

Ersatzica Wolf Princess

by shieldgenerator7

The cat kingdom is about to invade and the chiefling of the wolf village suddenly transforms into a cat, now she must choose between staying loyal to her wolf pack or accepting her new identity.

Content Warning: blood, gore, emotional abuse, physical abuse, violence, kissing

Prologue

[cats come and raid wolf village on the night of ersatzica's birth]

[Pantrinome meets Awoomoon for the last time]

Chapter 1 – The Drums of Retriyoan

Ersatzica found it easy to forget about the impending cat invasion while working on her brother's utility belt. The slender, black-and-white wolf girl inspected her patient on the worktable: a leather belt that had been cut through by a thousand tiny scratches. Attached to it were several items: a bag of rocks, a sheathed knife, a water bladder, and a wooden slingshot.

Her workshop was a comfortable, organized chaos of projects, tools, and materials. The counters that lined the walls were full of past projects, full barrels sat in a corner, and cupboards on the wall were bursting with materials. The entire space was full, and yet she always had room for one more project.

[describe her screwdriver: flatblade, shaft has knife and saw, handle has file on one side, can be used as a chisel]

She opened a cupboard and pulled out a dried skin, careful not to let anything fall out. With her trusty screwdriver, she sliced the leather, cutting off a thin strip. She sprawled the belt flat across her worktable and laid the strip on top of it. She sewed it together over the course of half an hour. Wiping the sweat off her brow, she admired her handiwork.

Her brother wasn't here to test it out, so she herself tried it on. She dug her paw hands into the bag of rocks and easily pulled one out. Check. She unsheathed and sheathed the knife. Check. She took out the bladder, pretended to drink from it, and put it back. Check. She unholstered the slingshot and tried to re-holster it, but a wooden spike on the slingshot scraped across the belt. Uncheck.

She placed the culprit on the worktable, eyeing the spike. "I want to remove this spike, but he told me not to." She looked to the slingshot for validation, but it offered no response. "But if I don't, he'll wear a cut into his belt again." She held down the slingshot and held up the file part of her screwdriver. "This will only hurt for a moment." She filed down the spike to a round bump. "There! All done."

When she holstered the slingshot, it didn't scrape the new patch of belt. Check.

KNOCK KNOCK

"Ersie, can I come in?"

Ersie took off the belt she had just finished repairing. "Come in."

The door burst open, releasing a short, all-white wolf girl. She ran up to Ersie, bouncing up and down, dried mud patches flopping to the ground. "Did you finish it? Did you did you?"

"Calm down, Muddy." Ersie pushed her back. "It's right here." From a barrel, she pulled out a metal hammer that was about as big as the white wolf girl was.

Muddy's fingers wiggled as she grabbed it. "This feels great!" Despite her small stature, she lifted the hammer with the heft of someone who moves dirt all day—because she does. She carelessly swung the hammer around, hitting the door and knocking the locking mechanism askew.

"Not in here!"

"Oh, right. Sorry, Ersie."

"Now, you need to take better care of it. I managed to scrape off all the rust spots, and I added a coat of sealant to make it water resistant, but you have to store it indoors."

"But then how will I know where I left off with my tunnel progress?"

“That’s what this is for.” Ersie handed her a stake with a stitched-together cloth attached to the end.

“Oh! This is wonderful!” Muddy stuck it in the cracks between the stones that made up the floor.

“I’m glad you like it. I made it out of scraps from my workbench.”

“Thanks so much, Ersie!” Muddy gave Ersie a big squeezer hug.

“No problem, Muddy.”

“Do you want to come help me with a new hole?”

“Not today, Muddy. I got stuff to do.”

“Ok, see you later!” Muddy ran out.

Ersie got to work on the next project: two identical drums. They had once been attached together by a belt, but that belt had since worn away. The drums were painted red with a gold trim and had impeccable craftsmanship. A blue glint shimmered across the drums. Ersie felt a closeness to them that she couldn’t explain, like the drums were welcoming her to work on them.

“Ersatzica?”

“Come in.”

Her brother Wryonin, a black and grey wolf boy, pushed the workshop door open and marched inside. “How’s it coming?”

Ersatzica looked up at him as she handed him the belt. “I fixed your belt, like you asked. I stitched it up, good as new, it should last a lot longer now.”

Wryonin wrapped the belt around his waist and felt around for the items. “Where’s the slingshot?”

“Now, don’t be mad, but—”

“Ersatzica, what did you do?”

She held the slingshot behind her back. “Your belt could break again, and what if it happened while fighting the cats?”

"Please don't tell me you did what I think you did."

"And you cut yourself all the time by accident. And... and you don't even look at your slingshot while shooting it, so..."

"Ersatzica, hand me my slingshot."

"Promise not to get mad?"

"Give it to me." He reached behind her to grab it.

"Promise?"

He grabbed it and pulled it out of her hand. Inspecting it, he found it lacking a particular spike. "Ersatzica! This was grandfather's! He carved it with his very own paws! And you went and destroyed it." He mimed shooting it. "How am I supposed to aim now?" He mimed throwing it on the ground but nevertheless holstered it. "Thanks a lot." He stormed off.

Ersatzica leaned over her workshop, tears welling up in her eyes. She picked up her screwdriver and slowly fiddled with an adjustment knob on the drums, but then dropped the screwdriver.

"Ha! I knew it!"

Ersatzica sucked in her tears and turned around.

A grey and white wolf walked in, eyes rolled back into her skull. A white bald spot on her forehead glowed enough to illuminate the scene. "I told you so! I knew he would get mad if you removed the spike."

"What do you want, Lemilay?"

Lemilay rolled her eyes forward, dimming out her bald spot. "My throne is getting uncomfortable. It needs some more stuffing."

"I just put more quills in your pillow last week."

"Well, it needs some more." Lemilay brushed aside the drums and set her "throne" pillow onto Ersatzica's workbench in their wake. "Bye for now, I'll be back after dinner."

"I'll have it done by tomorrow."

“Hmmm.” Lemilay lifted her chin at Ersatzica. “Very well. I graciously grant you a deadline extension.” She swiped Ersatzica’s chin with the tip of her tail. With a glowing bald spot, she added, “I see Mudrich broke your door again. Better get that fixed.” She didn’t even bother to close the door as she left.

Ersatzica stewed on her stool for a minute, and then got to work on the pillows. They were plenty puffy; they just seemed flat after hours of being sat on. She fluffed them out without even using her tools. For good measure, she straightened the fur grain on the top.

Ersatzica then pushed the pillow aside to make room for the drums. She cut out a strip of leather to fit around her own waist and laid out the drums along it, meticulously calculating where best to put them. She placed them right next to each other on the front. Then she attached them to the belt.

Putting the belt on, she immediately realized a problem: the drums sagged forward, causing the whole belt to droop. Uncheck.

Well why had this not happened with Wryonin’s belt? There was nothing on it that was that heavy. Wait, yeah there was. The bag of rocks, and the bladder. So why did that work, but this doesn’t?

Ersatzica took out a piece of paper and a pencil, sketching out her memory of Wryonin’s utility belt. She soon discovered that the heavy items were on opposite sides of the belt, balancing it out.

Aha!

With that in mind, Ersatzica detached the drums and laid them out so they were on either side of the belt. Her stomach rumbled as she sewed them back on.

Putting the belt back on, she found that the belt didn’t droop as much. Check! But the drums still didn’t seem to be attached properly. Uncheck.

Her stomach rumbled.

She pressed on, taking the belt off and preparing to detach the drums again.

“Ersie! Help!” Mudrich burst through the door.

“What’s wrong, Muddy?” Ersie sighed.

"My stake is broken!"

"How that happen?"

"I was trying to pound it into the ground, but when I hit it with my hammer, it just snapped instead."

"Oh, Muddy, you weren't supposed to pound it with your hammer."

"I wasn't?"

"No, you were supposed to—"

Ersie's stomach growled.

"Ersie! Did you skip dinner again?"

"I had a snack earlier."

"You mean leather and wood chips?"

"Maybe?"

"Come on, Ersie, let's go eat."

They were a bit late to the mess hall. Most wolves were already finished eating and tossing their leftover bones onto the bone pile. Ersie helped herself to some of the leftovers, taking it with her.

Muddie looked up from picking through the bone pile. "Where you going?"

"Back to my workshop."

"But it's such a nice day out! Let's go down to the river."

"But I don't want to eat where it's wet."

"Just eat on the way. Come on!"

Ersie followed Muddie to the river, eating her rations along the way. She finished well before they walked down the cliff stairs, through the forest, and to the river. She left a trail of bones as she went.

"So why the river?"

"I want to show you something."

Muddie led her to a big rock by the river, so close it was literally part of the river bank. The river roared up next to the boulder, threatening to swallow it up.

"...It's a boulder."

"Not just any boulder!" Muddie tapped the boulder gently with her hammer. *TING TING*. "See?"

"That's just the noise boulders make."

"No, it's not!" Muddie insisted. "I think there's something inside it."

"Like what?"

"I don't know, minerals maybe?"

"Well if it did, why hasn't it been mined yet?"

"Because it's been buried under a hole bunch of dirt, until recently." Muddie jumped onto the boulder island. "The river and I have done a fine job of finding it." Muddie danced on the boulder.

Ersie, with the drums still attached to her side, banged on them. *BUM BUM BUM*

"Oh yeah!" Muddie danced to the music.

Muddie danced to the beat of Ersie's drums .

"Whoa!" Muddie's eyes went wide. "Did you feel that?"

"No, what happened?" *BUM BUM BUM*

"I'm not sure." Muddie let her hands relax and her feet rest, but they didn't want to.

"Hey! Hey hey hey!"

"What's wrong Muddie?"

"Stop playing the drums!"

BUM BUM—

"Whew!" Muddie took a deep breath. "That was intense."

“It was?”

Muddie took another breath. “Alright, let’s go again. I think I have an idea how this heirloom works.”

BUM BUM BUM

Muddie danced to the beat of the drum.

“Faster.”

BUM BUM BUM

Muddie’s dancing speed increased. “Faster.”

BUM BUM BUM

Muddie danced in a frenzy, moving at speeds that seemed impossible.

Ersie sped up the drums.

Muddie became a blur.

“Muddie, you good?”

She didn’t respond.

BUM BUM—

“Ah!” Muddie exclaimed. “Finally!” She knelt down and took a deep breath.

“How were you moving so fast?”

“It’s... the drums...” Muddie caught her breath. “You try.”

Ersie did a little jig with her feet.

BUM BUM BUM

She sped up the drums.

BUM BUM BUM

She increased the tempo again.

BUM BUM BUM

Her feet were still moving like normal. “Nothing’s happening.”

“You’re doing it wrong.”

“Are you sure? I’m doing exactly what you were doing.”

“No, I was moving my arms. You know, the standard dance we do. You were just standing there like a tree.”

“Well, I can’t move my arms and play the drums at the same time.”

“Ok then I’ll try again.”

Ersie stopped dancing and focused on the drums.

BUM BUM BUM

“Muddie, you’re not dancing.”

“I’m trying something else.” She jogged in place, feet timed to the beat and arms pumping to the tempo.

BUM BUM BUM BUM BUM

“Ok now faster.”

Ersie gradually sped up the drums.

BUM BUM BUM BUM BUM

Muddie’s pace quickened as she jogged. Her legs soon became a blur.

BUM BUM BUM BUM BUM

Ersie blinked, and Muddie was gone. A huge gust of wind blew past her, leaving a trail of trampled leaves and muddy pawprints.

“Muddie?”

Ersie looked around, but there was no sign of Muddie.

AWOOOO. (“Here!”) Ersie howled.

AWOOOO. ("Here!") Mudrich howled back. A minute later, she appeared from the woods, running at top speed. She was covered in mud from head to toe. Well, more than usual.

"What happened to you?"

"The most amazing thing ever, Ersie!"

"A fresh pile of mud?"

"Something even better! I ran so fast with those drums! You're not going to believe this!" Muddie got on all fours.

"Mudrich! Not here!"

Mudrich shook all the loose mud off of her, splashing it all over Ersie and the drums.

"Oh, sorry Ersie." She picked up her hammer. "Let's try again."

They tried the drums out on Mudrich's hammer, finding that she can swing faster while under the influence of the drums. They tried other things, finding that it sped up Mudrich as long as she was synced to the beat first.

Ersie tried to get the same effect, but no matter what she did, she couldn't get it to work. Ersie growled at the drums.

Mudrich shrugged. "Maybe you're just bad. I've got the beat, and you don't."

"No, I'm good at getting the beat too. It must be something else."

"No you just suck, admit it."

Ersie's ears folded back. She slowed down the beat of the drums as Mudrich dug to the beat. She slowed the beat down to the starting beat, then further slower to about half as fast.

"Hey! What gives?" Mudrich shouted.

"What?"

"Why can't I move any faster?"

Ersie stopped playing.

Mudrich let out an exasperated sigh. “Finally!” She dug some more. “Hey, who turned off the beat?”

“Mudrich.”

“It wasn’t me.”

“No, Mudrich!”

“Huh? Oh... oh!” Mudrich slapped herself in the forehead. “Of course! If it can speed me *up*, it can also slow me *down*. But why would I want that?”

“That’s what I want to ask Ersatzica.”

“Lemilay!” Ersatzica turned to her sister, who quietly approached. “What are you doing down here?”

“I’m not *afraid* of mud, you know.” Lemilay wiped her fur to brush some mud off. “And you also know *that* is not what I asked for.” She pointed up to the village.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You know full well what I’m talking about. I asked you to—”

“Lemlem, check out what I can do!” Mudrich interjected, doing a quick jig.

“Brilliant.” Lemilay scoffed.

“Come on, Ersie, show her.”

Lemilay flashed her bald spot, her eyes rolling back into her skull. A second later, she returned to normal.

“Did you see it? Did you see it? Wasn’t it cool?”

“Great. So you two were down here partying instead of getting your jobs done? Wait until Mother hears about this.”

“Lemilay, don’t!” Ersatzica grabbed her by the arm. “I’ll-I’ll get it done.”

Lemilay crossed her arms. “Ok, but I expect extra fluff.”

“Ok.”

“Lemilay! Did you see the jig! Did you see how quick—”

"I saw your damn jig, Mudrich!" Lemilay shouted.

"Well you don't have to be so mean about it."

"Well you don't have to be so annoying."

"But you should see it."

"I *saw* it, Mudrich. It's just another stupid heirloom."

"It's not stupid." Ersatzzica's ears pinned back.

"Can it repair my cushion? Can it tell the time? Can it keep people in line?"

"Hey that rhymed."

"Shut up Mudrich."

"No, but it can—"

"Then who cares? You two have fun with it, but only after getting your jobs done. Are we clear?"

"What's going on?" Wryonin dropped down from a tree.

"Nothing, Wryonin, go away."

"I heard shouting. I thought you were in trouble."

"We're fine."

"You shouldn't be out here this late. The cats—"

"Wryonin check this out!" Mudrich did her jig. "Come on, Ersie, show him."

Ersie looked away.

"Come on, Ersie?"

Ersie mumbled, "Not right now, Muddie."

"As I was saying, the cats have taken the area on the other side of the river. Meaning this area is surely next on their agenda."

"Wryonin, we're fine." Lemilay walked away.

“Wait, we should all walk together.”

“We should *jig* together, right Ersie?”

Ersie followed her siblings, not saying anything.

“Everyone stop.” Wryonin froze.

Mudrich pretended to be a statue, standing on one leg. Ersatzica laid her hands on the drums as she stopped. Lemilay just kept walking.

Wryonin’s ears twitched. “They’re here! Everyone, run!” Wryonin took off toward the stairs. *AWOOOOO!* (“Intruders!”)

“It was probably just a twig.” Lemilay pulled out a telescope. She looked into it, then froze.

“Lemlem?”

Lemilay twitched. Then she ran, dropping the telescope. *AWOOOOOO!* (“Intruders!”)

Mudrich ran after them.

Ersatzica walked quickly, trying to be quiet as she panicked. All of her siblings were far ahead of her now. She heard several twigs snapping, getting closer. She jumped and ran, fleeing from the sound. The jostling around from her steps unsettled the scar on her stomach. She clutched her belly as she stopped. It threatened to bleed.

She looked back at the source of the noise. The intruders weren’t yet visible. She looked at her belly, just barely holding together. She looked at the drums. She wiped the dust off the tops. “Find the beat, find the beat. I just gotta find the beat.”

She stood up straight. Lifting one foot after another, she beat the drums in sync. “Find the beat.” Soon her feet were stomping at the same rhythm as the drums.

The snapping twigs grew louder and closer.

“Find the beat.” She stepped forward with each stomp. She slowly but surely increased the beat of the drums. She also increased the rate of her steps. “It’s working!” She speed walked towards the stairs.

The snapping twigs were right up on her soon.

“Fast beat! Fast beat!” She pounded the drums as fast as she could. However, her footsteps didn’t get faster. She speed walked as fast as she could, but without the beat. She was just normal speed walking this whole time.

PFFFFT!

Ersatzica got a face full of dirt and leaves. *AWOOOOOO!* (“Help!”)

The twigs got quieter. Faint silhouettes of cats shifted behind the nearby trees.

Ahead, the staircase was in view, but the landing was still far.

Ersatzica sat up, whimpering, tail curled.

The cats closed in to the nearest trees.

Ersatzica hit the drums. Then again. And again.

The cats paused.

Ersatzica beat the drums some more, pounding them faster with each beat.

The cats came out from behind the trees. One of the cats whispered, “Monassus?”

“Get him!” Another cat yelled. “Take him alive!”

The cats surrounded Ersatzica, and grabbed her by the arms.

She shifted so the drums fell a bit behind her, and she beat the drums with her tail.

A blur of white came out of nowhere, striking the cat holding Ersatzica and launching it forward and splatting against a nearby tree.

“What in the name of Teal—” said a cat who also got punted into a tree by the white blur.

Ersie just kept beating the drums.

“Retreat!” The cats ran away.

Ersie stopped playing the drums.

“Whoa-oh!” The white blur materialized into Mudrich, who appeared face flat on the ground. She got up on all fours and said, “Are you ok?”

Ersie gave her sister a big hug. “Muddie!”

“I heard your drums. Did they hurt you?”

Ersie held up her hand. It had a few scratch marks on it, but that was it.

AWOOOOO! (“Help!”) Mudrich howled. “Play the drums.”

“Muddie, I’m fine, let’s go home.”

Muddie jogged in place. “Play the drums.”

PLOK!

Muddie felt the spot on her back where something had just hit her.

Wryonin appeared. “Don’t even think about chasing those cats.”

“But they hurt Ersie.”

“And you’ll be hurt more if you chase them.”

“So, we’re just going to let them get away.”

Wryonin tilted his ear towards the cat’s escape path. “Hmmm. Yes.”

“Where’s my telescope?” Lemilay appeared.

Mudrich shrugged. “*You* dropped it.”

“Didn’t you pick it up?”

“No—”

“Did no one pick it up?”

“Why are you asking? You already know the answer.”

“I need it!”

“Well we can help you retrace your steps.” Wryonin offered. “Tomorrow. Tonight it’s just going to be us getting out here.”

"Tomorrow it's going to be out there." Ersatzica pointed out into the distance, indicating a location beyond the river.

"What do you mean?"

"One of the cats had it."

Lemilay's bald spot glowed and her eyes rolled back for a moment. "The cats *do* have it!"

"Well, that sucks, but we can't go after it tonight."

"Think about what that *means*, Wryonin. The cats are going to have access to a powerful heirloom that lets them see through walls. *See through walls!* Imagine how much *intel* they could gather with it. Imagine the *tactical* and *strategic* advantage that would give them."

Wryonin's tail swished and his eyes narrowed. "You want to risk your hide chasing some dumb heirloom?"

"It's not dumb!"

"Fine. You three get your hides back to town. I'll get your stupid telescope back."

"Hmmpf." Lemilay smiled.

"No way!" Mudrich started dancing. "I'm going with you."

"Mudrich, quit playing around." Wryonin's ear twitched.

"They hurt Ersie, I'm going with you."

"If I hit you, it's your own damnfault."

"Deal. Ersie, drums?"

Ersie scrambled to her feet. She beat the drums as she marched forward. *BUM BUM BUM*

Mudrich showed Wryonin how to sync with the drums. He stiffly jogged in place to sync to it, much less fun than Mudrich's jig. When both were synced, Ersie played faster. Mudrich and Wryonin ran off ahead.

Ersie ran as fast as she could without tearing her scar. She held her belly with one hand as she beat a drum with the other. She heard a lot of commotion ahead that she couldn't see. Lemilay ran behind her, pushing her pace.

When Ersie and Lemilay got to the beach, multiple cats were laying scattered and bloodied on the beach. The delicious taste of iron and the putrid smell of guts clashed in a battle almost as epic as Mudrich's battle with the cats, who were struggling to fight off Mudrich.

Mudrich swung her hammer left and right, keeping the cats at bay. She was moving at normal speed, apparently having left the range of the drums.

PLOK! Another cat was dropped to the ground, this one by Wryonin's slingshot.

Lemilay emerged from the woods, bald spot active. "There! They're getting on the boat!" She pointed.

"Ersie!" Mudrich shouted.

"Right!" Ersie beat the drums, syncing up with Mudrich's swings.

"Got it!"

Like adjusting a knob, Ersie turned up the speed, increasing Mudrich's swing rate.

Mudrich stepped forward, mowing down several cats at once. The remaining cats all backed up, scrambling to get on the boat. But the boat had already left, leaving the cats stranded on the shore.

Mudrich made short work of the stranded cats. Her muddy fur coat was now also covered in blood and bits of hair.

"Ok, now find the telescope."

"You runts!" Lemilay yelled. "You let him get away!"

"Yeah, but look at all those who didn't. Now you just got to find which one—"

"The one who has my telescope. Is. On. The. Boat."

"Muck." Wryonin looked across the river. There was one cat in the boat, almost at the other side. He tilted his ears towards the river.

“Wryonin?”

“Quiet.” At his command, the world went silent. Lemilay shut up, Ersatzica paused, and even Mudrich stopped digging for a moment. Wryonin closed his eyes, raised his slingshot, and let loose a rock. It sailed across the river, landing squarely on the back of the cat’s head. The cat dropped to the ground, tripping over the edge of the boat. “There.”

