the morning sun. Mulu was a good guide, and a fast runner as well. Balto wasn't going as fast as he wanted to, but they were still keeping a good pace. As they ran, Mulu explained what had happened the night before.

"I couldn't save him," he said sadly. "I was trying to get up, and then it was too late. He died saving me. I can only hope that he will be able to forgive me when I meet him again in the spirit world."

"Your alpha told me that he was only doing what any wolf in your pack would do. Wouldn't you have done the same for him?"

"Of course!" Mulu snapped. "I would have given anything to save him."

"I'm just saying... maybe he would have given anything to save you too."

Mulu opened his mouth to respond, but closed it again. The two of them ran on in silence for a while, then Mulu spoke again.

"I cannot rid myself of the feeling that there was more I could have done... more I should have done. I was a good friend of Kantu's, I used to play with him when he was a pup. I watched him grow into a strong yearling, and he was a good hunter even at his young age. For him to die when it should have been me is almost too much for me to bear."

"But he believed in life, Mulu. He believed in your life. I don't think that Kantu would ever blame you for what happened. He acted because that's how he was taught to act. He was taught that no wolf should die..."

"if we have the means to prevent it," Mulu finished and sighed. "I just wish it wasn't him. Not Kantu."

Balto nodded as they both continued to run towards the base of the mountain. He had been gone for close to twenty four hours, and he was becoming increasingly worried that he was not going to make it back in time to save Kodi. He began to run faster as they made their way down the mountain and through the forest covering the foothills. Soon, the ground began to level out and they reached the edge of the forest.

Mulu came to a stop and panted for a few moments to get his breath. "This is as far as I need to take you," he said. "Simply continue in the direction we were heading and you will see Nome soon enough. It's not more than an hour away at your pace."

"Thank you Mulu. Please tell Dakarai and Nightfall that my thoughts are with them. I am grateful for their help, and yours."

"I will tell them. And Balto," he stopped Balto as he was about to start running. "Thank you for what you told me. Kantu did love his

pack and our way of life, and so do I. I will honor his memory as best I can by staying true to the beliefs he upheld. Goodbye, and I wish you luck."

"Goodbye, Mulu," Balto said as he began to run.

Balto felt rested and had only been running for a couple hours, so he pushed himself as hard as he could to get back to Nome. He ran so hard that he lost track of time, and all that existed was the sound of his breathing, his paws on the tundra and the sight of the mountain behind him slowly getting smaller in the distance.

Soon he saw what looked like a town far in front of him, and he pushed beyond his limits to get there even faster. He was moving so fast his legs barely touched the ground, and he closed his mind to the fatigue and kept running. As he got closer he began to recognize some of the buildings and he knew he was almost home. He took a deep breath and howled as loudly and for as long as he could. He gasped and sucked in another lungful of air and howled again, splitting the air with his call.

He shot into Nome like he had been fired out of a cannon, and ran straight for the vet's office. The vet had heard him coming and was already standing outside with his door open. "Balto! You made it, boy!" Balto tried to slow down but his legs were numb and wouldn't do what he wanted them to do. He gave up and fell over in mid stride, and his legs crumpled under him. He bounced off the ground and skidded to a stop at the doctor's legs.

"Whoa boy, take it easy! Breathe!" Balto was hyperventilating and couldn't move, and the doctor checked his pulse. "Just breathe Balto, you'll be okay, just keep breathing," he said. "I don't think I've ever seen a dog move that fast before."

He removed the leather bag from Balto's neck and opened it, finding the antibiotics inside. "These are exactly what Kodi needs, Balto. You did it!" Balto put his paw on the doctor's arm and whined.

"Yes, Kodi is still alive. He hasn't gotten any better but he's still all right. These drugs should fix him right up. You saved him." The doctor smiled and rubbed Balto's head. "I'll be right back, I want to give these to Kodi right away."

The doctor went into his office, and Balto's breathing slowed down a bit and he was starting to get the feeling back in his legs. He turned over onto his back and lay panting on the cool ground, exhausted and thankful that his son was still alive.

"Balto! Balto!" His ears snapped forward as he heard Jenna frantically calling his name. She came running around the corner and saw him lying on the ground. "Balto!" she cried, and she leapt on top of him, smothering him with licks and kisses.

"I was so afraid... so afraid you wouldn't come back to us," she sobbed into his chest. "I missed you so much while you were gone, and I was scared that Kodi was going to die, and... I didn't know what to do."

Balto wrapped his paws around her, pulling her close to him. "It's okay Jenna, I'm here now. I got the medicine, and Kodi will be fine. The doctor is inside giving it to him right now. Everything is okay."