Lemilay tapped her foot. “So?”

“What?”

“Aren’t you going to go get it?”

“Crossing the river is a suicide mission. The cats will kill any wolves they see on sight. We’ll have the adults get it tomorrow.”

“So you’re not going to go get it?”

“No.”

Lemilay looked at Mudrich.

Mudrich shook her head at Lemilay. “It’s not bath time.”

Lemilay looked at Ersatzica, then rolled her eyes. She growled and stomped her foot.

“Sorry, Lemilay. Now let’s all get home before these cats wake up.”

“But we *need* to get it *tonight*!”

The voices of her siblings faded into the background as Ersatzica tightened the straps on the drums. *Just doggy paddle, just doggy paddle. There’s no shame in not being the best swimmer.* She closed her eyes and howled to the moon. *AWOOOO!* (“Alpha”) *Alpha, please guide me in what I’m about to do.* She gave herself a running start, jumping feet-first into the river with a splash.

“Ersatzica!” Wryonin yelled. “What are you doing?”

“I’m going to get the telescope!”

AWOOOOO! (Here!)

The drums helped her float, and she paddled herself across the river, but slowly. The current pulled her along, faster than she anticipated, and she floated out of view of her siblings.

Just doggy paddle, just doggy paddle...

She was almost half way across the river when she heard the sound of the waterfall ahead. Its roar deafened her and clouded her thoughts. She thought she had enough room and enough time to cross, but she didn't. She would only get about three-quarters of the way across when she would go over the waterfall.

She panicked. She beat the drums. But they didn't speed her up.

A rock splashed into the water next to her. A rope attached to it pulled it back up. It splashed down again.

Ersie reached over to grab it, gripping it like her life depended on it.

The rope pulled taut, pulling Ersie toward the shore. The cat shore.

She looked up. The rope went straight up towards a rock outcropping, where it vanished. It must have just been a trick of the sunlight, causing it not to be visible.

Ersie was pulled ashore. She crawled up onto the bank, digging her claws into the dirt.

"Hey there, are you ok?" A black and white hand reached out.

She accepted it and let it lift her to her feet. Standing upright again, she stood face to face with a cat!

She growled at the cat and jumped back. As soon as she did, the cat disappeared. Just vanished. There was no cat there. She looked around for tracks, but didn't see any. The cat she had seen just a moment ago was no longer there. A shiver spiked up her spine, making her fur stand on end.

Was I seeing things? Or... was that a ghost?

Walking along the shore, she very easily found the boat. The cat that escaped laid on the ground, head swimming in a pool of blood. It was still clutching the telescope with its clawed hands.

Her ears pricked when she heard a noise coming from the forest. After a moment of silence, she swallowed and built up the determination to take the telescope. She pulled hard, hard enough to get the telescope back.

The telescope was metal: blue paint with gold trim. It had three telescoping sections that allowed for a lot of adjustments. It was still in good condition; it didn't seem to get scraped up much from all the commotion. The lenses were still intact, and none of the paint was chipped. The blue shimmer frowned at her. It was a captive who almost escaped.

"I'm sorry. I know you want to be with the cats, but we need you—"

AWOOOOO! ("Here!")

Ersatzica looked up, and across the river, Lemilay was waving at her. Ersatzica waved back. She hopped into the boat and paddled across. This time, she made it to the other side very easily without worrying about the waterfall.

"Give me that." Lemilay swiped the telescope from Ersatzica's hands.

"You're welcome..."

"If you had just restuffed my pillow like I asked, none of this would have happened."

Ersatzica rolled her eyes.

"Did you encounter any cats?"

"I... I don't know."

Lemilay sighed. She flashed her bald spot for a moment. "It appears not."

Ersatzica froze. *If even Lemilay couldn't see it, was it ever really there? But if it wasn't there, how did I get across the river?*

Mudrich waved her hand in front of Ersie. "Are you ok?"

"Muddie, do you believe in ghosts?"

Chapter 3 – The Boots of Pantrinome

The four wolf siblings entered their bedroom.

"So what do we tell Mother?" Wryonin asked Lemilay as he hung his utility belt on a hook on his bed.

"She's not coming today, don't worry." Lemilay took her brush and dusted herself off outside the doorway.

"But what about next time we see her? Surely, she's going to ask."

"Fine. We'll just tell her Ersatzica got kidnapped by evil cats, and that we saved her."

"But I *didn't* get kidnapped." Ersatzica climbed into her top bunk, above Mudrich's.

"They surrounded you. Cats and wolves are both mammals." Lemilay said.

"Well I hope the eye piece was worth it." Wryonin remarked.

"It will be, don't worry. Just wait and see." Lemilay smugly rubbed the spyglass. She hung the brush up on the wall and stepped into the room, tiptoeing to her bed, bunked under Wryonin's.

"How are you feeling, Ersie?" Mudrich reached up and poked the bottom of Ersie's top bunk.

"Ow." Ersie shifted, peeking over the edge at Mudrich. "I'm fine. A little tired, a little wet. But otherwise, fine."

"That's good. Hey, do you wanna see something cool?"

"Sure." Ersie climbed down and sat on Mudrich's lower bunk. "What?"

Mudrich sat up cross-legged on her bed. "These." She grinned from ear to ear, her jaw wide open. "I got them off the cat we killed when we rescued you today."

Two silver circular bands gleamed in the dim torch light. A blue streak flashed over them.

"Ooh, shiny! What are they?"

"I don't know. I've tried throwing them, biting them, and wearing them as a crown."

"They're cuffs." Wryonin butted in. "They're meant to be worn on your wrists."

"Really?" Mudrich put one on, and it slid freely on her arm, then slid off onto the bed. "But they're too big to be cuffs."

"You just have small wrists." Wryonin shrugged. "At least compared to whoever they were made for."

"Well that sucks." Mudrich sighed. "I can't wear them!"

"Hold on. I've got just the thing." Ersie reached up to her bed and pulled out a roll of tape from under her pillow.

"You keep tape under your pillow?"

"Sure, never know when you might need some." Ersie taped the cuffs to Mudrich's furry arms. "How's that?"

Mudrich grimaced. "It's uncomfortable."

"But does it stay?"

Mudrich flung her arms around. "It works!"

"So what do they do?"

"I'm not sure." Mudrich said.

After a few minutes of testing, Mudrich discovered that they grant super strength. "Watch this! I can make the room bigger!" Mudrich punched a hole in the wall.

"Stop!" Lemilay shouted. "You're getting dust everywhere!"

Mudrich coughed. "It's just a little."

"Besides." Lemilay covered her mouth with her furry arm. "The other side of that wall is the rest of the barracks. Do you really want to share a bedroom with 30 other wolves?"

"Yes?"

"No, no you don't."

“Are you sure that it leads to the other barracks?” Ersatzica asked. “Muddie punched straight through and... it’s dark in there.”

“Yes, I’m sure, Ersatzica.”

“But it’s dark in there, like pitch black dark.”

“They probably just went to bed already.”

“No, no she’s right.” Wryonin’s ears twitched. “I think they’re still awake, playing cards, in fact.” Wryonin grabbed the lantern and swung it towards the hole.

Not much could be seen. Just some cobwebs and puddles. A critter skittering about.

“It’s some kind of room.” Wryonin stated.

“It smells really bad.” Mudrich covered her nose.

“Why don’t you two share the bunk tonight? We can get Nephalie to fix it tomorrow.”

“Or...” Mudrich shoved Wryonin out of the bed with ease. “I’ll just move it!” Mudrich picked up the bunk bed and dropped it against the opposite wall with a loud thud. “Done.”

“Ok, but we still need the wall fixed tomorrow.”

“Sure, sure.”

“It’s time for bed.” Lemilay yawned. “Can’t we just do prayer and go to sleep?”

“Alright, time for prayer, then lights out. Let’s bow our heads.” Wryonin led them in prayer. “Alpha, Wolf God of the Loyal Moon, thank you for keeping Ersatzica safe today. Please help guide us in our tasks tomorrow, and help Mudrich and Ersatzica not get distracted when fixing the wall—”

“Hey!” Mudrich protested.

“Shh! Prayer!” Lemilay shushed her.

“And please help us respect prayer time. May we always be—”

Everyone joined in for, “In your guiding moonlight.”

"Alright, everyone ready?" Wryonin held the lantern up, checking to make sure each of his sisters was in bed. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

He blew out the candle and climbed into bed himself.

===

The next day, Lemilay and Wryonin went to do their jobs, leaving Mudrich and Ersatzica to fetch Nephalie.

"What if we, instead..." Mudrich said.

"Muddie, no." Ersie refuted.

"But what if we find something good in there?"

"But what if we find something horrible in there? It smells like something *died* in there."

"Let's find out!"

"No!"

"Come on, Ersie. Can you speed me up?"

"Ok." Ersatzica beat on the drums, pounding more rapidly as Mudrich synced herself up.

Muddie punched the wall, and again. In rhythm with the drums.

BUM BUM BUM

POUND POUND POUND

Muddie punched the last brick with extra fervor, sending it flying into the room. Ersie handed her the lantern as they both entered. Ersatzica taped her nose and Mudrich's nose shut.

Dust and dirt rolled out of the chamber into their bedroom, depositing mostly onto Mudrich's bed. Ersatzica and Mudrich coughed as they breathed it in. It was as if they had discovered a long-lost tomb.

Inside, the floor was littered in rat feces and dotted with rat corpses. Cobwebs decorated every corner. A puddle or two reflected the lantern light.

Ersie gasped.

In one corner, a cot was rusting away. On top of it laid a blood-stained skeleton.

"Ersie look!"

"I-I see it." She approached the cot.

What sort of poor soul had lost their life here? Had been sealed up? And why? How awful it must have been to lay here and be forgotten about.

The skull had a muzzle that was too short to be a wolf's. *This must've been a cat.* The skeleton was devoid of any clothing, except for the feet. Over the feet were a pair of boots.

They were hard to see in the dim light, but they were red and gold-plated. Intricate mechanics filled up the internals near the heels. They were in dire need of repair.

A blue streak flashed over the boots.

"Don't worry." She whispered to the blue streak in the boots. "Whoever you were, I'm here now, and I'll take good care of you."

"Are you talking to the skeleton?"

"Muddie, go fetch Nephalie."

"Aww, alright."

Ersatzica turned back to the skeleton, and the boots.

The boots had two latches each. She held the boots in place as she unlatched them, one by one. The mouth of the boots opened up, and she gently slid the boots off.

They were covered in soot, dust, and cobwebs. She brought them into the bedroom, dusting them off by hand, then fetched Lemilay's brush from the wall to get in the crevices. Despite that, they were still dirty, and quite a bit rusty.

"Don't worry, I got you." She hid them under Muddy's bunk.

When Nephalie arrived with Mudrich, she was quite disgusted. "You pups really outdid yourselves this time, huh?" The deer girl walked in, rubbing her hoof hands together. "Might as well punch down the whole building while you're at it."

"Can you fix it?"

"You didn't even try to rebuild it yourself! Where are all the bricks at? Do you expect me to move them myself?"

"That's your job, right?" Mudrich contested, holding her nose.

"Mudrich. You did this, you help." Nephalie pointed to all the bricks. "Move them."

"Ok, ok, I'm doing it. Don't have to be so mean."

"And *you* don't have to be so careless."

Mudrich piled the bricks up near the hole.

Nephalie rolled her eyes. "That's not neat enough, but..." She flexed her hoof hands. "I guess it's good enough for me to work my magic."

Mudrich bounced up and down. "This is my favorite part."

Nephalie placed her hoof hands over the bricks, middle finger separated. The hoof on the end of her middle finger grew rapidly. The bricks morphed and stretched, growing up from the floor to fill in the hole in the wall. The result looked like someone stretched out a white blob of goo and let it dry. Ugly, but functional.

Nephalie tapped the wall with her middle hoof fingers, breaking off the excess hoof. She handed both hoof clippings to Mudrich. "Keep these safe. Remember to get this fixed properly."

Mudrich wagged her tail as she accepted the hoof clippings. "Thank you, Neffie."

"It's Nephalie. And don't do this again, *please*." She left.

Mudrich handed Ersatzica the hoof clippings. She moved the bed back to where it had been. Then she carried the boots to Ersie's workshop.

"So what do you think these boots do?" Mudrich said.

“Well, before we test, I need to clean them up first. I don’t even know if we can put them on to find out.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well for one, they might be too rusty to slip into. There’s also size. You have to be sure you have a matching shoe size. And the big one: they’re cat boots.”

“Of course they are. You don’t see wolves going around wearing boots.”

“But that means we wolves might not be able to use them.”

“Well, you can change that, can’t you? Make the cat boots into wolf boots?”

“Well, no, I can’t... unless I adjust the distance between the... and I also change the size of the sole... and.. Yeah, actually! I might be able to.”

“Then do it! I want to test them out!” Mudrich drooled.

“Hold on Muddie! It’s going to take a while. They probably won’t be ready today.”

“Ok.” Muddie pushed open the door to Ersie’s workshop, then set the boots down on her desk. “See you in a muddy!”

“It’ll be longer than a muddy.”

“Ok, then see you in an ersie!”

“Bye, Muddy.”

The boots had been sitting in a cool, dry place for a very, very long time. They were covered in, and filled with, dust. Ersie gently tapped them in various directions to get the dust out. She wiped down every surface she could, making sure to keep her nose strapped shut. Still, she sneezed a few times, necessitating opening the window.

Finally she was able to see what she was dealing with: Red metal imperial boots with gold plating. It had patches where the paint had been chewed down. It was very mechanical for a pair of boots: a spring from the heel to the sole, gears in the middle, and a sliding mechanism that separated the rest of the boot from the ground. It was very stubborn in moving, making it difficult to tell what the mechanism was for. But that wasn’t anything a little old oil couldn’t fix.

After a good oiling, scrubbing, and polishing, the boots sparkled like new. Even the missing paint splotches looked fantastic, gave it character.

A blue streak flashed across the boots for but a moment.

"Happy now? You're looking so much better!" Ersatzica gave the boots a few wolf kisses, polishing the boots with the resulting saliva afterwards.

The boots were very enticing. The best part of refurbishing an heirloom was always getting to try it out, to see what it could do. Even the disappointing effects were interesting. But without being able to fit into them, there didn't seem to be a way to test them out.

KNOCK KNOCK

"Come in." Ersatzica said, not taking her attention from the boots.

"Erse', it break again."

Ersatzica turned around. It was Tormael, the town chef. He stood just outside the workshop. His large frame almost matched the door opening. He held his hand out, dangling a taxidermied wolf foot from a string. It was covered in ice crystals.

"Oh, no problem. I can fix that for you."

Tormael dropped the foot as she reached out for it. "See you tomorrow."

Ersatzica barely caught it. "Oh, I'll have it fixed here in a few minutes."

"Tomorrow. I go now." He walked away.

Ersatzica put the foot on a shelf. Then she turned back to the boots. No use in fixing it soon if it won't be needed until tomorrow.

The boots called to her. She embraced them in both her arms. The boots felt warm and welcoming, as if they were hugging her back. She had felt connections like this to other heirlooms, but none as strongly as this one.

She placed the boots on the ground, and scooted her stool to be right next to them. She tried to slip a wolf foot in, but it wouldn't fit, even with the latches swung all the way open.

"By Alpha, I wish I could try you on. To see what you are, to learn more about you."

Just then, something happened. If Alpha answered prayers, this was definitely one of them.

The feeling started in her toes. It was tingling, a slight numbness, like her fur was being pulled. Then the tips of her toes cracked and flipped upwards, disappearing into her foot. The white fur of her wolf socks ceded way to an orange, stripy fur. But more importantly, they were now smaller.

Ersatzica clapped in excitement, giddy about a wish coming true. How did it happen, and why? That wasn't important.

She dipped her toes into the boots, which hugged her feet, welcoming them inside. The orange fur crept up her foot, her ankle, and her calves, letting her fit snugly into the boots.

Without clasping the boots, she lifted them up, one by one, to see how heavy they were. Despite being made of metal, they felt light enough to move about easily. She walked around her workshop a little, stomping about, clanging the metal boots on the stone floor. Then she returned to her stool.

Reaching down, she clasped the boots shut. The world around her demanded her attention. The door, it creaked? Even when shut and stationary? The wind blew through its cracks, around the workshop, and out the window, pushing the pane ever so slightly to make occasional scraping noises, and jittering the jars ever so slightly. The whipper-whirls outside were singing their nightly songs from their nests all the way down by the river. And the townsfolk! The walls usually muffled their voices into unintelligible murmurs, but now they were unmistakable whispers.

Sure, she was turning into a cat, bit by bit, but only her feet had turned so far. Nothing to be alarmed about, right?

"Is this what it's like to be Wryonin, all the time?" She wondered. She said it out loud, but this time, she didn't hear her own voice. She got up and stomped around the workshop. No noise. She took her screwdriver and tapped it on the counter. No noise. She picked up the frozen wolf foot, and smashed it with a hammer. No noise. She picked up an ice shard and threw it at the door. It made a small *PIP* when it hit, and a small *PAT* when it fell to the floor.

She sat down and unlatched the boots. Immediately the world fell silent, and she could hear her own breathing again.

"You give super hearing and silent stepping! That's wonderful!" Ersatzica slipped the boots off. "You have such an amazing effect. Whoever gets you is going to really enjoy... uh..."

The orange fur crept up her thighs. It was almost to her waist.

"Oh, and you also turn wolves into cats?" She brushed the transition line with her paw, as if she was pulling a skirt down. "You have more effects than most. You really are quite special." She whimpered. The orange fur didn't stop advancing. "But you can stop now. I took you off, that means you have to stop effecting me."

Ersatzica jumped off her stool and walked away from the boots. The orange fur kept advancing. "This isn't right. This isn't right." She insisted.

The boots gave off warm, positive vibes. They offered her a consoling, welcoming hug.

"No no no no no." Ersatzica frantically threw open her cupboards. "This can't be happening." She pulled out a lock that was rusted shut and quickly strapped it to her waist. "Help me out here, Ordaent."

A blue shimmer crossed the lock. It seemed to bolt shut tighter than it already was. The strap around Ersatzica's waist tightened like thorny vines.

Still, the orange fur advanced from her legs to her waist, crossing under the strap into her belly and over her scar. In fact, it sped up, reaching her tail and quickly turning it from black to orange, and topping it off with a red tuft.

She grabbed her tail in shock. It was a cat's tail. "I didn't need *this*! I didn't *want* this! I just wanted to fit into the boots!"

Her eyes widened. *Of course! You don't put Ordaent's Lock on the victim of the heirloom, you put it on the heirloom itself! That'll stop its effects!*

She unstrapped herself and strapped the boots together. The boots protested as she strapped them to the lock, and it broke her heart to do so, but she couldn't be a cat. She just couldn't. Usually transformation heirlooms reversed their transformation when taken off or removed, but if this one wasn't going to do that,

she had to take every measure she could to protect herself. Even if that meant making an heirloom unhappy.

Remorsefully, the boots accepted the lock's effects. The blue shimmer on the boots dimmed.

But the transformation didn't slow. In fact, it got more painful. The skin near the base of her tail peeled off, dangling on her back as the transformation continued.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" Ersatzica cried. She unstrapped the lock from the boots, letting the lock slip off her desk and clang onto the floor. The blue shimmer returned to the boots. "Please stop! *Please* just stop!"

AWOOO— She turned her muzzle up to cry for help, but stopped herself. What if she was a cat when help came? How would the others respond? There's no way to know. If they thought she was a cat, they might kill her on the spot. Best to wait it out, and figure it out from there. She put the boots on, and latched them up. Now she could let out all the howls of pain she wanted without attracting unwanted attention.

But it was *painful*. The skin peeling moved up her back, tormenting her sensitive nerves, and pulling at her new orange fur. It wasn't even in a place she could lick easily. She howled silently.

The orange fur advanced down her arms, slightly changing their proportions, and flinging her fingertips back into her fluffy hand paws. She drove her fists into her legs to try and quell the pain in her neck, but instead found a new pain: several sharp knives stabbing her thighs. They were attached to her fingertips. She pulled her hands back, whimpering.

Her old wolf skin hung from the back of her head, as the hairs were pulled out one by one as it peeled itself off her scalp. Then, as if taking off a mask, her face peeled off, starting at her forehead, reaching down around her eye sockets, and down her nose. Her muzzle snapped back into her face, leaving her old skin feeling like a wet rag on her nose. Her new jaw was full of teeth even sharper than before. Finally, with her cheeks peeling off in one last painful burst, she was free of her old wolf skin.

The old wolf skin hung limply on top of her head. She shrieked in disgust as she violently shook to get it off. But her muscles seemed to have forgotten how. She

just awkwardly shook her head back and forth instead. When that didn't work, she gingerly picked up the skin by the nose and flipped it over her head, jumping to the other side of the room as it fell away.

Her heart beat rapidly as she assessed her new condition. Using a mirror, she found that her new face was much smaller, and oranger, with a white muzzle. Her green eyes glowed even in the night's darkness. Red hair flowed from her head to her shoulders, where her orange-striped arms attached. She had white furry gloves, and a strange arrangement of knuckles, with no claws? Ah, there were the claws, just hidden.

The rest of her body was all orange. Surely, there's such a thing as an orange wolf, right? Just because she's smaller than before, orange, and has feet that can fit into a cat's boots, doesn't mean she's a cat, right?

The cat boots around her feet hugged her, comforted her, welcomed her to cathood.

Ersatzica shook her head. *No, this can't be happening. It didn't work! The treacherous lock didn't work! It was supposed to stop the heirloom from working, but it didn't! And these boots! How did they have so many effects?? That's not how heirlooms are supposed to work!*

Ersatzica slumped onto her stool, buried her face in her hands, and cried.

AWOOO! ("Ersatzica!") Mudrich howled from across the town.

Ersatzica looked out the window. It was dark, and that meant curfew, and bedtime. Her eyes widened, and her ears flipped back. She paced around her workshop.

How is she going to go to the barracks like this? As a cat? But how can she *not* go? If she stays, the first place they'll look for her is her workshop. And when they find her and they see that she's a cat, they'll... they'll...

Well, they won't find her. She'll leave. But how? Her workshop is in the middle of town. How could she possibly get out without anyone...

"Ersatzica!" Mudrich opened the workshop door.

Chapter 4 – Nosalen's Foot

Ersatzica quickly hid in a corner and unlatched the boots. "Oh, hi Mudrich!"

"Ersie, is that you?" She sniffed around.

"Yes, of course it is. Why wouldn't—"

"Do you smell a cat?"

"Mudrich, I've been doing nothing all day but working on an heirloom that an old cat *died*."

"Oh... right." Mudrich tapped on the door. "Well, anyway, did you get the boots fixed?"

"In a way..." Ersatzica stared out the window. The guards were posted in their usual positions.

"So?"

"Uh... no, you can't try them out. They're not fixed so that you can use them."

"Mud luck!" Mudrich spat. "Well, anyway, Wryonin says it's time for bed."

"Sure, just let me finish up here."

"Want some help? I can light your lantern for you."

"No!" Ersie threw her screwdriver at Muddy. "I mean, the new heirloom is a bit light sensitive."

"Your voice sounds different."

"It's because of the boots."

"The boots just change your voice?"

"That... and other things."

"Huh, well that's disappointing."

"Yeah, heh, voice changing boots."

"I was hoping for super speed. You know, to go with these super strength cuffs!"

“Yeah, hey Muddy, can you give me some time? I’ll be right over as soon as I’m done with this.”

“Ok, but don’t take too long. Wryonin says he wants to have a word with us about the whole secret room thing.”

“Sure thing. Ok bye.”

“Bye.” Mudrich left.

The hair on the back of Ersatzica’s neck stood on end. She only bought herself a little time. It was only a matter of time before another wolf smelt the cat and came to inspect.

Latching the boots, she rounded up some useful tools into a sack, including her trusty screwdriver, some maintenance supplies, straps, Ordaent’s Lock, and of course, Nosalen’s Foot.

If she couldn’t turn back into a wolf, she would have to go to the cat outpost, and hope for the best. Maybe they would have some idea about how these boots work and how to undo their effects. And to get to the cats, she would have to cross the river. And she’d rather not have to rely on the kindness of a ghost again. Nosalen’s Foot can freeze water, hopefully it’ll be enough to cross a river.

She peeked out her workshop door. There were no guards immediately in her vicinity. She opened the doors and sprinted to the nearest shadow. There were plenty of lanterns throughout the village, but there weren’t enough to cover it all. The way directly to the staircase down to the forest was very well lit, and the staircase was also very well lit. There was no way to get down there without being seen. But without being heard? That was easy, thanks to the boots.

Ersatzica darted around the village, jumping from shadow to shadow, finding opportunities when no one was looking. The silent footsteps meant it remarkably easy to stay hidden. And the enhanced hearing made it easier to tell where everyone was.

Soon the staircase was in sight. Imraen, the guard, stood by it, watching out for anyone coming up. He always very sharp.

Passing hoof steps caught the attention of her ear. It was Nephalie. Deer magic has been known to transform people as well as walls. Maybe she could help her out of this mess.

Ersatzica called out to her, but the boots silenced her. Ersatzica unlatched the boots, and called out, "Nephalie!"

Nephalie's ears turned before her head did. "Ers... atz... ica?"

"Here..." Ersatzica whispered as she hid behind a barrel.

Nephalie sighed. "Did you break another wall?"

"Not this time."

"Good. Good night." Nephalie got up.

Ersatzica pulled her down with her sharp claws.

"Ow."

"Sorry." Ersatzica rubbed the claw marks with her paw pads. "I need your help."

"Can it wait until morning?" Nephalie yawned. "I'm exhausted."

"Not really—"

"Also what did you do to me? I didn't know wolf claws were so sharp. What did you do to your claws?"

"That's the thing. That's it. I need you to turn my claws back into wolf claws."

"What did you mess them up or something?"

"Well, I found a new heirloom, and now my claws are... cat claws." Ersatzica whispered as quietly as she could.

"Uh huh." Nephalie nodded. "Nope! You'd have to talk to my aunt for that, and she's not been around for who knows how long."

"Why can't you do it?"

"You think I can do that? I only know how to transform bricks into bigger bricks."

"But isn't it the same—"

“No! Also why are you hiding behind those barrels?”

“Can’t you at least try?”

“No, I’m tired. What are you hiding?”

“Nephalie...”

“Never mind, I don’t want to know.” She walked off.

“Nephalie!”

“See you tomorrow, Ersatzica. I hope you figure out your cat problem.”

Shoot. That was the best chance she had of a quick fix. Apparently even deer magic has its limits. She strapped the boots back up.

“Is something wrong, Nephalie?” Imraen asked.

“I’m off work hours and Ersatzica is requesting immediate service. For something I don’t even do.”

“Well, she is daughter of the chief, so you have to obey her orders.”

“I’m tired, wolf. Can’t I just go to bed?”

Imraen left his post! Now was the perfect chance to run down the stairs.

“No, deer. You get over there and fulfill your orders.” Imraen grabbed Nephalie by the scruff of the neck.

Ersatzica dashed down the stairs, just out of view of the plateau.

“Let go of me!”

Ersatzica flinched. Nephalie didn’t deserve this. She unlatched the boots. “Hey! Imraen! Let Nephalie go!”

“Ersatzica?” Imraen turned around, but didn’t drop Nephalie. “But she disobeyed an order.”

“I dismissed her. Let her go!”

“But—”

"That's an order!" Ersatzica stood straight up, and stared daggers into Imraen's eyes.

"Ca—" Imraen stared back at Ersatzica, mouth agape. "Caaaat!" He dropped Nephalie. Drawing his sword and charged at Ersatzica. "Die!"

"No, it's me! Stop!" Ersatzica quickly relatched the boots. She ran down the stairs as fast as she could, careful not to trip over any loose pebbles.

AWOOOOOO! "Enemy!"

AWOOOOOO! AWOOOOOO! AWOO! AWOOOOOO! The whole town erupted into a howl.

"She's still not back yet?" Wryonin grumbled.

"She said she'd just be a few minutes." Mudrich played with her cuffs, swinging her legs off her bed.

Lemilay slipped into bed. "She's probably roped into one of her projects again. Just let her sleep in her workshop. Let's get to bed."

AWOOOOOO! "Enemy!"

AWOOOO! Wryonin replied. "Let's go, girls."

Mudrich jumped out of bed and grabbed her hammer in one smooth motion, beating Wryonin out the door.

Wryonin calmly took his utility belt off the wall and strapped it on himself. He took out his slingshot and send a pebble bouncing off the bedframe right next to Lemilay's head. "Come on."

Lemilay growled, but got up anyway. She stood behind Wryonin, grabbing him by the arm.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm going to need a guide. Be my eyes."

Wryonin rolled his. "Don't slow me down. First we go find Ersie."

They went straight to Ersie's workshop, where they found a dark scene. The door had been left wide open. Several tools and supplies were scattered everywhere, even more than was normal. And worst of all, there was a wolf skin lying on the ground, with the exact fur pattern of their sister.

Lemilay, eyes normal gasped in shock, and immediately left the scene.

Wryonin knelt down and picked it up, sniffing it with his scarred nose. It smelled vaguely of cat. It was very soft in his hands, something he had never realized about Ersatzica's fur before. Strangely, there was no blood.

"Wryonin? Where's Ersie?" Mudrich entered.

"Mudrich, you didn't fix the wall, did you?"

"Well..."

"Lemilay saw it. What did you find?" Wryonin growled, baring his teeth.

"Ok, ok!" Mudrich dropped her hammer. "We found this old pair of boots. Ersie was working on them today and—"

"Ok. And where are the boots now?"

"I don't know, Ersie must have—"

"Ok. Where is she?"

"I don't—"

"Can you smell her?"

"All I smell is a cat."

"Good enough. Let's go. Lemilay!"

"I'm not! I'm not doing it!" Lemilay cried.

"I'm not asking you to. Can you track a cat?"

Lemilay's eyes rolled into her head and her bald spot glowed. "It went this way."

Ersatzica ran down the stone stairs. Imraen, the wolf guard, chased close behind. Ersatzica was never the fastest wolf, and thus as a cat, she was also slow. But she had a head start.

Another wolf, Byporf, was running up, sword drawn. There was nowhere for Ersatzica to run now, except down. She got to the edge of the staircase where it made a 180 degree zigzag turn and jumped down the side. She intended to grab the cliff face on the opposite side, but it was too slippery. She fell off the wall. She landed on her feet, the boots sliding forward, pushing her onto all fours. Breathing heavily, she assessed her situation. Nothing broken, not even a bruise. All her things were intact, too.

Above, both Imraen and Byporf were looking down on her. Her pleading eyes were met with hateful looks. Imraen spat on her.

Ersatzica ran through the forest. The wolf guards would have to take the long, zigzag way down the stone railingless stairs. They could sniff her, but she'd have enough time to run away before they caught up. As long the night guards weren't stationed at the river. They could surround her and take her out. So far, all the howling was behind her. It was getting closer and closer, but the river was just within reach.

First one drop, then another. Then a whole downpour. The sky aided in her escape. The rain soaked her fur and cooled her cat skin. As she shivered in the pouring rain, she smiled, thanking Alpha for his help. Now the wolves wouldn't be able to track her scent.

Ersatzica got to the river. The moon illuminated it through the storm clouds. The river roared, as if daring Ersatzica to cross it. Last time she swam through it, it was calmer and she was upstream, and it still almost carried her over the waterfall. Crossing would be no easy task.

But this time, she was prepared. She reached into her sack and pulled out Nosalen's Foot. It was cold to the touch, and covered in ice. Rain had gotten in and covered it. Ersatzica held it up to the moonlight. Rain drops bounced off it and trickled down her arms. It wasn't freezing all the rain.

"It break." Ersatzica could hear the chef's voice in her head as she searched through her bag.

Everything was wet and soaked, and she couldn't find any shelter to help her stay dry. She pulled out her trusty hammer, and pounded the foot until the broke off. But every time she broke off some ice, rain pelted the foot and froze back onto it. She couldn't keep the foot thawed in the heavy rain. And without the foot to freeze the river, she didn't dare try crossing the river.

She could search for a better place to cross, but she knew the river was wide all along the bank. And the wolves were deep in the woods looking for her. She would risk them finding her.

She tried to make a make-umbrella for the foot out of straps and fabric, but it soaked up the rain and dripped onto the foot. She also wasn't able to hold the tarp with one hand, which made holding the tarp and breaking the ice impossible.

Out in the woods, several torch lights shown through the branches. She would be having company soon if she wasn't careful. They were like tiny menacing eyes of a creature eager to kill her for killing's sake, just meandering out in the forest as if blind.

But among them, one focused, seeking light shown. It was white and circular, and it didn't bother searching every nook and cranny on the way. It knew exactly where she was, and it was coming for her. Lemilay!

Ersatzica scrapped the tarp idea and shoved her supplies back into her sack, accidentally wrapping the hammer up in the tarp. She pulled out Ordaent's Lock, and applied it to the foot.

The white light got closer. Ersatzica moved out of the moonlight to work in the shade of a tree.

Without her hammer, resorted to pounding the foot against a tree. It made no sound as it hit, although ice still shattered off it. With the lock right up against it, the foot didn't freeze the ice. Instead, it soaked it in.

The light was close enough now that Ersatzica could make out her sister's beady little eyes rolled back into her head, and could hear her pants and footsteps as she ran. She wasn't alone, either.

She hit the lock and foot against a tree one last time before holding out the pair to the river. She let the lock up, and the foot froze the river beneath it.

The water froze instantly, despite being several feet away from the foot. However, the ice still flowed downstream. Walking across wasn't going to be easy with such a turbulent river.

"Hold it right there!" Wryonin yelled. "Don't go anywhere!"

A rock flew by Ersatzica, grazing her stomach fur.

Lemilay was closing in, her bald spot almost blinding Ersatzica in the cold, wet darkness.

Ersatzica didn't take any chances. She struck the foot with the lock, then palmed the foot to the river. And she jumped.

She landed on a solid sheet of ice. The ice swayed as she landed, knocking her off balance. She grabbed the edge of the ice with one hand, and with the other, she swung the foot around, increasing the amount of surface area of ice she had to work with. Eventually the ice expanded enough to give her a stable boat of ice.

Back on the shore, Lemilay's light glared at her, accompanied by a shadow with a slingshot.

PING!

A rock hit her ice raft, cracking it.

PING!

Another rock.

PING! PING! PING!

The raft cracked under the attacks. It would've made such an interesting noise if it wasn't forced to be silent.

The heavy rain pelted the raft. Ever the resourceful one, Ersatzica wiped water over the cracks and exposed it to the foot, healing the cracks. Her raft was intact.

The river roared, but the waterfall roared louder. The river was illuminated by the moon, but then it just ended, engulfed by a black void.

Ersatzica got up to run across the river, but found that her left boot was stuck in the ice, frozen solid. She was part of the raft.

PING!

Ersatzica got an idea. She's never known Wryonin to miss a shot, especially when it counts. And she's never known him to show mercy to a cat. That means he's been missing his shots. He also has really good hearing.

Ersatzica unlatched the boots. The roaring river roared slightly less loudly, and her breathing was rapid, and faster than her audible heart beat. She banged the lock against the ice. The ice cracked a little, but it was thicker than the ice that collected on the foot. That, and the awkward angle made it hard to hit with enough force to break the ice.

PING!

The rock landed exactly where Ersatzica had been tapping.

PING!

With that last hit, the ice broke and Ersatzica was free.

PING!

This time, the rock hit the boots, denting one of the latches.

Ersatzica quickly snapped the latches shut. The last latch wouldn't shut properly. But still, she was quiet and the world was loud.

PING!

The next rock whizzed by her face.

Foot in hand, she ran to the edge of the raft, running away from the waterfall. But she was closing in on it faster than she could run away from it. So she ran to the other side of the river, allowing herself to get dragged ever closer to the waterfall.

PING!

The raft was almost as wide as the river now. She was close to the other side. The river froze into sheets of ice as she ran.

PING!

Now she was just a few steps away from the other side. She took another step, but the ice cracked and flipped, and her feet slipped out from under her.

The head of the raft toppled over the waterfall, cracking and crumbling as the support underneath it vanished. Her piece of it, still connected, swayed and threw her off balance.

She grabbed on to the edge, but it was no use. She was going over the waterfall.

The moment it happened, it was like she was suspended in midair. Then the wind rushed up at her face as she accelerated downward, the hairs on the back of her neck pricking, all her fur standing on end. She stood like a bullet, diving feet first into the river below. The ice sheets all toppled down below her. She held out the foot to her feet, screaming at the top of her lungs, but silently.

Ice fragments flew everywhere, mixed with the fog from the rain and flowing water.

The ice beneath froze solid, and she landed feet first onto it. The boots slid forward on their plates, forcing her to her knees. She landed on a newly created piece of ice, from a deadly drop, and didn't even have a scratch.

The moon was bright, still shining down on the river through the storm clouds. Ersatzica was trapped in a narrow corridor with steep rock walls on both sides. It was going to be hard to get out of this one, and she didn't want to go all the way down the river. She had no idea where it led. She was trapped.

Just around the bend, the moon revealed a log trapped in the river too. It was stationary, somehow lodged in place. She crawled over to it, expanding her new ice raft as she did. The ice formed around the log, staying in place. She expanded the raft a little more, widening it to the whole width of the river, which was only about twice her height.

She held onto the log for dear life, waiting out the storm.

The sounds of the wolves were drowned out by the rain, and she felt safe from the immediate threat that they posed. Not even Lemilay was likely to find her here. No one was.

She unlatched the boots.

"I'm... I'm alive!" She yelled. "I'm here! I'm here!" She raised her chin to the moon. "AWOOO!" She gagged. Her throat did not want to cooperate. She was drenched and tired, and alone.

The moon shone warmly through the rain clouds, illuminating down on Ersatzica. She looked up to it. "Alpha, Wolf God of the Loyal Moon, please help me."

Chapter 5 – Yotleph's Skull

Ersatzica slept under the stars that night in the river.

In the morning, when she woke up, she was shivering and sneezing. Her nose was dripping and she was miserable.

She patted herself down. Her fur was intact, her belly scar was still there, her tail was complete with the red tuft, and all four limbs and both ears were present. Peeking into her sack, she confirmed all her belongings were still there.

Nosalen's foot was covered in ice, several layers below the surface of the ice raft. The lock was also frozen into the raft. She must've dropped them while she was asleep.

The boots were again stuck into the ice, but this time it wasn't so bad. She wiggled them around a little and they popped right out.

The sun was shining, beaming directly into the river canyon she found herself in, but the ice raft showed no signs of melting.

"How am I going to get out of this one?"

The sides of the canyon were too steep and smooth to climb. The river flowed through the mountains, twisting and winding, taking a path that was totally unknown to her. The heirloom she relied on was stuck in the ice.

She didn't really have any good options.

She took her trusty screwdriver out and scraped at the ice, trying to get the foot out. Pounding the ice to crack it risks breaking the whole raft, and trying to melt the ice away would prove fruitless against the foot's power.

After about an hour of scraping and blowing the ice scrapes, she realized she hadn't packed any food. Her stomach grumbled as she picked away at the ice.

Finally she was able to scrape the foot out of the ice. She held it above the river and it worked like normal, freezing the water under it instantly.

She stood up, stabilizing herself with the tree. Then with all her belongings, she held the foot out in front of her and walked upstream to the waterfall.

As she approached, the mist kicked up from the waterfall crystalized in the air, falling like snow onto the ice road she made. She held the foot out to the falls itself, and it instantly froze around the foot.

However, it didn't do quite as she imagined. The frozen water fell from the air as a solid sheet, splashing into the river below her feet. The water flowing from above was still liquid, and it created a steady flow of small ice sheets.

Ersatzica's eyes lit up. She kept the foot there, in a place where it couldn't easily be drenched by the falls, and waited for the sheets to come. Upon touching the water, the sheets didn't instantly break or melt, so they just kept piling up.

But to her dismay, she realized that they were being washed away under her ice road.

So she froze the area under the falls to make a floor for the ice sheets. This resulted in the water flowing over her road, freezing her boots to it.

"Well, at least I'm not slipping away."

Now that she had a base for the new water to freeze to, she could start working on a structure to get back up. She figured out that freezing to the canyon wall made it sturdier, so she froze it up against the cat side of the river. She climbed up the handlebars of ice all the way to the top.

The foot was getting very warm by the time she got there.

But at the top, she found that the bank was a bit taller than the current river level, and that trying to freeze the river water in this position didn't help much. She was stuck.

"Take my hand, Your Majesty." A clawed paw hand invited her to the cat side of the river.

She took it, and it pulled her up. She clambered up onto the bank on all fours, trying to shake the water off. But her usual post-bathtime instinct didn't kick in. Instead, she just had to soak it in.

She looked up at her savior. He was a black and white cat in a red-feathered green hat.

"You're the ghost!" Ersatzica screamed.

"Hey calm down," the cat said, raising an arm over his face. "I didn't ghost you, Your Majesty. I was just getting in out of the rain. Your Majesty."

"Huh?"

"I just left to get an umbrella, Your Majesty. I'm so so sorry you ended up down there, Your Majesty."

Ersatzica stared at him. She poked him. He was real.

"But hey, it looks like you got a lot of good loot, Your Majesty?" The cat knelt down to look at the boots. "Some shiny boots, a creepy cooked foot, and a sack of goodies."

"It's all I could take with me."

"Well, you did a fine job." He grimaced. "Please don't hurt me, Your Majesty."

Ersatzica stared at him. She didn't know what to expect meeting a cat for the first time, but it wasn't this. He wasn't at all scary or menacing like she thought he would be.

Her stomach growled.

"Oh! You must be hungry! Come! I've caught some fish! ...Your Majesty." He walked off along the bank and then suddenly disappeared.

Ersatzica knelt there, bewildered.

He reappeared again. "Aren't you coming?"

Ersatzica nodded, got up, and walked over to him.

He disappeared again. Just walked away, and gone. She followed after him, and found that he magically reappeared, sitting on a blanket with a basket full of fish. Next to him was a wolf jaw bone with most of its teeth missing. A blue streak shined across it.

Ersatzica took a step back. All of it disappeared. In its place was a patch of dirt and some grass. She stepped forward again. It all came back. She took out her screwdriver, and poked everything. It was all real. She stepped in and out a few more times.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," the cat said. "I know this isn't your favorite fish, Your Majesty, and you prefer them cooked, but this was all I caught today so far." He held out a fish, letting it hang limply from his hand. "Your Majesty."

Ersatzica looked at it for a second. Its bulbous eyes protruded from its oily scales and its wide-open mouth pleaded for it to be over. She snatched it from his hand and took a big, deep bite into its side.

The cat flinched away. "I'm glad you like it."

Ersatzica gobbled it all up, and licked the bits off the bones.

"Still hungry?" He gave her another one.

She gobbled that one up, too.

After she ate that one, she licked her lips, and let a hearty burp escape. Then she hugged him. "Oh, thank you so much!"

The cat winced at first, but then patted her on the back. "Heh, heh. I'm glad you liked it. Your Majesty."

Ersatzica sat back down on the blanket. She stared at him, taking in all of his cat features. Is this more or less what she looks like now too?

"Wow, I can't believe you actually hugged me. I didn't think you would ever—" He put his arms up over his head, as if to guard against something.

Ersatzica sat and watched.

He peeked his eyes open, and upon seeing her calm expression, he relaxed his guard. "You're not going to...?"

"Going to what?"

He tilted his head. "Did you, hit your head or something?"

Ersatzica held her head. "No, I don't think so." She sneezed.

"Oh, you might have a cold. Here, get up." He moved the jaw bone off the blanket. He picked up the basket by the handle, but it was broken and he immediately remembered to pick it up with both hands from the bottom. He moved it next to the jawbone in the grass. Now with the blanket vacant, he wrapped her in the blanket. "Feeling better?"

"A little bit."

"So, how did you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Get away with all this stuff?"

"Well, I just packed my sack here and grabbed what I could. I didn't have much time or I would've taken more with me."

"Did you snag anything for me?" He raised his arm to guard again. And again, when she didn't react, he relaxed.