"Oh Balto," she sniffed and kissed him. "I love you so much."

"I love you too, Jenna." He closed his eyes and nuzzled her, breathing in her scent. He could smell his family, and he finally

allowed himself to relax.

###

Balto and Jenna walked down the beach near Balto's boat, with their six children nipping at their heels and playing in the water. "Don't go too far out, little ones," Jenna said to the pups. She looked over at Balto who was smiling. "What is it, my love?"

"Oh, nothing really. This just reminded me of a dream I had when I was sleeping at the vet's in White Mountain. I was here on the beach with the pups, and they were playing in the water and attacking my legs. It felt just like it does now, like it's the best thing that's ever happened to me. I love being a father, Jenna, and I love you for giving me a family."

"I love you too," Jenna said as she kissed him. "I can't believe it's already been a week since you came back with Kodi's medicine. Look how fast your children are growing."

"I can't believe it either. This is how Dakarai must have felt when Kantu was their age." Balto's smile faded. "He was only a year old, Jenna. I don't know what I would do if... if..."

"Hopefully we'll never have to find out. I can only imagine the pain his poor mother must have felt. Her only child..." Jenna's ears flattened and she looked down at the ground.

"Yeah. She was devastated. I still owe them my life, I want to go back to visit them sometime. Maybe after the kids are grown up

and have their own homes, and it's just the two of us again."

"I'd like to go too... I want to thank them for saving your life myself. I don't know if I can run that far though, I've never trained as a sled dog."

Balto smiled at her. "You would be fine. For now though, I just want to enjoy my pups while I still can." He ran up to the warm sand and sat down. "Come on pups, time to play with papa!"

The one brown pup and the five red and white ones all scrambled up the beach to attack their father, and he laughed and rolled over under their tiny assault. They bit and yipped and growled and tumbled around all over him, and he just laughed and laughed.

The runt of the litter bounded up to his father's face and yipped, then licked him. His tiny tail was wagging so hard it looked like he was going to fall over. "I love you too, Kodi," Balto said as he nuzzled his child. "You're a very special pup, and I would do anything for you."

Jenna sat and watched with a tear in her eye. "Thank you for giving me a family too, Balto," she whispered.

###

Epilogue: One Year Later

"I can't believe Aleu is leading her own wolf pack," Jenna said. "When I said I wanted her to find a home, this isn't exactly what I meant."

Balto smiled at her. "I know, love. And believe me, it was not easy for me to let her go, either. But you should have seen her out there. Strong, independent... you would have been proud of her. When she left, I had no doubt in my mind that's where she was supposed to be."

Jenna stretched and yawned, and lay her head on Balto's shoulder as they sat in front of the big iron stove in the shed behind Rosy's house. "You know, Jenna... All our kids have homes now. I think it might be time to take that trip back to the Falling Leaf Tribe. Spring is nice and warm this year, no snowstorms this time... it would be a great time to go."

"Can I still go with you?" Jenna nuzzled Balto's nose.

"Of course, I was hoping you still wanted to go with me. And since Kodi isn't doing anything special, I want to take him too."

Jenna smiled. "Kodi would love that. You told him the story of what happened, but I bet he would love to meet Dakarai and his tribe."

Balto nodded. "All right, it's settled. I'll tell Kodi tomorrow, and we'll leave the day after. How's that?"

"That's fine. But right now, it's just you and me," she said with a grin. She pushed Balto over with her nose, and he lay on his back

looking up at her, smiling.

"I will never get tired of looking at you, Jenna," he said as the light from the fire in the stove made her red fur glow. "You're even more beautiful than you were on the first day I saw you."

"And you are more than I could ever have hoped for in a mate," Jenna replied. "I love you Balto, and I always will." She bent down to kiss him, and he wrapped his paws around her and pulled her to him.

Two days later, Kodi showed up at Balto's boat just as the sun was rising over the mountains to the East.

"Dad! Dad! Come on, dad!"

Balto groaned and pulled his blanket over his head. Kodi jumped onto the boat and walked up to where Balto was sleeping. "Come on dad, I know you can hear me."

Balto sighed. "All right, all right, I'm up. Have a little respect for your elders."

Kodi laughed. "Come on, you know how excited I am to make this trip. I've been practicing running up and down the beach, and I can do it!"

Balto looked at his son and smiled. "I know you can, Kodi. I never doubted it."

"You're the best, dad," Kodi said, and nuzzled him.

Balto closed his eyes and nuzzled his son. "Well, we better get going. We don't want to keep your mother waiting."

The two of them left the boat and ran to Jenna's shed at the back of Rosy's house. When they got there, Balto nosed the door open. "Jenna?"