"Hmm..." she rummaged through her sack. "How would you like a strap?"

"A strap, Your Majesty?"

Ersatzica crawled out of the blanket and pulled out a strip of leather, two nails, and her faithful hammer. She wrapped the leather around the break in the basket handle and tapped the nails into the handle with the hammer. Then she filed down the points of the nails sticking through with the file part of her screwdriver, to keep it from pricking those who pick it up.

Then she lifted the basket up by the handle to demonstrate. Despite the weight in the basket, the handle didn't break.

"You fixed it!" The cat proclaimed. He grabbed the handle and lifted it up and down several times. "Thank you so much!" He hugged her, but then immediately disengaged and flinched again.

Ersatzica held out her arms. He embraced her once again.

"So, you like hugs now, Your Majesty?"

"I guess... I do now, yeah." Ersatzica couldn't remember the last time she had hugged anyone. Then again, she couldn't remember the last time anyone had saved her life twice in the same week before, either.

"Your majesty?"

"Yes?"

"Is it ok if I just call you Majestra?"

Ersatzica shrugged. "Sure, why not?"

The cat breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank you, Your Majest—uh, Majestra. I shall call you Majestra now."

"And I shall call you... Fisher."

"Fisher?" He smiled. "I like it. But..."

"So, Fisher, what are you doing on the river?"

"Waiting for you, of course."

"Really?"

"Yes—are you sure you didn't hit your head?"

"It's been a long night in that cold river. Maybe I am a little ill."

"Well let's get you back to the outpost." Fisher helped "Majestra" to her feet.

Still wrapped in the blanket, she got up and walked with him. Fisher offered to carry her sack of supplies, which she accepted.

When they entered the outpost, Fisher yelled out, "Hey! Your Majesty, Majestra is back!"

The outpost was a temporary settlement made of canvas tents, with a few permanent stone structures. The stone had the classic sign of deer magic, tear marks that streaked upwards, as if it was made of hardened taffy.

When Fisher got the attention of the outpost, the cats mulling about all stood and begrudgingly clapped, staring straight at Majestra. It was very awkward and forced.

An older cat emerged from a canvas tent. She wore various pieces of armor.

"Majestra! My dear! Where is your armor?"

"She spent the night in the river, General Seamtrust." Fisher explained.

"Well why did it take you so long to get out? You're all wet." She put a hand on her shoulder and led her into the canvas tent.

"General Seamtrust?" Ersatzica looked up at her.

"Majestra, dear," General Seamtrust cooed once inside. "Why so formal with your auntie? What happened? Was that cat bothering you again? Does he need more punishment?"

Ersatzica's eyes widened, then she nodded slowly, while staring into the space behind General Seamtrust. "No, ...auntie."

"Well what then? Speak, child."

"Like he said, I spent the night in the river. I barely escaped the wolves."

"Well, it's good to see you survived. Now tell me the mission report."

"Mission report?"

"Yes, are you daft? Tell me what happened on the mission."

"Well, I lost all my things, but I managed to snag these items." Ersatzica pointed out the items: the boots, the paw, and the contents of the sack.

"What about the tooth I lent you?"

Ersatzica shook her head.

"And the..."

“Nope.”

“Well!” She put her hands on her hips. “This just won’t do! You must step up your game, your little majesty, if you want to take command of the town. This is really unbecoming of a lead—”

“I’ll make it up to you.”

“You better! Are you still able to stick to the schedule?”

“Yes.”

“So you’ll be ready for the mission in 2 days?”

“Yes.”

“Come here.” She grabbed Ersatzica’s face in her palms and directed her to look up at her, then brought her in close for a hug. “Make me and your mama proud, little majesty.”

“Yes, auntie.”

Ersatzica stepped out of the canvas tent with her stuff. She looked bewildered out at the outpost, not sure where to go.

“Majestra! Are you ok?” Fisher was waiting outside.

“Yes, yes, I’m quite fine.” Ersatzica raised her head high, mimicking Auntie Seamtrust. She eyed Fisher out of the corner of her eye; he was flinching. She dropped the act. “I’m... not feeling well. Can you take me to the medic bear?”

Fisher relaxed. “Medic bear? I don’t know what that is, but I can take you to the doctor.”

Fisher took Ersatzica to the medic tent. The medic cat checked her out and said she was fine. They gave her some headache medicine that she hesitantly accepted.

As the day wore on, it was time to go to bed. Ersatzica asked Fisher to escort her to her barracks, and he escorted her to her sleeping room: one of the few stone structures in the outpost. Two guards were stationed just outside. Ersatzica said good night to Fisher.

[TODO: Fill in this in more detail]

Then the next morning, Ersatzica followed Fisher to the beach.

"Your next mission isn't until tomorrow. Are you sure?"

"I want to... observe the wolf side from this side."

"Ok."

They sat down on the blanket. Fisher set the skull, basket, and fishing equipment on it.

"So, Fisher," Ersatzica said.

"Yes, Majestra?"

"Have you tried howling? When you make announcements? I see your people yelling a lot to get attention."

"Howling? You mean like wolves?"

"Oh, right." Ersatzica looked down. "Well then how do you pray to Alpha?"

"Alpha... the wolf god?"

"Yeah."

"We... don't. *You* don't, do you?"

Ersatzica looked away. "Uh, no, of course not." She played with her claws, flipping them in and out. "I mean, I have to study the wolves for my mission."

"Right."

After a while of talking on the beach, a familiar face appeared. A white wolf came up and sat on a boulder on the other side of the river. She looked down into the water.

Ersatzica jumped up, waving her arms.

"You know she can't see you, right?" Fisher whispered.

"Oh, right." Ersatzica took a deep breath in, then yelled, "Mudrich!"

Fisher jumped up and put a hand over her mouth. "Shh!"

Mudrich looked around. She stood up, turning around, trying to find the source of the noise.

"Don't give away our position! It'll compromise our mission."

"Oh, right."

AWOOOOO! Mudrich let out a baleful cry. It was the special howl they use when they try to find each other.

Ersatzica wanted so desperately to respond, but not only could she physically not, she also couldn't risk putting herself in danger. Her arms drifted down slowly and her excitement waned.

Fisher shushed her, covering her mouth with his hand.

Finally, after a few minutes, Mudrich left.

Fisher relaxed. "What was that about?"

"Uh, nothing."

"How did you know that wolf's name?"

"Like I said, I've been studying them." Ersatzica searched for a new topic. "So for tomorrow's mission. Are you coming with me?"

"Into the wolf village? No way." Fisher sat down and cast a fishing line into the river. "That's your job."

"Then can I take this skull with me?"

"No. Don't you have your necklace?"

"What neck... Oh, no, I lost it."

"Ah, the storm, yes." Fisher nodded. "That's too bad."

"What did my necklace do? I mean, which necklace are you talking about?"

"You had more than one? I only seem to remember you having the one, you know with the tooth from the skull attached to it."

"The tooth was removed from the skull?" Ersatzica whispered to herself.

"Yes. Are you feeling ok, Majestra?"

"Uh, yes. Of course I am."

"So are you feeling up to exploring the forest?"

"Sure!"

"Really? I thought you hated the forest."

"...it's not so bad, now that I've spent some time in it."

"Sweet!"

"Wait, don't you have to stand guard here?"

"Wow, you really don't remember much, huh?" Fisher got up and held out a hand to Ersatzica. "My main job is to bring you back across the river after your mission. But since you're here, I also have the day off!"

"Ok, where to first?"

"This way, Majestra." Fisher took her by the hand and led her through the woods. They came to a hole in the side of a small hill.

"What's this?"

"You wanted to know about the tooth necklace?" Fisher reached in and scooped up some dirt from inside the hole. "This is where it was found."

There once was an old and craggy monster who blocked the cat's advance into the valley for decades. It was a giant wolf, a terror to all cats. It had massive fangs and claws, and the more cats you threw at it, the easier time it had killing them all. Occasionally, it would disappear for days at a time, and the cats would advance into the valley. Those that did, never returned. When the wolf reappeared, it would be carrying a sack full of skulls, and leave it laying in the open for the cats to collect. It was known as the Phantom Guard, for the ghostly white fur pattern on its face, that looked like a skull, and the three stripes on its belly, that looked like a ribcage.

"Yotleph!" Ersatzica interrupted.

"Yotleph?" Fisher quizzed.

“Yeah, that’s his name!”

“Ah, ok, Yotleph.”

The Yotleph, as it was named, was a fierce wolf monster that terrorized the cats for years. Until one day, it vanished, like it had several times before. The cats waited a week, a month. No sign of the Phanto—The Yotleph. It was months before a single cat was brave enough to step foot into the valley.

When they finally did, they found the dead, headless bodies of their fallen cat comrades, littered around the forest. They tried to collect them all, but every single body was... trapped! I’m talking pit traps, hidden spikes, vine snares, all of it. A lot more cats were lost to the recovery project.

“And then Yotleph comes out and kills them all!” Ersatzica said gleefully.

Fisher flinched.

“No, no, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you.” Ersatzica rubbed Fisher’s shoulder.
“Continue please.”

Fisher brought his arms back down.

The Yotleph, in fact, did not jump out and kill them all, because it was also dead. No one knows how or when it died, but when its bones were discovered, the cats that found them simply vanished.

Ersatzica gasped, covering her mouth.

All that was found was its skull, eerily similar to the markings on its face. But some still say, that to this day, it haunts these very woods, waiting to behead the next cat that steps foot—

“Yotleph is dead?”

“Well, so they say, but you never really know about ghosts...”

Ersatzica began to tear up.

“Ah, don’t cry. It’s ok. I’m sure these are just tales they tell to scare the recruits.”
Fisher hugged Ersatzica.

"I'm... I'm not scared." Ersatzica wiped a tear from her eye. "I've heard a different story about Yotleph.

Yotleph was my uncle—I mean, he was an uncle. He had a family, a wolf pack, and he was an uncle to a litter of wolf cubs. He was big and strong, courageous, and loyal, like Alpha. He was the strongest and most experienced of his brothers, so he left the village to defend it the only way he knew how. He would be gone for weeks at a time, fighting off the bad cats. But he was also compassionate. Every month, he would return with shiny new gifts, heirlooms from the cats he had protected us—I mean the wolf village—from. My favorite was a screwdriver with multiple functions. It wasn't an heirloom, per se, but it was my favorite tool—is my favorite tool.

"Your favorite tool?"

"Yeah." Ersatzica reached in and pulled out her screwdriver, handing it to Fisher to examine.

"That is a very nice tool. This is what you used to fix my basket?"

"Yes."

Fisher thought for a moment. Then his eyes went wide. He looked Ersatzica up and down. "You're... you're not..." He gasped and backed away from her. "You're not Majestra!"

Ersatzica dashed to him and covered his mouth. "Shhh!" She looked around to make sure no one else was listening. "Ok, I'm not Majestra. I'm a wolf in a cat's body."

Fisher tore her hand off his face and jumped to his feet. "What—what are you doing here?"

"Calm down, Fisher. I'm not here to hurt you." She reached out to him, but he flinched, so she backed away.

"You're not?"

"No! Look, have I been mean to you at all since I got here?"

Fisher lowered his arms. "Well, you didn't scratch me, you didn't punch me, and you didn't kick me in the groin."

"No, and I'm not going to."

"So you're not here to bury me like the Phantom Guard?"

"No. And actually, I need your help."

"Ok, as long as you don't promise to hurt me."

"I promise."

"Wait, I meant promise to not hurt me."

Ersatzica clasped her hands around his and looked him in the eye. "I promise I won't hurt you."

Fisher breathed a sigh of relief. "So, what do you need?"

"I'm trapped in this cat body."

"How?"

Ersatzica tapped the boots she was wearing.

"Ah." He crouched down to examine them more closely. "They're in pristine condition. The owner must have only recently passed."

Ersatzica blushed. "Actually, I found them in an abandoned room on a poor old soul who had been forgotten for ages. I polished them up myself."

"You did this? Wow!" Fisher looked at his reflection in the boots. "I don't think I've heard of these boots before. What are they called?"

"The boots."

"Yes, but *whose*?"

"I'm... not sure."

"May I test them?" Fisher began to take them off her feet.

"No no!" Ersatzica brushed him off. "I'm not taking them off."

"But if they turned you into a cat, then logically taking them off would turn you back into a wolf."

"I tried that, it didn't work."

"Huh." Fisher pondered. "Well there are other heirlooms that turn cats into wolves." He pulled a book out of his basket. Its pages were filled with sketches of various items, their names, and what was known about them. Fisher flipped to a particular page. "The Wolf Skin of Monassus!" He proclaimed, presenting the book to Ersatzica. "This heirloom would turn you into a wolf. You'd have to wear it the whole time though. Sounds uncomfortable. Maybe even itchy."

"Do you know where to find it?"

"It hasn't been seen for over 15 years." Fisher shook his head. "You'd have better luck asking the wolves."

AWOOOOOOO! ("Here!")

"Wolves!" Fisher jumped behind a bush.

Ersatzica calmed down Fisher, and together they followed the sound of the howl. Peeking through a bush on the river bank, they spotted three wolves on the other side of the river. "Shhhh."

Ersatzica latched up both boots. The world came pouring into her ears. The wind whistled, the trees groaned, and the river roared. But just beyond, she could hear voices.

"Ersatzica! ErSAAAATZica!"

AWOOOOOOO! ("Here!")

It was her siblings!

Mudrich mournfully held up a wolf skin in the air as she howled as loud as her heart would allow.

"That looks like the Wolf Skin of Monassus." Fisher said excitedly. "I guess you really would have better luck asking the wolves!"

"Those are my siblings!" Then she turned to Fisher and hugged him. "Thank you Fisher! I couldn't have survived without you."

"You're welcome."

She stood up, preparing to leave.

But he grabbed her hand.

“Don’t go.”

“What? Let go of me!”

“You’re the only one who’s ever been nice to me. If you become a wolf again, you’ll be my enemy. I don’t want to lose my only friend.”

“Don’t worry, Fisher. If we ever become enemies, remember, I made a promise. I won’t hurt you.”

“Yeah.” He hung his head. “Ok.” As he let go, he added, “Can I at least know your name?”

“Ersatzica.”

“It was nice knowing you, Ersatzica. We should spend time together again.”

Ersatzica smiled. “Sure.”

She waved down Wryonin, Mudrich, and Lemilay. Wryonin drew his slingshot, but Lemilay pushed it down. Mudrich cried howls of joy. Mudrich rowed a boat across to pick up Ersatzica, with Wryonin standing by, slingshot drawn.

When Mudrich rowed ashore, she stood and paused. “Ersatzica?”

“Oh, Muddy! It’s you!” She tried to hug her wolf sister, but Mudrich pushed her back.

“Hold on, hold on. I have to first ask you a few questions.”

“Huh?”

“Where did you find the boots?”

“In the wall behind our bedroom.”

“Who won the hole digging contest when we were kids?”

“You did, of course.”

“And how did you get your scar?”

"I was born with it."

"Oh, Ersie! It is you!" Muddy hugged her back, but just for a moment. "Ah! Cat! Ew! Here, take this."

Ersatzica held the wolf skin up to the sun. A blue shimmer streaked across it, welcoming her back. "The Wolf Skin of Monassus." She put it on, snuggling her head into the "hood" first. It immediately took effect, changing her cat features into wolf from the head down. She slipped the boots off just in time before the changes got to her feet. She hugged herself. "Thank you, Monassus."

Mudrich rowed her across the river. She was once again reunited with all of her siblings.

"Wryonin!" Ersatzica opened her arms wide.

"How could you do this?" Wryonin scowled.

"What?"

"Never mind. Let's get home before the cats spot us." He walked into the woods, and they followed.

"I never thought I'd be so happy to see you, Lemilay." Ersatzica went in to hug her sister.

Lemilay pushed her back. "Your little stunt cost me three weeks of extra work. I hope you're happy." She walked off.

Ersatzica hung her head.

She wasn't able to contemplate long, as Mudrich lifted her up in a big squueeze hug. "I'm soooooo glad you're back!"

She gasped. "Good... to be... back..."

As soon as Mudrich put her down, they both followed Wryonin and Lemilay.

"I was wondering where you were, why I smelled cat, and why would you just jump into the river. I'm so glad you decided not to defect to the cat kingdom!"

"Defect? What are you talking about?"

“Lemilay saw you turn into a cat and walk off with a bunch of heirlooms. Sounded like you were giving our stuff away to the enemy.”

“Oh, she saw that huh? I was hoping it was too dark.”

“So why did you run off?”

“I suddenly turned into a cat, and I didn’t know what to do.”

“Well you should’ve at least told me.”

“You’re right. I should’ve. I’ll do that next time.”

“Promise?”

“I promise.”

“Good. But hopefully there won’t be a next time.”

“I hope so too.” Ersatzica said, as she turned her head back to steal a quick glance. Fisher was waiting on the shore, waving goodbye. She smiled back, wagging her tail.

Chapter 6 – The Spyglass of Sureye

“Mudrich, don’t forget to take a bath when we get home.” Lemilay said.

“Me?” Mudrich sniffed Ersatzica then plugged her nose. “Ersatzica is the one who stinks! You smell like a cat!”

“I do?”

Wryonin sniffed her. He shrugged.

Lemilay took a little whiff from far away and instantly covered her nose. “Yeah, you do.”

“Ok, I’ll take a bath when we get home.” Ersatzica sheepishly looked down.

“Yay! No bath for me!” Mudrich did a cartwheel, landing face first into a mud puddle. She waved her arms and legs, wagging her tail, doing mud angels. “Maybe you should smell like cat more often, Ersie.”

"If you track any of that into the barracks, you're sleeping outside." Lemilay snapped.

"Fine." Mudrich hugged a tree, rubbing the mud off onto it, and wiped her paws on grass as they walked.

When they got back home, Ersatzica went to the bath house. Lots of other wolves were there for their weekly bath. If they were lucky, they got to take a shower in one of the few standing spots in the rain room. Being the daughter of the chief, the other wolves gladly let her take their place in line.

A long, stone trough ran from a nearby waterfall into the roof of the rain room, which was halfway into the ground to ensure proper water flow. The water flowed from the trough onto the roof, which had small holes specifically designed to pour onto individuals below.

Inside, Ersatzica ran into a familiar teenage deer.

"Oh, hi Nephalie."

"Oh, it's you again." Nephalie turned her back and put her tail down. "Are you still a cat or do you just smell like one?"

"Are you ok?"

"Of course I am." She stomped a hoof as she scrubbed her fur.

"I mean, they didn't hurt you, did they."

"What does it look like?" Nephalie showed her front enough to make a bruise on her side visible.

"I'm sorry, Nephalie, I didn't mean for—"

"I don't want to hear it. I'm not interested in fixing whatever it is you want me to fix."

"No, it's not that, it's—"

"What? You're genuinely concerned for my well being? Give me a break."

The other wolves were too busy making full use of their limited shower time to pay attention to the conversation.

“Yes. Give me a chance to make it up to you. Anything.”

“How about your shower slots for the month?”

“*All* my shower slots?”

“Well, yeah! At least until my bruise heals.”

“Ok, done.”

“Really? Hm. I’ll believe it when I see it.” Nephalie continued scrubbing. “But for now, that’ll do.” She finished up, and as she was walking away, she added, “And by the way, thanks for standing up for me.”

Wagging her tail, Ersatzica smiled at Nephalie as she left.

Now it was time to make good use of the last shower she’d have for a while. Ersatzica scrubbed the cat scent off her and finished up. She sniffed herself. She smelled weird, like wet dog. She left the shower room and did a big shake to dry off.

“Ersie!” Muddy leapt at her, tackling her in a hug.

“Oof!” Ersie hugged her back.

Mudrich buried her nose in Ersie’s fluffy chest. “You smell like a wolf again!” She gave her another squeeze hug.

“I smell weird.”

“Well, you’re still wet, yes, but give it a few minutes, and it’ll smell like normal again.”

Why does the scent of wolf smell weird to her? She’s been a wolf all her life. Was she expecting a cat scent?

“I guess you’re right.” Ersatzica looked down at her chest. “Muddy! You got me all—”

“Muddy!” She giggled. “No baths for a week!”

“You can’t keep getting away with this.” Ersie brushed the dry mud dust off her fur.

"Agreed." Out of the shadows stepped a weary figure, the chief of the wolf village, their Mother.

"Mother." They both greeted.

"My young pups." She glared for a minute before speaking. "Mudrich, why haven't you taken your bath yet?"

"I gave my bath time to Ersie, because she needed it."

"And why did she need it?"

"Because she smelled like a cat!"

"And why is that?" Mother eyed Ersatzica.

"Because she was a c—"

Ersatzica grasped a paw hand around Mudrich's muzzle. She held on as Mudrich growled and tried to break free. "I wasn't a cat! She means, I was in cat territory... um, no, I mean, uh, by that I mean, I was in territorial boots, that smelled like cats."

Mother was not amused.

"I mean, I found some heirloom that was made by cats, and I spent *all* day working with it, and that's why I smell like cats. It's a lot of work fixing them up, you know, and..."

Mother gave her a look.

Ersatzica hung her head and let Mudrich's mouth go.

"You did too!" Mudrich exclaimed, taking a deep breath. "Also, Mother already knows everything! I don't know why she's even asking. And it wasn't nice of you to shut me up like that."

"I'm very disappointed in you, Ersatzica. A young chiefing should know better than to lie to their elders."

"Sorry," she mumbled.

"I forgive you." Mudrich's mood flipped on a dime. "So, do you want to go the bone pile before bed? I heard there's some pretty big scraps left—"

“Mudrich, give us some space, please.” Mother said.

Mudrich’s ears drooped. “Ok.” She left.

Mother led Ersatzica to the edge of the cliff where the bath house drained out.

“What happened, Ersatzica?”

Ersatzica broke down into tears. “I sinned against Alpha.”

Mother hugged her. “Tell me.”

“I became our greatest enemy, and ran away to join them forever.”

Mother stroked the fur on the back of her head. “Go on.”

“I didn’t mean to, I swear. I never *wanted* to leave. But I had *no choice*.”

“And why did you have no choice?”

“Because... because...” Ersatzica choked back tears. “Because I turned into a cat.”

“And why did you?”

“Because I wanted to fit into these damned boots.”

“Yes.”

“And then I didn’t know how to undo the transformation, and I was so scared. So I ran.”

“Yes.”

“And I was going to just stay over there forever, but then they found me, and brought me this heirloom—” She pinched her wolf skin. “—and now I’m me again.”

“Yes. And?”

“And I’m scared—scarred. I’m scarred. My belly scar is still here.”

“Yes.”

Ersatzica’s eyes dried as Mother stroked her fur.

“Is that all?”

She wiped some tears from her eyes. "Uh huh."

"Listen, Ersatzica. What I'm about to tell you is *very* important, understand?"

She nodded.

"You are a wolf. I am a wolf. You are my daughter. And that's never going to change."

She nodded.

"I swear to Alpha, the Wolf God of the Loyal Moon, you are my daughter, and I will never abandon you. Understand?"

"Yes, Mother."

"And in return, I expect you to be loyal to me as well. Yes?"

"Yes."

"That means staying as a wolf, keeping to the wolf side of the river, and fulfilling your duties and responsibilities as chiefing. Understand?"

"Yes, Mother."

"Ersatzica, look at me." Mother grabbed Ersatzica by the cheeks and steered her into her gaze. "I love you very much. Nothing will ever change that."

"I love you, too, Mother."

Mother brought her in close for a hug. "Your mother would be so proud of you."

Ersatzica embraced Mother, tears still drying in her eyes. How could she ever have let this happen? She was a disgrace for ever wishing to fit into the boots. She should hide away those boots the next time she sees them—or give them away. Maybe even put them back where she found them. Yes. She should do that tomorrow, or even tonight. But no, there's no time. Besides, Nephalie wouldn't be up to closing up the wall tonight. Either way, Ersatzica was going to get rid of the boots for good.

"But they're so dusty!" Ersatzica held the boots up to the morning light shining through the workshop window. "Maybe I can just clean them up a bit, so they look decent when going into long-term storage. Yeah, that'll—"

BAM! “Ersie!” Mudrich burst through the door, breaking the deadbolt clean off the wall.

“Muddy! How many times did I tell you to knock first?”

“That *was* the knock!”

“Oh...” Ersatzica turned to look at her. “What?”

“Yeah, with these cuffs, even my knocks are super powerful!”

“Well don’t knock so hard.”

“Sorry.” Mudrich scampered in, tracking mud flakes across the workshop. She licked Ersie on the cheek.

“Muddy!”

“Come on, Ersie! Let’s go test out some new heirlooms! There’s a whole wheelbarrow of them we haven’t tested yet.”

“Sorry, Muddy, but after recent events, I’m trying to avoid potentially cursed items.”

“Ah, come on!” Muddy insisted. “What’s the worst it could do? Give you diarrhea?”

“It could turn you into a cat.”

“Oh, right. The boots.” Mudrich flicked a gear on a boot. “What are you going to do with them?”

“Well, I’m waiting to talk to Nephalie. I’m going to put them back in that hole we found them in.”

“Pffft. We don’t have to wait for her to drag her deer butt over here. *I* got the hoof clipping.”

“It hasn’t been fixed yet?”

“No time, we were out looking for you.”

“But if we break the hoof clipping to open the wall again, we’ll still need her.”

“Well I discovered a way to un-break one.”

“Really?”

Mudrich led Ersatzica to a mud puddle with a circular mound built around it. “Yep! All you have to do...” She fished around in the puddle, and pulled out a soggy hoof clipping. “...is soak it in mud!” She snapped it in half, then put the pieces back together. “It’s that easy.”

They verified that it worked in their bedroom, too. The hole opened when Mudrich pulled the pieces apart, and the hole closed when she put the pieces together.

“Muddy, you’re a genius!”

“Thank you. And now the hole is ready!” She opened the hole to the secret room.

“Ok!” Ersatzica grabbed the boots and walked to the threshold. She hesitated.

“What are you waiting for? Put them back.”

“But what if we need them?”

“What do you need cursed boots for? Put them back.”

“I mean, even the belt of diarrhea has its uses, right? Like if you’re constipated.”

“Well, yeah, but—”

“So maybe these boots also have their uses.”

“Yeah, if you’re cat, maybe.”

“So that means—”

“That *means* that you have to put them back!” Mudrich growled.

“Ok, ok, I’m putting them back.” Ersatzica did so and returned to their bedroom.

Mudrich put the hoof clipping back together and the wall sealed itself back up.

“Phew! I’m glad that’s gone and done, and over with. And finished. And completed, and another word that means finished. Ah, finished! No wait, I said that already.”

“Yeah...” Ersatzica climbed up into her bunk to think. To think about the boots.

“So, do you want to play in the mud?”

“Sure, Muddy, let’s go!”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I need a break from work for the day.”

“Ok!”

Ersatzica played with Mudrich in the mud for an hour or so. The whole time, Ersatzica kept track of where Mudrich stashed the hoof clipping. She found a moment to strike, and snatched it out of its muddy hiding spot. She hid it in the thick of her chest fluff, but Muddy smelled it.

“Why do I smell deer hoof clipping on you?”

“What do you mean?”

Mudrich reached in to Ersie’s chest fluff and pulled it out. “Ersie!” She growled.

“I just wanted to make sure it didn’t get lost, or broken, or stolen. A mud puddle isn’t a very good place to keep it.”

“Good point. Well, seeing as how I won’t be needing a bath for a while...” Mudrich stuck the hoof clipping in her chest fluff. “That’ll do.”

Ersatzica tried in vain to take it throughout the day, but Mudrich blocked all her attempts or very easily got it back.

“I’m telling Mother.”

“No, please, Muddie.” Ersie pleaded. “Ok, ok, I’ll stop trying to get it from you.”

“Ok! Time to die!” Muddie tackled Ersie and went for her leg, biting it with a playful ferocity only a sibling could have.

“Not if I get you first!” Ersie pawed at Muddie and bit her ear. The two of them wrestled in the mud pit for a few hours.

AWOOOOOOO! (“Hour”)

“Hey, that’s the lunch hour howl! Last one there is a smelly cat!”

“I’m all muddy, Muddy.”

“That doesn’t stop me.”

"But I don't want to eat with all this mud on my paws."

"I swear to Alpha, You're turning into Lemilay!"

"Why don't you go on ahead, I'll catch up."

"Ok, see you in a muddie!" Muddie left.

Ersie rose from the mud puddle and brushed herself off. It didn't help much. She wandered to the river, and looked longingly out to the other side. She waved at the spot she thought Fisher would be at.

A rock came hurling through the air, landing right next to her. A fishing line pulled it back into the river and to the other side, where it disappeared.

Ersie took this as her cue to row across the river. "Fisher!" she whispered.

A black and white cat suddenly approached. "Ersatzica!" He smiled.

"Quick! Get in the boat!"

"Why don't you come on shore?"

"I made a promise not to go to the cat side of the river."

"Well you've already broken it."

"No, I haven't gotten out of the boat yet."

"Ha! Well, I don't want to be seen with a wolf. Can you transform?"

[make fisher refuse to see her in wolf form for fear of getting caught with her]

"I also promised not to turn into a cat. Besides, the boots are in a secure location, I can't get to them."

"And you have time to be here?"

"Well, I'm *supposed* to be fulfilling my duties, but as long as I get it done, it doesn't matter if I take a break, right?"

"Haha." Fisher laughed. "I guess you're right." He climbed into the boat. "But we should make this quick, I don't want Mystra to find me talking with you."

"Right."

"Would you like some fish?" Fisher offered.

Ersatzica salivated. She grabbed two whole fish and bit into them.

"So about that wolf skin, I did some more research on it. It turns out it has a pretty interesting history."

"Mmm?" Ersatzica eeked out, mouth full.

Fisher pulled out a book from his basket, and opened to a particular page.

In the early days of the Cat Kingdom, there was a young cat prince self-named Quivester. Although he was a royal orange-coat red-tip, he behaved like a scrappy black-coat white-foot. He did nothing but practice his favorite sport: archery. He was very good at it, but terrible in all other aspects: manners, social gatherings, keeping up appearances. This greatly bothered The High One.

"The High One? Is that the name of your god?"

"No, he's the king of the Cat Kingdom."

"Ok."

One day, The High One's daughter asked Quivester to mate with her. Quivester refused. Insulted, The High One exiled him for 1 month, or until he agreed to mate with his daughter. Quivester walked himself out of the city and they closed the gates behind him. "He wouldn't last long outside the gates," declared The High One.

Quivester killed dozens of wild animals in that month, sustaining himself on his hunting skills. He conserved his gold this way, spending only what he needed to on equipment at trading posts. The traders all raised their prices on him, of course, as ordered by The High One.

One visit to a trading post led to him meeting a wolf slave pulling a wagon. The cat owner was punishing it harshly, using illegal torture devices. Quivester pulled the cat owner over, and ordered him by official decree to transfer ownership of the wolf to him. He spent the last of his gold, but the wolf was now under his ownership. The wolf was forcible named Monassus at birth. It was despised by The High One.

"You keep wolves as slaves?"

"No, not anymore. They were all freed a long time ago."

Quivester and Monassus spent everyday and every night together, hunting and telling stories. Quivester hunted food for them, and Monassus managed the equipment. Quivester told Monassus about the privileged Cat Kingdom life, and Monassus told Quivester about the unloyal slave trade in the wolf village. When it came time for Quivester's exile to end, he was summoned back to the Cat Kingdom by The High One.

The High One demanded Quivester mate with his daughter, but he refused again. This time, The High One exiled him for good, and stripped him of all his possessions, including his wolf slave, which was given to his daughter. Lost was Quivester, punished was Quivester. Exalted and triumphant was The High One.

Let this be a lesson to you, o people of the Cat Kingdom. The word of The High One is the holiest of words, and shall be followed unwaveringly before all other word. If you disobey him, you will face the wrath and punishment of The High One.

"Wait, that's the end?" Ersatzica grabbed the book and glued her eyes to it. "I thought you said this was about the wolf skin?"

"Huh, I thought it would be. Also I'm surprised to hear The High One was so strict back then. He's really lightened up over the years."

"But how did it end? For Monassus?"

"I don't know. But I'll see if I can find more stories about him."

AWOOOOOO! ("Here!")

"Oh! That's my sister calling. I have to go."

Fisher hopped out of the boat. "Ok. Say hi to Majestra for me if you see her."

"Ok."

Ersatzica rowed back across the river and ran to catch up with her sister.

"I'm... here!" Ersatzica panted. "Muddy."

"Ersatzica! Where've you been?" Muddy patted her on the back.

"I just had to check something by the river."

Mudrich sniffed the air. "Hold on, what's that smell?"

"What smell?"

"It's cat! You smelled like cat!" Mudrich sneered.

"I do?"

"Yeah. Did you go across the river again?" She gasped. "Did you turn into a cat again?"

"No, we sealed the boots, remember?"

"Ok, but did you cross the river?"

"No."

Mudrich eyed her.

"Cats must've been in the area recently, and the scent must've clung to me."

Muddie eyed her.

"Ok, ok. I was trying to sample some cat piss."

"What? Why?"

"An experiment I'm working on. Want me to explain it to you?"

"Ew! No!"

"Now *you're* starting to sound like Lemilay."

"Come on, Mother has called us for a meeting." Mudrich grumbled.

Ersatzica and Mudrich arrive at the mess hall, where Wryonin and Lemilay were talking with Mother. Or rather, listening to her lecture them about something.

"Ersatzica, how good of you to join us."

"Where were you? I howled like three times for you." Wryonin growled.

"I was busy."

"With what?"

"My pups," Mother said. "It is time to start the meeting."

They all sat up straight and paid attention.

“As you know, the cats have recently advanced to the river. Any day now, they may have the courage to cross and attempt to invade our village.” She sighed. “It has come to my attention that I may have been neglecting you, my pups.”

Lemilay raised her chin in agreement.

Mother gave a quick glare, but continued, “With your training as chieflings. One day, one of you will take my place as chief of the wolf village. When that day comes, you must have the skills and wisdom to do so.”

“I already do.” Lemilay whispered.

Mother growled. “To that end, I will assign you a series of tasks. Whoever completes them the best, I will appoint them as chief-lo and will train them to take my place.”

Lemilay smiled smugly, looking down on her siblings.

“The first task is to do a census. This must be completed by the end of the day.”

“What’s a census?” Mudrich asked.

Lemilay chuckled. “It’s a survey, muddling.”

Mudrich grumbled.

“Mudrich, my pup, just count everyone in the village, and then tell me what number you counted.”

“That’s it? That’s easy!”

“I would hope so.” Lemilay chuckled.

Awoomoon growled at Lemilay.

She stopped chuckling, but still held her chin high.

“Lemilay, you have until the end of your shift today. Everyone else, you have until bedtime.”

Lemilay scoffed. “You mean I have to survey the village *and* do my usual job?”

"I would hope it'd be easy for you?"

"Fine." Lemilay grumbled. "This just means I'll get it done first."

"Good. Any questions?"

Wryonin raised his hand. "Do you want us to count the traders currently at the bear farms and the—"

"No, they're not currently in the village."

"What about the hunters who are just gone for a few hours?"

"No, they're not currently in the village."

"Ok, so what if I count, then they come back. Should I count them then?"

"Wryonin, just do your best. Ok, my pups, duty calls. I love you all. See you at bedtime."

AWOOOOO! They all howled in unison.

Afterwards, Ersie approached Mudrich. "Muddie! Muddie!"

Mudrich stopped in her tracks to pick up a rock. "What's up?"

"I need help. I am suuuper busy today with my other tasks."

"And you want me to help you do the counting?"

"Yes... I was hoping you could..." Ersatzica got up close and whispered into her ear, "Tell me your count before bedtime."

"I don't know Ersie, Mother wouldn't approve." She dropped the rock and kicked it with her foot. "But this counting sounds hard. I don't think I can do it by myself. Can you count and give *me* the answer?"

"Hmm, ok. How about this? You count one half the village, and I'll count the other. Meet up at my workshop before bedtime?"

"I can do that!"

"Ok, great, see you then!"

"Be back in an Ersie!"

“Hey!”

Mudrich giggled as she scampered off.

[my computer crashed and lost the scene I just wrote about Ersatzica and Mudrich getting a complete count :[]

[Ersatzica goes to see fisher as seen earlier in the chapter]

Ersie finds Mudrich. “Hi Muddie!”

“Ersie!” Muddie hugged her, tail wagging. “Guess what Ersie!”

“What?”

“I did it! I did it!”

“Did what?”

“I did the counting! I thought it would be hard, but I did it!”

“Good job Muddie!” Ersie patted her on the head. “What’s the count?”

“I went to door-to-door, and counted all the buildings. I did a thing! It’s called ‘estimation’, and it was actually easier than counting!”

“What was your count?”

“Then I went into a building, counted how many people—it’s 5 by the way, 5 people per building—and then I asked Wryonin.”

“What did he say?”

“Well because I counted 25 buildings, Wryonin said the answer was 125.”

“125? That seems... low.”

Muddie hung her head. “I tried my best, Ersie.”

“And you did great Muddie.” She patted her on the head again. “Guess what number I counted?”

“125?”

“125.”

"We both got the same number! Did you use estimation too?"

"Sure did!"

AWOOOOOO! ("Hour") The tone was very angry.

Lemilay walked by them, arms crossed, head held high. Without stopping, she snapped at Mudrich, "What are *you* looking at?"

"Who pissed in your territory?" Mudrich growled back.

"Walk away, Lemilay, ignore your sister, Lemilay..." She stormed off towards the barracks.

Ersatzica looked at Mudrich. "What's the matter with her?"

"Uh oh, looks like Mother caught Lemilay spying on people with her spyglass... again."

"How do you know?"

Mudrich pointed.

Mother was walking toward them, with Lemilay's spyglass in her mouth. She looked like she was in a bad mood.

"Quick! Act natural!" Mudrich elbowed Ersatzica.

"Why Mudrich, did you see that... cat?"

"Yeah, that was something... cat-like."

"It sure was."

"The cattest thing to cat."

"Cat? What cat?" Mother stopped in her tracks. "Was there a cat sighting today?"

"Oh nothing."

"Oh there's no cat. Me and Ersie were talking about the cat from the other day."

Mother grumbled. "Ok... have you pups finished your cens—counting?"

"Yep!" Mudrich beamed.

“Still working on it.” Ersatzica fidgeted with her fingers.

“Well you have until bedtime, Ersatzica.” Mother continued to her chambers.

Mudrich waited before speaking. “I’m sure glad I’m not Lemilay right now.”

“Yeah.”

“Hey Ersie?”

“Yeah?”

“What’s 125 plus 125?”

“250.”

“Thanks.”

[ersie goes to see fisher again?]

Bedtime approached, and Ersatzica entered the barracks to find her siblings already there.

“Ersie!”

“Muddie!”

“but you can’t count them, they’re not people—” Wryonin argued with Lemilay. “oh hi, Ersatzica—they can’t lift anything, and they can’t be separated from their mother—”

“But they will increase the population!” Lemilay protested.

“What are they arguing about this time?” Ersatzica sat next to Muddie in her bed, picking a spot with less dirt.

“The census.”

“So... about that.” Ersie pulled out a piece of paper. “I did a... recount, and these are the new numbers I got.”

“Having fun estimating, huh?”

“You could say that.”

Mudrich glanced at the sheet. "Looks good, Ersie."

"How many people did I count?"

"250!"

"No, that's not what it says."

Mudrich squinted. "One... three..."

"No, that one's a two."

"Ugh!" Mudrich flopped back onto the bed. "Just tell me what it says, Ersie!"

"You got the first one right, that's a one. Then a two, then a seven, then a five. See?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

"It's important that you—"

"I don't care, Ersie."

Ersie fell silent, letting the other argument fill up the space.

"But if I have to rescue a pregnant wolf, I only have to use one shoulder, not two!"

"But then she'll weigh more than a normal wolf, reducing how many others you can carry!"

"Look, if *you* were pregnant, I'd only see one wolf, not two."

"Well, I sure would feel like there's a second wolf there."

Wryonin's ears pricked. "She's here!"

Wryonin and Lemilay hushed up and sat straight up in their respective beds. Ersie and Muddie sat up in Muddie's bed. All watched the door.

The handle turned, and the door creaked open. Outside was Mother.

"Hello, my pups."

"Hello, Mother." Lemilay responded.

"Lemilay, did you redo your count?" Mother sat in the middle of the room, facing them all.

"Yes, I redid my *census*." She grumbled. "I'm not a *baby*, Mother."

Mother sighed. "Mudrich, did you do your count?"

"250!"

"Thank you, Mudrich."

Lemilay laughed out loud. To herself, she whispered, "Ha! The moon beams down on me."

"It's not over yet, Lemilay." Wryonin slapped her with his tail.

"So, Lemilay, what was the result of your census?" Mother asked.

Lemilay held her chin high. "There are 849 residents. 163 battle-ready wolves. 50 wolves that will be battle ready within a year. Our population will increase by 34 within the year, from births alone."

Mother's eyebrows lit up. "Hmm. Is that the info you collected with the spyglass?"

Lemilay looked to the side. "Yes."

"Then it doesn't count. We don't spy on our own people, Lemilay."

"Yes, Mother."

"Wryonin?" Mother turned to Wryonin.

But he turned to Lemilay. "How did you get that many? I only counted 781! And there's only 53 that are battle ready."

"Did you count pregnant wolves? And those wolves who would be willing to fight if they had to?" Lemilay smiled smugly.

"I go to training every day. If they were willing to fight, why aren't they at training?"

"Shh!" Mother hushed them. "Well done, Wryonin. Mudrich, what is your count?"

"250?"

"How did you get that number?"

"Estimation!"

Mother smiled. "Good job, Mudrich. Ersatzica?"

Ersatzica grinned sheepishly. "I got 815."

Mudrich looked shock. "815! But I thought—"

Ersatzica covered her mouth. "I got 815."

"And how did you get that number?" Mother asked.

"Estimation."

"Good job, Ersatzica."

"But Mother, she's lying." Lemilay protested. "That's not how she got that number."

"You're missing the point, Lemilay." Mother stood up. "Why do you think I asked you to do the census?"

"To see who should be the next chief." Lemilay puffed out her chest.

Mudrich raised a hand. "To test us."

"Obviously," Wryonin said. "It's so we can plan an evacuation procedure for when the cats invade."

Mother turned to Ersatzica. "Why do *you* think?"

"To... plan an evacuation procedure?"

"Hmm." Mother opened the door. "It's a chance to get to know your wards. Everyone of these lives will be *your* responsibility, if you become chief. It's important for you to know each and every one of them. Let's bow our heads."

"Wait!" Lemilay interrupted. "Who won this challenge?"

"You're missing the point, Lemilay. Let's bow our heads."

"Fine."

They all bowed their heads and closed their eyes.

"Alpha, Wolf God of the Loyal Moon," Mother began, solemnly. "Watch over and guide us, help us unite our people, so that they may be strong and endure the challenges ahead of us. Please give us humility," —she licked Lemilay on the forehead—"compassion," —she licked Wryonin—"wisdom," —Mudrich—"and strength"—Ersatzica. "May we walk in the light of your guiding moon to the destiny you have for each of us. Awoo."

AWOOOOOOOO! ("Acknowledged") They all howled in unison up to the sky.

"Good night, my pups." Mother closed the door behind her.

"Compassion." Scoffed Wryonin, holding the candle while his sisters got comfy in their beds. "Cats didn't show compassion to Yotleph. Not to Nosalen, and not to Monassus."

"Monassus?" Ersatzica's ears perked.

"Yeah, you know, the legend of Monassus."

"The legend?"

"Yeah, Ersie, don't you remember?" Muddie said.

"Everyone knows the story of Monassus."

"I don't." Ersie said.

"Didn't you hear it while camping with Great Uncle Yotleph?"

"No, I never went camping with him."

"That's a shame."

"Anyway," Wryonin began. "The cats were cruel to him. They captured him and 3 other wolves, and they made them fight to the death. They forced Monassus to kill his own kind. Then they punished him for it, and made him wear this extremely tight collar so he couldn't howl. Eventually he escaped and returned to the wolf village."

"What happened after that?"

"Great Uncle Yotleph never really said. All I know is that after Monassus died, some cat snuck in and stole his wolf skin."