"Come in, my love," she said. "Good morning you two. Ready to go?"

"I've been ready for an hour!" Kodi said.

Jenna laughed. "In that case I'm glad you went to get your father first. Shall we?"

The three of them left the shed and headed out of town towards White Mountain. They ran at a medium pace so that neither Jenna nor Kodi would have any trouble maintaining it. They took breaks when they needed to, and they still made good time to the mountain. They reached the forested foothills, and Balto lead them in the direction he remembered coming from when Mulu had lead him back to Nome.

It was a beautiful day, and the warm sunlight streamed through the trees as they ran. They could smell the fresh pine and the grass, and they were all enjoying it very much. They continued up the side of the mountain for a while, and eventually Balto thought they were getting close.

"I'm pretty sure we're near it now. Keep your senses open, see if you can identify anything," he said.

Just then, a large grey wolf emerged from the underbrush in front of Balto. "Balto? Is that you?" he said.

"Mulu! Yes, it's me! And this is my family, my mate Jenna and my

son Kodiak."

"Kodiak...!" Mulu said in awe. "So you did get the medicine back in time, then! And what a handsome pup he is."

Jenna giggled, and Kodi frowned. "Hey, I'm not a pup any more."

Mulu smiled. "My apologies, Kodiak. You remind me of a yearling I once knew."

"That's a compliment son," Balto nudged Kodi.

"Oh! uh, thank you sir," Kodi said, embarrassed.

Mulu grinned. "Allow me to escort you to our home. My alpha will be thrilled to see you all."

"Thank you, Mulu," Jenna said as they began to follow him.

As they walked, Balto told Mulu about Aleu and how she had become the leader of her own wolf pack. "I will be sure to remember her name if we ever run across her pack," said Mulu. "She will be as welcome among us as you are."

After a short while, they arrived at the home of the Falling Leaf Tribe. When they got there, Mulu howled for his alpha to come down and join him.

"Yes Mulu, what's..." Balto, Jenna and Kodi watched as the red and tan wolf stopped in mid-question as he saw Balto sitting next to Mulu. "Balto?"

"Hello Dakarai," Balto grinned. "This is my mate Jenna, and my son Kodiak."

"Nightfall!" Dakarai yelled. "You're going to want to come down here and see this..."

Dakarai walked up to Balto, and the two of them looked at each other for a moment, then Dakarai nuzzled him. "It's good to see you well, Balto. And even better to see your son Kodiak."

Dakarai stepped back to take a good look at Kodi. "Hello, Kodiak. I am Dakarai, leader of the Falling Leaf Tribe. It is good to see you alive and well."

Kodi lowered his head humbly. "My father told me what you did for him. I... I'm glad to be able to thank you in person. You saved his life, and mine. I just wanted to thank you."

Dakarai gently nuzzled Kodi. "You remind me so much of my Kantu. I am happy that you came to see me. And I'm happy to see your mother here as well," he said, turning to Jenna.

"Thank you for saving my mate's life," she said. "I will always be grateful to you."

Dakarai nodded. "I'm glad he was able to get back to you and Kodi safely. Ah, here comes my mate now."

A beautiful all black female with bright blue eyes descended from the caves above, and approached the group. She smiled when she recognized Balto. "Hello Balto, it's good to see you again," she said.

"Nightfall, these are Jenna and Kodiak, Balto's mate and son," Dakarai said.

"Kodiak," she whispered. "I'm so glad to see you alive. Your father risked everything to save you, but we never heard if he was successful. It appears he did get back in time after all. Such a handsome young pup you are."

Kodi began to blush. "I - thank you," he managed to stutter.

"He reminds me of our Kantu," Nightfall said to Dakarai, and he smiled. Just then, a pair of yipping, barking balls of fur ran down from the caves and attacked Dakarai. One was pure black, and the other was a reddish-brown color, with black paws and muzzle and black circles around his eyes.

Dakarai laughed as he succumbed to the attacks of the two wolf cubs. Nightfall smiled. "These are our two new pups, Inaya and Kanto. They were born two months ago. Kanto bears a striking resemblance to Kantu, don't you think?"

Balto stared at the two wolf cubs. "They're beautiful! Dakarai, Nightfall... I'm so happy for you."

Jenna gasped. "They're adorable! Oh, you must be so happy."

Nightfall smiled and nodded. "Aniu has rewarded us for helping you, Balto. To see your Kodiak alive, and to have two more pups of our own... this is all the thanks we would ever need."

Dakarai grinned and looked up at Balto as the cubs growled and chewed on his ears. "There's nothing like being a father, is there?"

Balto looked at Kodi and smiled. "No, there isn't. Nothing in the world."

###

-Xaqtly