“Huh.”

“Like, after all that, the enslaving, the forced murders, and everything, they can’t even let his family keep his heirloom.”

“Yeah, that sucks.” Ersatzica stroked her arm. “It’s ok. You’re with us, now.”

“They don’t deserve compassion.” Wryonin growled. “Alright, everyone ready?”

SNOOOOORE! replied Mudrich.

Lemilay was already fast asleep too.

“I’m good.”

“Good night, Erse’.”

“Good night Wry’.”

Wryonin blew out the candle and got into bed.

“Don’t worry, Monassus.” Ersatzica nuzzled up against her arm. “I’ll make sure you’re safe from the cats, even after I find out how to turn back into a wolf permanently.”

Chapter 7

The next day, after breakfast, Ersatzica snuck into Mudrich’s mudhole and took the hoof clipping. She snuck back into their bedroom and took the boots back out, then put the hoof clipping back together and buried it in the mud again.

She took the boots to the river, where she placed them next to a boulder. Sitting on the boulder, she whispered, “I wish to be a cat.” She slipped her now cat-shaped feet into the boots, which hugged her legs, welcoming them in. The transformation into a cat went smoother this time, and she hugged the wolf skin of Monassus after. A blue streak flashed across the hairs. “Don’t worry, Monassus, I’ll hide you so they don’t find you.” She stuffed it into a pile of leaves, then rowed across the river.

There was no sign of Fisher, but then again, there never was before, either. Once she got onto the cat shore, she searched for Fisher. She found him doing something odd.

Fisher held a stick in one hand and thrust it forward, leaping with the motion. "Ha!" He swiped the stick. "En garde!" He slashed again. "Stay back!"

"Fisher?" Ersatzica interrupted. "What are you doing?"

"Ah!" Fisher dropped the sword and stood at attention. "I was just practicing my combat skills, Your Majesty."

"Fisher, it's me."

"Erzca?"

"You can relax."

Fisher sighed in relief.

Ersatzica approached. "Fisher?"

"Erzca!" He opened his arms.

Ersie ran into him for a big hug.

"It's good to see you, Erzca."

"Erzca" giggled. "It's Ersatzica."

"Ersica. Ersitzica..."

"Er, satz, ica."

"Er, satz, ica. Ersatzica." Fisher took a deep breath. "Whoa that's a mouth full. Maybe it'd be better if I just called you 'Your Majesty'."

Ersatzica giggled. "'Ersie' is fine."

"Ersie? Ok. How are you today, Ersie? You're a cat!"

"No, *I'm* a wolf, but yes, I transformed again."

"But I thought you didn't want to be stuck as a cat?"

"Well, I'm not stuck. At least not permanently. I have easy access to the wolfskin of Monassus."

"That's great, Ersie. But that means you're still a cat underneath the wolfskin, no?"

"Yes, and that's why I need to find a way to undo the effects of the boots. Did you find anything else out about Monassus?"

"Actually, I did."

"Let me hear! Let me hear!"

"I found a wanted poster." He flipped to a loose leaflet inside a book. "It says he escaped slavery, and is wanted alive by Princess Retriyoan. With a pretty hefty reward, even by today's standards."

Ersatzica looked at the poster. It had a picture of Monassus' face. It had the same black and white pattern as her face, with the same swirly stripes and black nose. Even the eyes were the same. It was the same wolf face that she had always known.

She looked in the river at her reflection. It was a cat face, less familiar, but somehow, it felt more like something that belonged to her.

"Fisher..."

"What is it?"

"Do I look like Monassus?"

"Of course you do! That's what the heirloom does. It doesn't just turn you into a wolf, it turns you into *the* wolf, Monassus. It's a known quality of the heirloom."

"I... I don't know. It doesn't make sense."

"What doesn't."

Ersatzica paused, staring at her reflection and the wanted poster. "Could I be related to Monassus?"

"It's possible. I don't know if he had any children or not, but I don't think there would be records of it in the Cat Kingdom."

"Yeah."

"Hey, do you want to see my cool moves?"

"Ok."

Fisher flipped to another section of the book. It had lots of diagrams of sword fighting techniques.

“Wait, this isn’t an heirloom encyclopedia?”

“No, it’s a sword fighting primer. Lucky finding that wanted poster in there, huh?”

“Yeah, that is lucky.”

“So, I don’t have a sword—yet—but I can still learn the moves.”

“That looks great so far, Fisher.”

“You like it?” He smiled.

“How long have you been practicing?”

“I took a few lessons when I was a pup, but other than that, I only just started today.”

“Scoundrel! Scoundrel!” A voice called from afar.

“Oh fish!” Fisher’s hair stood on end. “That’s Majestra. Quick! Scram!”

“But I have more questions—”

Fisher picked her up and plopped her into the boat. “Go quick before she sees you!”

“But I’m slow at crossing the river!”

“Hold on.” Fisher jumped on Yotleph’s skull and wrestled a tooth loose. “Here, take this.”

Ersie took it.

“Ok, now be quiet, and hope she doesn’t see you.”

“Ok.” Ersie latched the boots as she waited in the boat, still beached on the shore.

“Scoundrel!” An orange tabby cat with flowing red hair and a red-tipped tail strutted out of the woods, aggressively approaching Fisher. Her hair was pulled up in a bun, with some intricately woven golden fabric woven in. She wore a golden necklace with a ruby embedded in the center. A gold-plated belt held a few pouches.

"Your Majesty." Fisher addressed her.

"What have you done today?"

"I'm actually learning sword fighting." He threw up his arm.

Majestra clawed his arm. "You forgot."

"Oh, I'm sorry! Your Majesty."

"That's better." Majestra looked down at the book. "Is *this* how you're learning to 'sword fight'?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"That's stupid." Majestra picked up the book and clawed up the page Fisher was on. "You should ask the general for proper training. Books will get you nowhere."

"Yes, Your Majesty. I was stupid, your majesty."

"You fool!" Majestra clawed him again, which he blocked. "You didn't capitalize it!"

"Yes, Your Majesty. Sorry, Your Majesty."

"Better." Majestra approached the boat. "But for your insolence, you will have to catch me 5 fish today. At least you can be of some use."

"Yes, Your Majesty." Fisher grabbed her hand. "Wait, Your Majesty."

"How dare you touch me!"

"You can't use that boat." Fisher gulped. "Your Majesty."

"Let go of me!" She slashed him across the face with her bare claws.

"GAAAHHHH!" Fisher knelt down in pain.

"When I return, I'll have you reported. Foolish hound."

"Go, go! Ersie, go!" Fisher yelled. Then he added, "Your Majesty."

Ersie froze.

Majestra snatched a fish from the basket and plopped it into the boat, almost hitting Ersatzica in the foot.

"I'm sorry, Ersie..." Fisher knelt over in pain.

Majestra pushed the boat into the water, then hopped in. She looked directly at Ersie, or rather, directly through her.

Ersie gasped. Her heart beat heavily. If Wryonin were here, he would hear her heavy breathing, or at least he would, if she hadn't latched the boots.

"Why is the boat so bow heavy?" Majestra looked around. She patted down every surface.

Ersie dodged her hands, intentionally moving around so she wasn't discovered.

Then, Majestra reaches, and accidentally hits her boots. "What in the name of Ajig?"

Ersie jumped into the river. The sudden change in weight and the splash threw Majestra off guard. She looked around, but didn't see any wolves. Instead, she took a tooth out of her pouch, and she and the whole boat disappeared.

Ersie swam to shore. Luckily it wasn't that far. She unlatched the boots. "Fisher?"

"Ersie?" He eeked out.

"Stand up, let's get you to the medic bear." She dropped the tooth back near the skull, then ripped a piece of cloth from the blanket and wrapped it around his scars. Helping him to his feet, she asked, "Can you stand?"

"Yes. I just can't see right now. It's so painful."

"She hit you pretty hard, huh?"

"Hard? Ha!" He laughed. "I'm tougher than that. Ow! GAAHHHH!!" He coughed. "I mean, she got a lucky strike."

Ersatzica led him to the medic bay.

"And *how*, Your Majesty, did this happen?" The medic cat asked.

"Um, it was a bear." Ersie said.

"Are there bears in this part of the country?" The medic cat whispered to his aid.

"I haven't seen any." He answered.

“So, can you heal him?”

“Yes, Your Majesty. But Scoundrel here will have to wear this bandage for at least a week.”

“His name is Fisher.”

“Fisher, Your Majesty?”

Fisher shook his head. “No, bad idea. I’m Scoundrel.”

The medic cat and his aid backed up away from Ersatzica. Then they looked puzzled.

Ersatzica’s eyes lit up, then she got angry. “That’s *Your Majesty* to you, Scoundrel.” She hit him with a clawless hand, which he easily blocked with a clawed-up arm.

The medic cat and his aid returned to their normal behavior.

Ersatzica breathed a sigh of relief. “So, is *Scoundrel* cleared for duty?”

“Yes, Your Majesty. Now Scoundrel, go easy on that eye. Don’t go poking any bears.”

“Haha, you guys are so funny.”

Ersatzica led Fisher out of the cat outpost. “So, how are you feeling?”

“Much better, those pain killers really helped.” He covered his eye with his hand.

Ersie reached a hand out to take his, but he blocked it instinctively. She lowered her hand and hung her head. “You shouldn’t do that. It’ll slow the healing process.”

“I know, but it feels better this way.”

They walked a bit, and got to the edge of the woods, with the river now in view.

“I know of another way across the river.” Fisher said.

“Huh?”

“You need to get home, to get the wolfskin back before Majestra finds it.”

“Yeah, but it can wait. Right now, I want to make sure you’re alright.”

"I'll be fine, Your Majesty."

Ersatzica stopped walking. "I'm... I'm sorry."

"Sorry?"

"I didn't mean to hurt you back there."

"I understand, you were just keeping up appearances."

"No, I hurt you. At least, maybe emotionally. I'm sorry."

Fisher looked at her.

She looked up at him, meeting his gaze. "Forgive me, Scoundrel?"

He hung his head. He started trembling, and then broke down, kneeling on the ground, head in his hands.

"Fisher? Fisher!" Ersatzica rushed to his side. Tears streamed down his furry cheeks.

"That's not my name! That's not my name!"

"Fisher? What is it then?"

"I don't have one! I'm... not worthy."

"No, no, no." Ersie argued. "You *are* worthy! You're the worthiest cat I know. You saved me from the river, twice! I *owe you* my life! I would do anything for you, Fisher. If it's ok to still call you that."

"I don't even deserve that name." He sobbed. "I use a net. The fishing line is just for Majestra in case she can't the boat."

"You're still a Fisher to me. You deserve that name, it's a good name. And it fits you well."

He sucked in his tears, and pounded the ground. "I'm sorry, Ersitzaca, for breaking down in front of you like this. From now on, I'll be strong! I'll be stoic, and I won't let anyone or anything bother me!"

"What?"

"It's fine. Don't worry about. It's just a minor injury, it'll heal." Fisher stood up.

"Let's get you back home."

"No, tell me what's wrong."

"I... I just want to be strong. Like you. Like Majestra."

"But Fisher, you *are* strong."

"I don't feel strong."

"Well, it's ok. Fisher. I'm here for you."

"How about we go look for some more books about Monassus?"

A look of realization crossed Ersatzica's face. "Actually, I'm also interested in sword fighting. Teach me?"

"Ha," Fisher laughed, wiping away a tear. "I'm not a master, but I can show you what I know."

They found another suitable stick, and Fisher showed him the moves he had learned so far. After a while of practicing, Ersie broke his sword accidentally. They both laughed.

"Well, it's high time we get you a real sword." Ersie said.

"I don't have permissions."

"Well I bet I know who does."

"No! Bad idea, Majestra would just confiscate it when she finds out."

"Well then, just make it so she *doesn't* find out." Ersie grabbed him by the hand.

"Come on!"

Ersie led him randomly around the outpost until they found the armory.

"Your Majesty." The guard working the armory said.

"Fisher—Scoundrel here was attacked by a bear today. He needs someway to defend himself in case it happens again."

"I'm sorry, Your Majesty, but there has been no weapons allocated to this... thing."

"You... insolent... little... hound!" Ersatzica raised an arm.

The guard flinched. "I'm sorry, your majesty."

"Get him a sword."

"But General Seam—"

"I spoke with the general already. He said—"

Fisher elbowed her.

"She said to give Scoundrel a sword."

"Which one, your majesty?"

"Pick out your sword." She elbowed Fisher.

"Yes, Your Majesty." Fisher instinctively flinched, then perused the swords. "This one looks the most like the one in the book."

"Then we'll take it."

"But doesn't that sword belong to..."

"We'll take it!" Ersatzica held up a clawless hand.

"Of course, your majesty." The guard held out a paper and a quill. "Please sign here to sign it out."

Ersatzica took the sheet, and held it up to her face, so the guard couldn't see her lips.

"Sign it." Fisher whispered.

"I don't know her signature."

"It's a claw strike. Just swipe it once with your claws."

Ersie flexed her fingers. "How get claws?"

"Like this." Fisher raised a paw, then flexed his fingers all the way. Claws came out and he gestured with them.

"Ok." Ersie did the same, and clawed the paper, almost to shreds. "There."

The guard took the paper. "Um..."

"Is there a problem?"

"No, your majesty. It's just that... usually you only rip up the bottom part of the paper."

"Well today I felt like ripping the whole thing."

"Yes, your majesty."

Outside the armory, Ersatzica squealed and spun in a circle, chasing her tail. "I can't believe that worked!"

"Well, you are Majestra, after all." Fisher admired his new sword.

"Ew." Ersatzica's bubble was burst. "I don't like being called that."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Shut up." Ersatzica punched him playfully in the arm, but he dodged it. "Oh, sorry."

"No, it's ok."

"So, let's go test out your new sword, huh?"

"Sure, but what am I going to test my new moves on?"

"I've got an idea!" She went around the outpost, and found a deer. "You there, do you lie on wood?"

"Excuse me, Your Majesty?" This male deer spoke in a gravelly voice. He looked like he could drop dead from exhaustion at any moment.

"Wood. Can you manipulate it?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Good. Come with us."

"But, Your Majesty, I'm behind on my tasks."

"Ersie," Fisher whispered. "Maybe we should leave him alone and find another way."

"No, I got this." Ersie replied. Then to the deer, she said, "Well forget about those tasks. You're coming with us now."

"But, Your Majesty—"

"Now." She raised a clawed hand.

The deer flinched. "Yes, Your Majesty."

"Come on, Scoundrel."

"Yes, Majestra." Fisher said plainly.

"It's Your Majesty."

"Yes, Your Majesty." He rolled his eyes.

Ersie led them to the river, where she stood next to a tree. "Cut off this branch here." She ordered Fisher.

"Yes, Your Majesty." He swung with his sword, but it only went in partway and got stuck.

"Oh, that branch is too thick. How about this one?"

"Yes. Your Majesty." The sword got stuck again.

"Ok, try this one."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Finally they found a branch that was thin enough to chop off with the sword.

"Excellent!" Ersatzica beamed. "Now, Mr. Deer, turn this branch into a target dummy."

The deer curled up in a ball in the grass, antlers sticking up, fast asleep.

"Oh, he fell asleep."

"Well, let's wake him up."

"No, Ersie, let him sleep. I don't think he gets much rest otherwise."

"But we need a target dummy for sword practice."

“Well, it can wait. I don’t need the practice *that* badly. And to be honest, you’re beginning to scare me.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“I know it was all a bit at first, but you’re really starting to turn into Majestra. And it scares me.”

“Oh.” Ersie sat on the ground, and latched the boots. She put her head down and mumbled to herself. “Why am I so stupid? How could I be so cruel? These cats didn’t deserve the abuse I gave them. I should’ve been kinder. Wait, am I saying I should’ve been nicer to cats? Yes, yes I am. And this deer especially, he didn’t deserve what I was about to do to him. It’s a good thing Fisher was here to stop me.”

“Ersie, are you ok?”

She looked up at him, then spoke. “Yeah I’m ok.”

“I didn’t hear you. Are you whispering?”

She unlatched the boots. “I’m ok. Thanks for stopping me. I... I don’t want to be Majestra.”

“Well, you’re not. You’re Erzazica. You’re my friend.” He hugged her.

“Thanks.”

“But, speaking of Majestra, it’s about time for her to come back. And I don’t think you want to meet her.”

“No, not really.”

Fisher picked up the tooth again, vanishing immediately. “Next time you want to be visible again, just do this.” He appeared again, with his hands enclosed around the tooth. He opened up his hands, and he vanished again.

“Oh! Or I can put it a bag?”

“Yes.” He handed it to her.

“Thanks, Fisher.”

"You're welcome."

Ersatzica hid herself while Fisher hid the sword. When Majestra came back, she appeared out of nowhere in the boat when she put the tooth back in the bag.

"I see you went to the medic, you coward."

"Yes, I survived the bear attack. Your Majesty."

"Bear attack? Is that what you told them?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Clever boy. I'll let this one slide. My mission went well today, so I'm in a good mood. Now, my meal."

"Yes, Your Majesty." Fisher presented some fish.

Majestra rolled her eyes. "Not even this measly offering is enough to sour my mood. Come, I must speak with Auntie Seamtrust."

"Yes, Your Majesty." Fisher waved goodbye to Ersatzica as they walked away.

Ersatzica waited for them to enter the forest before getting in the boat and rowing across. She retrieved the wolf skin, greeting it with a warm hug. She carried the boots and the tooth to her workshop, where she hid the boots among some other junk. She dropped the tooth into the boots.

At bedtime, Lemilay seemed unusually smug.

"Someone had an extra helping of moon beam today." Wryonin noted.

"Let's just say, I have a new plan." Lemilay beamed.

"Does this 'new plan' guarantee you become chief or something?"

"Not only. It also ensures that the wolf village survives the invasion."

"That's a bold claim. I'd love to hear this new plan."

"Well, I can't tell you."

"Why not?"

"Because you... well, you'll see." Lemilay grinned.

“Is Mother coming tonight?” Mudrich watched the door from her bunk.

Wryonin tuned his ears. “Doesn’t sound like it.”

“Awwww...”

“Alright, everyone, time to get ready for sleep.” Wryonin picked up the candle and enforced the nightly routine.

When the lights were all out, Mudrich asked, “Is it just me, or does something smell like cat?”

Chapter 8 – The Wolfskin of Monassus

AWOOOO! (“Alarm!”) The howl rang out through the wolf village.

Awoomoon burst through the door to the siblings’ room. “Wake up pups! Emergency meeting, now!” *AWOOOOO!* (“Alarm!”)

Wryonin was the first to wake up. *AWOOOOO!*

AWOOOOO! The other three joined in when they woke up.

They all met in the mess hall with the other warriors of the village.

“We’re all here today because I have recently been informed of the exact location of the cat outpost inhabiting our valley across the river. We must act fast before they know we know and move or enact defenses.”

Ersatzica’s ears pinned back.

“Our plan is to attack from the east, west, and south all at once. We *expect* that we will have a 97% chance of success. Therefore, this is a great and unique training opportunity. Stand, my pups.”

Wryonin, Lemilay, Mudrich, and Ersatzica stood up and faced the wolf warriors.

“Each one of you will have your own pack to lead. Wryonin: the west, Lemilay: the east, Ersatzica and Mudrich: the south. Now, everyone, stand in a line in front of your pack alpha.”

AWOOOOO! (“Here!”) Wryonin authoritatively howled to the wolves. “I want good climbers and good shots. We’re going to pick off the stragglers as they try to escape.”

Awoomoon, though initially shocked by the interruption, smiled proudly.

Wolves with bows and arrows rallied onto Wryonin’s side.

Lemilay, not one to be outdone, howled, *AWOOOOO!* (“Here!”). “Loyal wolf warriors of Alpha, follow me into battle!”

Awoomoon frowned, but nodded anyways.

Wolf warriors of all kinds packed in to follow Lemilay—more than half the room, even taking some who had already formed up for Wryonin.

Lemilay gave Wryonin a smug glance, who responded with a scoff.

AWOOOOO! AWOOOOO! AWOOOOO! (angry sounding gibberish) Mudrich beat her chest, picked up her hammer, and slammed into the ground, cracking some floor boards.

AWOOOOOO! (angry sounding gibberish) Howled the riley wolves that packed in under Mudrich.

Mudrich raised her arms in excitement as she rallied her wolves. “This morning, we taste the thrill of the hunt!”

AWOOOOO!

Awoomoon beamed with pride. *AWOOOOO!* (angry sounding gibberish)

AWOOOOO! (angry sounding gibberish) Howled all the wolves in the room, no matter who they rallied with.

Ersatzica stood there, tail tucked between her legs, ears pinned back, fidgeting with her fingers as she stared at the floor.

Mudrich, seeing her sister feeling left out, jumped over to her, put an arm around her, and howled. *AWOOOOO!* (angry sounding gibberish)

Ersatzica sheepishly grinned, joining Mudrich. *AWOOO!* (angry-ish sounding gibberish)

AWOOOOO! (“Attention!”) Awoomoon howled to quiet everyone. “We will wait for the east and west packs to get into position. East and west: head out. South: we’ll wait here for 15 minutes before heading out.”

AWOOOO! “Here!” Wryonin led his pack of archers out.

AWOOOO! “Here!” Lemilay led hers out too, attempting to beat Wryonin’s pack to the stairs.

While Mudrich riled up her pack, Awoomoon approached Ersatzica. “May I have a word with you?”

Ersatzica gulped. “Yes, Mother.”

Awoomoon led Ersatzica to the kitchen, where Tormael was chopping meat. Awoomoon asked him to leave, and he did.

===

Music: <https://youtu.be/5rV9RDS1AzM>

“How are you feeling, my pup?”

“I’m fine, still just waking up.”

“You seem to be hesitant, like you don’t want to destroy the cat outpost.”

“It’s not that, it’s...” Ersatzica looked away. “Last time me and my siblings fought the cats, Mudrich got injured. What if this time, she...”

“Last time she foolishly charged in alone. This time, she’ll have a whole pack with her. As she says, “Those cats won’t stand a chance!”” She chuckled.

Ersatzica cringed, hairs standing on the back of her neck.

“Or is there something else bothering you?”

“What if, instead, we don’t attack them from the east, and instead we drive them out of the valley, *without* killing them?”

“Ersatzica, this is *war*. If we don’t kill them, they will wait for a moment to strike, and *wipe us out*.”

“Can we at least take prisoners?”

"Do you want to be the one to request Mudrich to take prisoners?"

"Can we at least spare one or two specific cats?"

Awoomoon eyed her suspiciously. "My pup, are you hiding something from me?"

"Mother, I—" Ersatzica cried. "I'm still a cat!" As the tears dripped down her wolf face, her skin peeled off, and she held the wolfskin in her hands. "I'm trying to become a wolf again, Mother. And Monassus here, he's helping me the best he can. But it's not enough. And in the cat outpost, there's this lovely cat, who's... who's... He's helping me find out how to transform back for real!" She put the wolfskin back on.

"My pup, my pup." Mother hugged her. "Come here." She sat cross-legged on the floor and invited Ersatzica to sit in her lap.

Ersatzica accepted the embrace once the wolfskin finished transforming her back into a wolf.

Awoomoon licked the back of Ersatzica's head. "You know that you're my daughter, yes? And that I love you very much, yes?" She licked behind her ears. "That's what's important."

"But, I'm... I'm not a wolf, not right now. I'm only a wolf because of Monassus and his wolf skin."

"I didn't say you were my *wolf* daughter, I simply said you were my daughter."

"What are you saying?" A feeling welled up inside her. She could feel her identity shift, her very essence rejecting the wolf skin. "Am I a cat?"

Awoomoon licked the back of the wolfskin, then, realizing what happened, pulled it off. Then she licked Ersatzica's long red hair.

"But I can't be!" Ersatzica wailed. "I've been a wolf my whole life! How can I now all of a sudden be a cat? Is this something to do with age or rite of passage?"

"No, my pup. You were born a cat, and raised a wolf."

"So I've been a cat this whole time? I'm a cat?"

"Hm. I can only tell you what you were, but what you are now? That's for you to decide. Monassus has given you that choice."

So it was true. She'd been a cat all along. Her body, her wolf body, this whole time, was just the wolfskin. She'd been wearing it all these years, none the wiser. Had her whole life been a lie?

"Why?"

"It was for your own good."

"But why now? Why wasn't I given this choice then?"

"You were too young, so I made that decision for you. But now, you are old enough, so now you get to decide for yourself. But be aware, not everyone will be accepting as me. The decision you face now will be a difficult one. But remember this, you *are* my daughter, Ersatzica. And I will love you no matter which you decide to be: cat, or wolf." Awoomoon wrapped Ersatzica in a hug and rested her head on hers, slowly stroking her hair.

Ersatzica sat still for a moment. This was a lot to take in. Growing up as a wolf, and suddenly realizing she was a cat. That there *was* no permanent fix for her transforming into a cat, and the wolfskin was the best there was. Should she choose to stay in her "true" form? Or should she stay loyal to her wolf form, the one Mother chose for her? She no longer felt at home in her wolf skin, now that she knows it's not her own. But she's afraid of what will happen if she chooses cat. Will the village forsake her? Will her siblings? She couldn't stand the thought of letting down Wryonin, or Lemilay, and especially Mudrich. Or even herself. How in Alpha's name can she look at herself in a mirror and not see a loathsome cat who betrayed her own family for her own comfort? But how could she live with herself, living the life of a lie? Ersatzica sobbed.

Mother soothed her, singing her a lullaby.

[maybe make it clear that Awoomoon will protect her even if she decides to be a cat]

Finally, Ersatzica reached for the wolfskin. She grabbed it, and pulled it close. The blue streak in the wolfskin hugged her. Hugging it back, she whispered, "Thank you, Monassus. For giving me this choice. For giving me this life."

Mother hummed the melody of the lullaby.

“Mother, I’ve made my choice.” Ersatzica pushed out of her Mother’s embrace and stood up. She performatively held out the wolfskin.

Mother held her breath, looking up at her.

After dusting it off, Ersatzica flipped the wolfskin around her shoulders and slipped the scalp over her head like a hood. *For Mudrich, for Mother, for Wryonin, for... Lemilay, and for my wolf pack.* Monassus reached out across her body, lending her his wolf face, his wolf fur, and his wolf claws.

“I’m a wolf.”

Mother got up, licked her on the forehead, and hugged her. “I love you, my pup.” Her tail wagged as a tear fell from her eye.

Ersatzica sucked in her tears as she returned the embrace.

“Now, my pup, let’s prepare for battle.” *AWOOOOO!* (“Here!”)

AWOOOOO! (“Here!”) Ersatzica echoed.

AWOOOO! (“Here!”) Replied Mudrich and the other wolves in the mess hall.

When Ersatzica entered the mess hall, she howled, *AWOOOO!* (angry sounding gibberish).

The wolves all howled back in unison.

===

Ersatzica rushed to her workshop. “Ok, I only have 15 minutes to prepare.”

She dug through the junk pile and pulled out the boots. “If I’m fast enough, I might get there in time to warn them—” She hesitated. The wolfskin flashed a blue streak down her legs. “But I’m a wolf.”

She hid the boots.

Reaching up into a cabinet, she pulled out the drums. “This time, I’ll be there to support Mudrich.”

The blue streak in the drums replied with an energetic fervor that gave Ersatzica the boost she needed.

===

AWOOOO! Mudrich greeted Ersatzica when she joined them at the base of the stairs. The wolf warriors greeted her the same way, as they prepared to run through the forest.

AWOOOO! Ersatzica replied. She wore the drums, Nosalen's foot, and a locket with Yotleph's tooth inside it. *AWOOOO!* ("Attention!")

"Everyone! Listen to Ersie!" Mudrich shouted, pointing at her sister.

"Stomp your feet to the beat!" Ersatzica beat the drums in rhythm.

Mudrich and the wolves matched the rhythm of the drums. When Ersatzica sped up the drums, they stomped faster.

"I will lead us across the river. From there, Mudrich will lead you into battle."

Aow-Aow-Aowooooo! Mudrich howled, holding her hammer high. The cuffs jingled on her wrists.

"March!" Ersatzica ran forward at a pace comfortable for her. *They're not getting out of my range this time.*

They got to the river, and Ersatzica took a test step on the water. Nosalen's foot froze the water beneath her feet. This time, its radius expanded, and she let it sit there for a moment, to freeze the water to the shore. She marched across the ice, allowing it form an ice bridge suitable for 4 wolves to across side-by-side. She could feel the foot heat up as the ice froze. She made it across, and stepped aside, letting the wolves cross to the beat of the drum.

Once everyone was across, Mudrich howled, *AWOOOOO!* ("Attack!") She raised her hammer forward and all the wolves ran ahead. Ersatzica beat the drum faster as she ran after them.

Mudrich took the hammer in her mouth and got down on all fours, running like a wild wolf to the drums.

Ersatzica ran, beating the drums fast enough to speed them up, but slow enough so she could keep up.

Mudrich was the first to dive in. With a crazed howl she ran to the first cat she could find, leapt into the air, and while mid-air, she dropped the hammer from her mouth, caught it with both her hands, and swung it at the cat. The cat flew to the right and splat against a wall, lifeless.

A great cry rang out from the outpost and the cats panicked as they fled. The wolves overwhelmed them, catching them in vulnerable moments and eliminating them quickly.

Some fled, but they didn't get far.

Ersatzica beat the drum, speeding them up. *We. Are. Wolves. We. Are. Wolves. We. Will. Win. We. Will. Win.* She followed Mudrich around the village, watching her go on an unstoppable rampage.

Then she stepped on something soft. Looking down, she saw a green hat with a red feather in it. A red strand flashed blue.

"Fisher!" She whispered to herself.

She stopped drumming, ending the beat. The wolves barely noticed, continuing to ransack the cat outpost.

Ersatzica picked up the hat. It had stains where blood had splattered onto it from the inside. Her wide eyes were only matched by her wide open mouth. She searched for a body. There were dead cats everywhere, but none with Fisher's exact pattern. "Fisher! Fisher!"

She forgot about the raid and ran around the cat outpost, looking for him. "I hope he escaped."

AWOOO! (indiscernible) A faint howl came from somewhere in the outpost. It didn't sound like any normal wolf howl she'd heard before.

Ersatzica followed the howl to a jail cell. Inside, she found a black and white wolf.

"Ersie?" The wolf asked.

"That's Chiefling Ersatzica to you." She said. "But don't worry, I'll get you out."

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

Ersatzica looked up at him. He had a bandage over one eye, and his arms had cut marks on it. His forehead had a long cut that went up his scalp. "Did Majestra do this to you?"

"Yes."

"You poor thing. Don't worry, I'll get you out." Ersatzica tried to pick the lock with her wolf claw, but it didn't work. "Don't tell anyone about this."

"About what?"

"Shhh." Ersatzica reached a wolf hand forward, and pulled back on the wrist of the other one, like she was rolling up her sleeves. That hand turned into a cat hand. With a cat claw, she nudged the internals of the lock around until it came open. "Aha! Just a little trick I learned from Fisher." Then she "rolled down her sleeve" again, turning completely back into a wolf.

"Thank you." The wolf said, exasperated. "Now, what are you doing with that hat?"

Chiefling Ersatzica growled. "Don't you touch that! I have my own reasons for keeping that."

"May I see it?"

"No."

"I think I know who it belongs to."

"How could you possibly know that?"

"And in fact, I know where he is."

"Is he alive?"

"I believe so. Just give it to me and I can help you find him."

"You smell like a cat."

"Well, I've been here in the cat outpost for all this time."

Ersatzica hesitantly handed the hat to the strange wolf, who couldn't even howl an actual word.

"Sorry, Ersie." The wolf took off.

Ersie tried grabbing him, but he slipped away. By the time she left the jail building, he was gone. Now the last remnant of her cat friend was gone.

She searched the entire outpost. A lot of the cat bodies looked familiar, but none were Fisher. That wolf was suspicious, but he claimed to know that Fisher was alive, and where to find him. She could only hope that somehow, Fisher really was out there. He was still alive, and survived the raid. She just had to have hope.

Music: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hN_q-_nGv4U

Then she found a body, hidden in the shadows, with its head smashed to pieces. It was a black and white cat, and it had scratches all over its arms. *Isn't this near where I found the hat?* She looked closer, trying to find the face, anything at all. An eye, the nose, a tooth, an ear? But its skull was smashed so thoroughly that it was all paste on the wall. Ersatzica knelt down, and took its hand in hers. "I'm so sorry, Fisher. I should've warned you. But I failed you. And now you're... gone."

She sat in silence. *We had a lot of good times. You saved me from the river, twice. You taught me how to be a cat. Well, Fisher, guess what? I'm a cat. I was always a cat. Wish I could've told you. I appreciate all you've done for me, helping me get back to being a wolf, despite the fact that you're fighting the wolves. I wish I could've known you better. You told me a lot of stories, which I enjoyed, but none about yourself. Who were you really, Fisher? 'Scoundrel' was an unfitting name. I'm glad I got to at least give you a proper name, before you died. I wish... I wish you survived. I wish... I could've saved you.*

She sobbed into his hand.

She didn't respond to the howls to group up. She didn't even respond to the Mudrich's secret sibling howl. Finally, Mudrich found her.

"Ersie? What are you doing? We won."

"Did you do this?" Ersatzica asked, not looking up.

"*That?*" She pointed at the cat splattered against the wall. "I don't remember that one specifically, but sure, I'll take credit for it." She lifted her hammer into position over the splatter. "Sure does look like my hammer's print, what do you think?"

"I wish I had never made that hammer for you."

"Ersie? Ersie what's wrong?"

Ersie got up and walked away.

"Ersie, we won! We were victorious! Why are you so sad?"

[ersie internal monologue: if we won, why do I feel so terrible?]

"Mudrich, I need some space." She said, not even looking back.

"No, Ersie, tell me what's going on." Mudrich grabbed her by the shoulder.

Ersie stopped.

"Is this something about you turning into a cat—"

"I said!" Ersie slapped her in the muzzle, drawing blood. "I need some *space*!" The force of the slap stung her paws as the look of shock and betrayal on Mudrich's face stung her heart. Nevertheless, her fury held her soured countenance.

"Ok, ok." Mudrich backed off. "Don't have to be so mean." Ears pinned and tail tucked, Mudrich ran off, dragging her hammer.

[show ersie's internal dialogue here, where she keeps it together]

Ersatzica watched her walk away. Rage built up inside her. She fought every urge in her bones, in her fur, in her claws to rip the wolf skin off—and up—and avenge her fallen friends. But her rational side kept her safe, kept her in wolf form. Even as patches of cat flickered about around her body. She held steady.

Her legs gave out from under her. Kneeling, she cried a river of tears into the heart of the cat outpost.

===

Over the course of that day, Ersatzica was busy identifying items that were heirlooms. There were about as many as there were dead cats. She found trinkets and gadgets, necklaces and wristbands, a keg of beer, and a quite a few articles of clothing. She noted how none of them seemed to be body parts.

For each one she found, she howled to the moon as she held it.

"Why are you howling for the cats?" A wolf in Mudrich's pack asked her.

"I'm putting a good word in to Alpha, so that Alpha he might accept them into his moon paradise."

"Of course I know about that, but why for the *cats*?"

"Wouldn't you want someone to howl for you when you die in combat?"

"Yes, but—"

Ersatzica stood up, staring him straight in the eyes.

He stared back.

"Are you good with heirlooms?"

"Yes?"

"Good. I need someone to help me catalogue them."

"But I'm already on burial duty."

"Perfect. This is part of burial."

"But Mudrich said—"

"Mudrich, do you mind if I recruit some of your pack?" Ersatzica said as she passed by.

"Go ahead." Mudrich said, muzzle down.

"What's your name?"

"Yosummit."

"Your first task, Yosummit, is to help me gather the heirlooms I find."

"Yes, chiefling."

Ersatzica pointed out heirlooms to him and he carried them to a central point in the middle of the cat outpost. It was right next to Fisher's body. Ersatzica kept a close eye on it to ensure it was handled properly when the burial team came for it.

"This is going to take a lot of time to sort through." Ersatzica ordered Yosummit to try each item, doing what he thought the item would do. She found some paper and noted things down. She found mostly useless or minor effects, but she did find a few that showed promise.

"Thank you for your help, Yosummit." Ersatzica dismissed him.

"Yes, chiefing."

===

When they got back to the wolf village, the four siblings met Mother in their barracks.

"Mission report."

"We won." Mudrich said, sprawled out on her bed.

"My team shot down 5 stragglers." Wryonin nodded.

"We took no prisoners." Lemilay agreed.

"Very good, my pups." Mother smiled. "And you, Ersatzica?"

Ersatzica buried her head in her knees as she sat in her top bunk. "We found 65 heirlooms. 3 with potential combat uses."

"Very good. Casualties?"

"My pack didn't have any." Wryonin declared.

"There were no wolf deaths." Lemilay beamed.

"Excellent. I am very proud of all of you. You showed great leadership and competence."

"So may I ask....?" Lemilay asked.

"I'm meeting with the veteran warriors tomorrow to discuss leadership performance tomorrow. I'll know then."

"Where and when?"

"You're not invited, Lemilay."

Wryonin laughed.

"It's not funny." Lemilay giggled, biting his tail.

"Hey! Mother! Lemilay bit me!" He swiped her with his tail.

She lunged at it again, grabbing and thrashing it around. She pulled it and he fell out of his bunk onto the floor. He landed on all fours.

"I'll get you for that!" Wryonin jumped and pounced on Lemilay, sending her onto her back. "Tickle tickle tickle!"

"No! Stop!" Lemilay giggled uncontrollably.

"Mudrich, did you have fun?" Mother asked.

"I *did*." Mudrich replied.

"Did something happen?"

"Nothing happened."

"You need a bath, my pup. It's not good to let your fur be soaked with so much blood."

"I don't care."

Mother's ears pinned back for a split second. "Very well. Ersatzica, are you ok?"

"I'm fine."

"I see. I have other matters to attend to. Good night, my pups."

"Good night!" Wryonin and Lemilay paused just long enough to cheerfully reply.

"Night," said Mudrich.

"Good night, Mother," said Ersatzica.

The girls all got ready for bed, and then Wryonin turned and blew out the candle and got into bed himself.

That night, in the dark, Ersatzica tossed and turned. Her thoughts wouldn't let her sleep. Leaning over the side of the top bunk, she whispered, "Mudrich, you awake?"

"Yeah."

"Is it ok if I come down?"

"Yeah."

Music: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LySf7d0u8r8>

Ersie snook down the ladder and gently laid next to her sister in the bottom bunk.

"Hi Muddy."

"Hi."

"Hey, I wanted to apologize to you. For slapping you earlier today."

"Mm hmm."

"I was really upset at that moment, and I let my emotions get the best of me. I'm sorry, Muddy."

"Are you still mad at me?"

"What? No."

Muddy grabbed her sister in a tight embrace. "I'm so sorry Ersie. I don't know what I did to make you mad at me, but I'm so sorry and I promise I'll never do it again and—"

"No no no, Muddy," Ersie hugged her back. "I wasn't mad at you. I was... going through something, and I took it out on you. I'm sorry that I made you feel like that."

"Really?" Muddy sucked in a tear.

"Yes, and you will always be my sister, no matter what..."

"...but?"

Ersie sighed. "Muddy, you know how I turned into a cat?"

"And then we gave you your wolf skin, and now you're a wolf again!"

"Well, what if... what if you *didn't*?"

"What?"

“What if it got lost, or it didn’t work, or—”

“But it *did*. And you’re my sister again.”

“Muddy, uh...” Ersie sighed. *Why is she being so difficult? Would she really not accept me if I was a cat?* “Never mind. You told me all I needed to hear.” She turned to get out of the bed.

“Ersie wait!”

“You wouldn’t understand.”

“I’ll try. I’ll try my hardest. Please tell me.”

“Ok. I’ll show you something. But you have to promise not to tell anyone, ok?”

“Ok.”

“Promise.”

“I promise not to tell.”

“Swear on Alpha’s name.”

“I swear to Alpha that I will not tell anyone.”

“Ok.” Ersie held up her hand. “See my hand?” She let the wolfskin slip, revealing her orange cat fur and claws underneath.

“Ersie, wha—”

Ersie grabbed Muddy’s muzzle. Then she turned her hand back into a wolf’s.

“Shhh!” She released her muzzle.

“Ersie, you turn into a cat?”

“Sometimes, even involuntarily.”

“Involun—”

“Without me meaning to.”

“Oh! Oh no! You’re *cursed*, Ersie! It’s those damn boots! You should’ve never put them on, Ersie.”

Ersie sighed again. "You're missing the point, Mudrich."

"You're right. We need to break your curse, Ersie. Don't worry, I'll destroy the boots tomorrow."

"No, Muddy. That won't work."

"Well, have you tried?"

"No, it won't work because..."

"Because?"

She shook her head. "I knew you wouldn't understand."

"What? Ersie, no! Tell me!"

"No. Goodnight, Mudrich." Ersie climbed back up into her bunk bed.

"Tell me! Tell me!" Mudrich shook the bed.

"No."

Wryonin grumbled. "Mudrich! Go back to sleep!"

Mudrich quieted down. "Goodnight," she eeked out.

Ersatzica lay in bed, still unable to sleep. Her wolf fur felt dirty, uneasy. She buried herself in her blanket, and let the wolfskin slip off. She curled up into a little cat ball, hugging her red-tipped tail. *My siblings won't accept me for what I am inside, not even Mudrich. I guess it's ok. I'm a wolf anyways.* She petted the red tip of her tail as she fell asleep.

Chapter 9

AWOOOO! ("Hour") The Hour Wolf howled at the crack of dawn.

Ersie opened her eyes to the new day, greeted by her red-tipped cat tail, still under her covers.

The bed shook as Mudrich woke up. The bed creaked as she landed on the floor. Her hammer went *skrik* against the wall as she picked it up. *Pad pad pad* as she

went to the door. She *creaked* it open, but didn't close it. The cool morning air blew in.

Ersie realized her back left paw was outside the blanket, and quickly retreated it back in. *It wasn't like Mudrich to sneak out like that. She must really be going out to destroy the boots.* Ersie stroked her tail. *What will she say when she finds out they're no longer where we put them? She'd probably look in my workshop next. I can't let her destroy them.* Ersatzica put on the wolfskin, and once it completely covered her, she uncovered herself and jumped down to the floor.

Wryonin and Lemilay were already gone, beds both neatly made.

Ersatzica raced to her workshop, found the boots, and wrapped them in cloth. She hugged the drums as she put them on, kissed Nosalen's foot as she wrapped it around her ankle, and held the locket close as she placed it around her neck. She packed her screwdriver into her utility belt, put it on, and scrambled out the door with the boots.

She spotted Mudrich in the streets of town, opened the locket, and turned invisible. She stepped off to the side, but still, Mudrich bumped into her, clumsily falling onto the ground. "Sorry, Muddy." She said, as she ran off.

"Ersie?" Muddy looked around, confused.

Ersie took off down the stairs, taking care to close the locket in the shadows so as to not startle anyone. Wolves nodded to her as she ran, some even addressing her as "chiefing". She ran as hard as she could, pushing her body to their limits. She ran across the river, freezing it only as much as she needed to. She ran up the bank on the other side and into the cat outpost.

Finally, she could take a breath.

There were lots of other wolves in the outpost, still working on disposing of the bodies from the previous day's raid.

AWOOO! ("Here") Ersatzica howled. The wolves in her vicinity all turned to look at her. She recognized one of them. "Yosummit."

Yosummit dropped what he was doing. "Yes, chiefing?"

"Come with me."

"Yes, chiefling."

She led him to the outskirts of the outpost, in the thick of the forest. "I need you to dig me a hole, right here."

"Here?" He examined the spot. "There's not enough room for a body here."

"For this one, there is. Hurry."

"Ok, ok." He dug fast.

As soon as the hole was big enough, Ersatzica stopped him. "That's enough."

"What do you need this hole for?"

"I need you to promise me that you won't tell anyone. Swear on alpha."

"I swear to Alpha I won't tell anyone."

"Thank you." Ersatzica placed the covered boots in the hole. "Now bury it."

"Ok." Yosummit buried the boots.

"Thank you."

"Is that it?"

"Yes, you may go back to your duties."

"Ok."

"And if you find a strange wolf that can't speak Howl, send him to me."

"Certainly." Yosummit returned to the cat outpost.

Ersatzica went to the pile of heirlooms in the center of the outpost. The black and white headless cat body was still plastered against the wall. She found a book in the pile, and wiped the blood off it to let the blue streak shine. She cuddled up to the body and put the book in its hands.

"How about a story?"

She flipped through the book, looking for something fitting. Her eyes fell upon a picture of something very familiar to her: the drums. "These are a known heirloom?"

Music: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OykiLWjpOzY>

The Boots of Princess Retriyoan

Known as the Battle Drummer Princess, Princess Retriyoan would join the heart of the battle, beating her drums to drive her soldiers onward. They say a battle was never lost while Retriyoan was in the mix. She kept hopes alive, and was greatly loved by all, and missed by all when she passed. We will remember her by her deeds, which were many and glorious.

She is succeeded by her red-tipped daughters, Princesses Seamtrust, Marvelosa, and Pantrinome, who continue to uphold her legacy.

Ersatzica brushed her wolf paw against the golden-plated picture of Retriyoan. She was a beautiful orange-striped cat, with magnificent red hair and a red-tipped tail. She wore a golden collar with a ruby engraved into it. Under the collar, black tendrils peeked out that looked like scorch marks. She wore the drums that—Ersatzica briefly glanced at the drums she wore on her hips—that Ersatzica now wore. But instead of on the hips, Retriyoan wore them on her thighs, wrapped around each individual leg.

The Drums of Princess Retriyoan are a legendary heirloom intended to be worn and used by her daughters, and their daughters, in times of great need. The wearer can make a beat with the drums, and all cats who follow the beat will be able to follow it, no matter how fast it becomes. Slowing the beat also has beneficial effects. If the wearer syncs the drum beats to a person, slowing the beat will effect them, even unwillingly. This effect can even stop them from moving, even freezing them midair. The drum beat can also be synced to non-living objects and phenomena.

The drums were bestowed upon Princess Pantrinome.

Ersatzica placed the book in her lap, letting it rest on the drums. *If this is true, these drums are even more powerful than I realized. Wait, Princess Retriyoan? Isn't that the cat who...* She pulled out a book from her sack, and flipped to the part with the wanted poster. *It is! She's the one who put out a wanted poster for Monassus. I wonder what she wanted him for? Well, it looks like she caught him.* She chuckled.

Granddaughter? Hello? The words suddenly appeared in the margins in the book.

Ersatzica blinked. She stood up, picking up the book and putting it in the sunlight. She looked again. The words weren't there. *I must be seeing things.*

"Ersie?" A wolf approached her.

"You!" She pointed. "You're the one who took off with Fisher's hat!"

"Uh, yes, that's me. About that—"

"You lied to me! You said Fisher was ok, and—"

"Whoa whoa whoa!" He looked around. Other wolves had stopped what they were doing to watch what was happening. "Hold on a second, let me explain."

AWOOOO! ("Here") Ersatzica pointed at the strange black-and-white wolf. "Grab him!"

The other wolves ran at him.

But before they could get him, he revealed a tooth and turned invisible. The other wolves were perplexed.

"I know where he is." Ersatzica opened the locket and also turned invisible. "Great Uncle Yotleph, please help me catch this wolf."

She opened her eyes, and she saw the strange wolf running away, but his body was transparent.

She ran after him. She wasn't fast enough, but it didn't matter. When he felt safe enough, he stopped to take a breath, and she caught up to him. She grabbed him by the hand and then closed the locket. "Got you!"

"Ersie, please, I have something to tell you." The strange wolf hid the tooth around his neck into his chest floof and reappeared.

"Why do you keep calling me that? I told you, call me Chiefling Ersatzica."

"You'll understand why after I tell you what I need to."

"And what is that?"

"I know where Fisher is, and he's alive."

"How can you be sure? Didn't you see the body in the cent—"

“Yes, and that is not Fisher. Trust me.”

Ersatzica let go.

“Wouldn’t you rather believe he is alive? Just trust me, please.”

“Do you have any proof?”

“Not right this moment—but hey! Hey! I have a message! From Fisher. He wants you to meet him tonight, around midnight, at the place where Yotleph died. Do you remember how to get there?”

“Will you be there?”

“Yes, I mean no. But Fisher will be.”

“Ok. I believe you. Tell Fisher I’m coming, and that I’m looking forward to seeing him.”

“I’m looking forward to seeing you too, Ersie. I mean he is.”

Ersatzica smiled, then frowned and tilted her head. “Who are you?”

“Um... not important.”

“Why aren’t you over here helping bury bodies like the rest of the wolves?”

“I was... assigned to another task. Yeah, that.”

Ersatzica squinted at him. “Ok. But if Fisher isn’t there when I go there, I’ll have my wolves track you down and gut you for treason.”

“Ouch, Ersie. But ok, point taken. Also, come alone. Fisher is... let’s say, afraid of wolves.”

“Understandable.” Ersatzica nodded. “See you then.” She walked away.

“See you then.”

Ersatzica turned around, but the wolf was gone. She put her hand on the locket, but decided not to open it. *Fisher. Can he really still be alive?*

===

Ersatzica went back to organizing the heirlooms. She requested someone bury the black and white headless cat. She tested a few more heirlooms, experimenting to see what they did. She didn't discover very many effects.

The day wore on, and soon it was getting late. She left the pile and headed off in the opposite direction everyone else was.

"Are you not heading home, Chiefling Ersatzica?" Yosummit asked.

"I have something I need to do. I'll catch up."

"I can't let you go by yourself. There might be cats still lurking in these woods."

"I'll be fine. Don't follow me."

"But Chiefl—"

Ersatzica growled, baring her teeth.

Yosummit backed off.

"See you tomorrow, Yosummit."

"Bye?" He backed away slowly.

Ersatzica raced through the forest, eagerly waiting to get to the meeting spot. When she arrived, there was no one there. "Fisher! Fisher!"

The creatures of the forest responded with regular forest critter noises.

Is he really going to be here? Maybe I'm too early. I shouldn't get my hopes up. Fisher is likely dead, and this strange wolf is leading me into a trap.

Nevertheless, Ersatzica sat down under a tree. She beat on the drums and hummed a little tune.

Music: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o8pQLtHTPaI>

"Ersie?" a voice called out.

Ersie stood up. "Fisher?" *Could it really be...?*

A figure arose from a bush. It was too dark to see anything other than their silhouette, but it was definitely a cat. "Ersie?" He walked forward into the small clearing under the trees. He wore a hat with a feather sticking out of it.

"Fisher?" She approached. As she got closer, the cat definitely was black and white, and had a bandage over an eye. "Fisher!" *It really is! It really is!* She jumped out of her wolfskin, pouncing on him with a passionate kiss. *I can't believe he's alive!* They lingered for a tender moment. *I may be a wolf, and he may be a cat, and this may be wrong, but I don't care. As long as he's ok—*then Ersie backed off. Sheepishly smiling, she said, "Sorry, I'm just so excited to see you—"

Fisher put a finger to her mouth, wiping a tear from her eye. "I love you, too, Ersie." He kissed her back.

He grabbed her in a hug and pulled her close. She pulled his head close in turn. He rubbed her back, stroking behind her orange cat ears and around her shoulders. She took a free hand to beat on the drums. *BUM BUM BUM* She synced it to his movements, then slowed the beat down, as she felt pleasure from his strokes. She also rubbed behind his neck.

Things got heated up, and suddenly they found themselves on fire. Literally.

"Fire!" Ersie screamed, frantically pawing at Fisher's chest. "You're on fire!"

"So are you!" Fisher patted down her chest, putting out the fire.

After a final pat down, they both were no longer on fire. They sat down against a tree, holding hands and leaning on each other.

Fisher sighed. "Well, that was something, huh, Ersie?"

"Fisher! I'm so glad you're alive!" She cried. "I saw that cat, and I thought it was you and—"

"I'm fine." He rubbed a paw hand along her thigh. "But you're still a cat! A beautiful, gorgeous orange cat, with soft fur, and *sharp* claws, and... I can't get enough of seeing you like this."

"But?"

“But you want to go back to being a wolf, right? I’ve found something that shows promise—”

“Fisher, I need to tell you something.”

“What is it?”

‘I’m a wolf, I hold to that. But I wasn’t born that way. I was born a cat, and I’ve been wearing this wolfskin all my life.”

“And you only just recently discovered this?”

Ersatzica nodded.

“Wow, that must’ve been hard on you.”

“It was. It *is*.”

“I understand.”

“I know you do.” Ersatzica licked his head, specifically the part where the cut was.

“Ouch.”

“Hold still.”

“It’s just a cut, Ersie, I’ll be fine.”

She kissed it one more time. “Ok.”

They sat in silence for a moment, enjoying each other’s company. Then they shut their eyes, and fell asleep.

===

AWOOOO! (“Here!”)

Ersatzica woke up. It was dark, and the moon wasn’t even half full.

AWOOOO! (“Here!”)

“Awooo!” She choked. “Oh, that’s right. I have to put the wolfskin back on.”

“Ersie?” Fisher squeezed her hand.

"I'm sorry, Fisher. I have to get back to my pack. I'll be back tomorrow." She got up and searched for the wolfskin.

"Oh." He shivered in disappointment.

"Wait, where will you sleep tonight?"

"Well, they didn't destroy the beds in the raid, so there's that."

"But we're watching the outpost all day and all night. You won't be safe."

"I'll figure something out."

"No, hold on. Help me find the wolfskin. You can take it, and sleep in the barracks tonight."

"No, Ersie, don't sacrifice yourself for me like this."

"I'm not. My siblings know what my cat form looks like. They'll know it's me. Worst case, I spend the night in the jail." *It's a long shot, and they won't like it. But they wouldn't kill me, right?*

"No, Ersie. I can't let you risk yourself like that. Besides, there's no reason to do that. I'll be fine. I survived last night out here, didn't I?"

"But it's not safe for you out here. Wait, where's my wolfskin?" Ersie stumbled around, kicking things in the dirt, hoping to trip over it. "Fisher, have you seen it?"

"No, I haven't."

"Can you help me look?"

After looking around in the dark for a while, neither Ersie nor Fisher could find it.

"Aw shoot, I guess that means you're stuck as a cat then?"

"No! I'm a wolf! I have to have it!"

"Ersie, it's dark out, and you're searching for a black object. It's near impossible, even with our night vision."

"But my siblings are going to be worried when I don't come home tonight. And they'll start a search party for me, and someone knows that I stayed on this side of the river, and they'll find me, find *us*, and they'll kill us!"

“Ersie, Ersie.” He grabbed her by the shoulders. “Calm down. Everything will be alright. We’ll survive the night, then come back to look for your wolfskin in the morning, ok?”

Ersatzica swallowed, and tried to control her rapid breathing. “Ok. Alright. We find it tomorrow?”

“Yes.”

“But where will we go tonight?”

“Follow me.” He took her by the hand and led her through the woods. She caught occasional glimpses of the moon between the tree tops, but otherwise she had no idea where she was. They arrived at a cliff face. Fisher ran his fingers along the wall. “It’s here somewhere.” Eventually, he found a spot where his hand seemed to pass right through the rock. “In here.”

Inside, there was a campfire running low on wood, with a few dozen figures sitting around it.

“Scoundrel, is that you?”

“Yes.” He hung his head in shame.

“Finally. Where’ve you been? Never mind. Go get us some more wood.”

Fisher whispered to Ersie, “Go sit by the campfire, I’ll be right back.”

Ersie stood in the entrance. Outside, the woods were almost pitch black. With her hand on the outer wall, she walked outside to look in. The opening was a mere crack in the cliff, and it looked nothing like a cave until you entered it. She shivered. The whole cave smelled like cat, but strangely, the scent didn’t carry outside.

“Hello?”

“Majestra, dear, is that you?” A familiar voice called to her. “Come, sit by the fire. You must be cold.”

She sat next to the cat who called to her. “Auntie Seamtrust, is that you?”

“Yes it is dear. How was your mission?”

“Good.”

"It must have been amazing if you're back so soon."

"I guess I got lucky."

"So what did you find out?"

"The wolves are all over. They have complete control over the valley. Just like when Great Uncle Yotleph was alive."

"Who?"

"Oh, I mean, 'The Phantom Guard', that one wolf who—"

"I'm familiar with the legend, I just didn't know he had a name."

"Yeah, all wolves have a name."

"And how did you come across its name?"

"Just one of those things I picked up on my mission."

Auntie Seamstress giggled shortly. "You are such a clever girl. You remind me so much of my sister, Pantrinome."

"Maybe I can meet her someday."

"If only, child, if only. But mayhaps, you have already, in a way."

"Auntie?"

"What do you think of heirlooms, child?"

"They're a gift from our ancestors, a piece of themselves they leave behind for us to hold on to."

"Interesting. And how do you know if something is an heirloom?"

"It's pretty obvious, I don't know how to answer that question."

"Observe." She took an earring from her ear, and showed it to a cat sitting near.

"What do you think this heirloom does?"

The cat shrugged. "Increase your hearing range?"

"Now," Auntie Seamtrust turned to Ersatzica. "Can *you* tell me what this heirloom does?"

Ersatzica gave her a puzzled glance. "Huh? Wait, can I see that?" She took it and looked over it, rotating it in the light of the campfire.

Auntie Seamtrust smiled. "Do you get it now?"

"No, this isn't an heirloom. I'm not sure what you're getting at."

The cat next to Auntie Seamtrust hacked up a furball. "It's not?"

Auntie Seamtrust took back her earring. "See?"

Ersatzica shook her head.

"You will in time, child. You are very special, just like Majestra. You will grow to be a powerful leader, one day. Now, are you hungry?"

Ersatzica's stomach answered for her.

Auntie giggled. "Here, have some stew."

Ersatzica gulped it all down. She looked around the cave, at the few cats sitting around the campfire. "So, is this all there is?"

"We have more we can make in the back." Auntie took the bowl and handed it to another cat.

"No, I mean you—*us* cats. Is this all there is left? After the raid?"

"Yes, unfortunately. But it doesn't matter, child. The plan is still in motion. Right?" She winked.

"Right, the plan. Yes, you're right." Ersatzica sipped some more stew. "I have it all under control."

"Splendid!"

"Alright!" Fisher grunted. "I've got the firewood!" A wall of wood approached the firepit.

"By Alpha, Fisher!" Ersatzica giggled. "How can you see with that load?"

Fisher dumped the wood next to the fire. "Oh? You like that?" He flexed his muscles in front of the fire.

Ersatzica giggled. "I saved you a seat." She patted the log next to her, as she scooched over, forcing Auntie Seamtrust to move, who gave an exasperated grunt.

"What are we doing, putting ale in a teacup?" Auntie seemed annoyed.

"Auntie, we have to make room for Fisher."

"Fisher?" She laughed. "Please, he's hardly a fisher. Besides, his name is already Scoundrel."

"Auntie, please."

"Mmph. Very well, as you please. Next time don't be so rude about it!"

"I'm sorry, Auntie. I'll remember."

"So..." Fisher began. "It's ok for me to sit next to you?"

"Your Majesty." Reminded Auntie.

"No no, Auntie. He's fine, he's with me." Ersatzica turned to Fisher. "Come, sit."

Fisher plopped on down next to her, almost falling over backward. "Whoa, this log isn't flat."

Ersatzica steadied him. "No, but I got your back."

"And I got yours."

Auntie hissed. "Don't go touching my niece, filthy hound."

Fisher put his arms up and lowered them into his lap.

Auntie returned to normal.

Ersatzica was quiet. Her ears pinned, tail swooshing. *Ok, so I can't be friendly towards Fisher around Auntie Seamtrust. Got it.*

The rest of the night was uneventful. By Auntie's orders, Fisher and Ersatzica slept on opposite sides of the cave. It was miserable and cold, but it was at least safe. Ersatzica sat up and looked across the cave at the mound that was Fisher. It rose

and fell in the middle at regular intervals. Ersie smiled. *He's alive*. She imagined her red-tipped tail was Fisher's as she hugged it.

===

Music: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g-mdQgrZgew>

Wryonin and Mudrich stood on the home side of the riverbank, waiting for Lemilay to cross. It was dark and the waxing moon was out, but it was still warm from the evening sun.

Finally, a black and white wolf emerged from the forest and approached Lemilay. She held her head high and walked confidently. Lemilay whispered to her, and then she relaxed her posture and put her head down. They got in the boat and Lemilay rowed across.

"Ersie!" Mudrich greeted when they arrived on the bank.

Ersie stepped out of the boat, looked Mudrich up and down, and scoffed.

"Give her a hug, *Ersie*." Lemilay said.

Ersie grimaced, but acquiesced. She knelt down—Mudrich assaulted her with a full on hug—and gingerly patted her on the back. After the hug, she immediately brushed off her fur.

"Ersie, are you ok?" Mudrich asked.

"I'm fine." Ersie patted herself down. "Let's go home."

"Alright, let's go." Wryonin led the way. The other three followed.

"Ersie, are you mad at me?" Mudrich walked beside Ersie.

Ersie looked at Lemilay.

Lemilay nodded.

Ersie held her head high. "Yes."

"What did I do?"

"You already know what you did."

“Is it about the boots?”

Ersie didn't respond.

“Well, if it is, I didn't!”

Ersie was silent.

“I didn't destroy the boots. I was going to, then on the way to get the hoof clippings, I decided not to. I left your boots alone.”

Ersie was silent.

“I don't understand why, but I know the boots are important to you. So, I promise to not destroy them. I'm sorry.”

Ersie was silent.

“Ersie, please tell me what's wrong.”

“I don't know what your problem is. Just leave me alone.”

“But Ersie!”

“Mudrich!” Lemilay barked. “She said to leave her alone!”

“Oh.” Mudrich stopped walking. “Ok.” She trailed behind them the rest of the way home.

When they got home, Mother was waiting outside their room. Her tired eyes betrayed no lack of alertness. “Good evening, my pups.” She pushed the door open.

Wryonin licked her on the cheek as he walked in, wagging his tail. She licked him on the forehead in return.

Mother ushered Lemilay and Mudrich in, but when Ersatzica crossed her path, she stopped her. “Ersatzica, I need to speak with you.”

Ersatzica looked shocked. She looked at Lemilay. Lemilay tensed, but nodded. Ersatzica took a deep breath, and relaxed, head held high. “What is it, Mother?”

Mother shut the door. “Let's go for a walk.”

Wryonin's ears pricked. He snook up on the closed door.

Lemilay stopped him. "Wryonin, don't."

"Don't what?"

Lemilay's face betrayed a look of concern. "Uh, don't trip. Mudrich still hasn't gotten the wall repaired properly yet."

"Hey! Ersie hasn't either."

Wryonin rolled his eyes. "Sure." Wryonin opened the door slowly and snuck outside. He pricked his ears, sneaking behind them.

Music: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mm0Tk7KD3hc>

"So I've been told," Mother stated to Ersatzica. "That you struck someone very close to you in the face. Is that true?"

Wryonin waited out the silence.

"And why did you do that?"

"He grabbed me by the hand."

"I understand. But that's not the appropriate response. We don't strike people we care about, especially not in the face. You could've poked an eye out."

"So what?"

Mother grumbled. "Don't talk to me like that, young pup."

Ersatzica tucked her head and put her arm up, as if to block an incoming strike.

"Ersatzica, are you ok?"

"I'm fine."

"I'm not angry. I'm just talking."

A brief pause. "I meant, so what... should I do? If that happens again?"

"Tell them to let go."

"What if they don't listen?"

“Ok, then you may hit them. But only for the purposes of getting them to let go. Hitting them in such a way that causes damage is unnecessary. But first, talk to them. Let them know you don’t like what they’re doing and you want them to stop.”

“Ok, I understand.”

“Good. I love you, my pup.”

Ersatzica was silent.

“Ok, let’s get you pups to bed. When we get there, I want you to apologize to Mudrich.”

“Mudrich?”

“Isn’t that who you struck?”

“Ah, yes. Yes, Mother, I will do that.”

“Good.”

Wryonin quickly but silently ran back into the room and jumped onto his bunk. He looked around, pretending to have been there the whole time.

Ersatzica and Mother entered the room. Mother nodded to Mudrich.

Ersatzica stood over Mudrich as she said, “I apologize... *Mudrich*, for striking you today.”

“Ah, it’s alright, Ersie.” Mudrich got up for a hug.

Ersie awkwardly gave her a hug.

“Are you still mad at me?”

Ersie looked at Lemilay, who shook her head. “No.” Ersie awkwardly stood up.

“Ah, I forgot, Ersatzica.” Lemilay got up. “You were right. So you get my pillow for a night. So, here you go. My pillow in *your* bed, right up here. Where you sleep. And I’ll take your pillow, for tonight. Fair?”

Ersatzica nodded. “Yes, right. Of course I would have a top bunk.” She got in her bunk bed and laid down on her belly on top the blanket.

Wryonin tilted his head.

"Comfy?" Lemilay grimaced.

"Yes, quite." Ersatzica yawned.

"Alright, time for prayer." Mother said. "Let's bow our heads."

Everyone bowed their heads, except Ersatzica, who was already asleep.

Mother said a prayer, then said goodnight.

After checking his sisters and blowing out the candle, Wryonin laid awake in bed. Something wasn't right, but he couldn't quite put an ear on it.

===

Music: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8inJtTG_DuU

"Erfie, wake up, Erfie."

Ersie opened her eyes to Fisher with a fish in his mouth.

"Fisher?"

"Good morning. I haf fish fo you." Fisher leaned forward.

Ersie leaned in and took the fish with her mouth. They rubbed noses in the process. Ersatzica gobbled it down eagerly.

"How did you sleep?"

Ersatzica swallowed the last bit, then looked over to where Fisher had slept that night. "It was cold." She unstrapped the drums and the wolf foot. "And these were a bit uncomfortable to sleep with." She rubbed the part of her fur where they had been.

Fisher rubbed the sore spot on her leg, tenderly. "Well next time, don't sleep with them on, silly."

Ersatzica laughed. "You should've told me that last night."

"I forgot."

They laughed.

"So," he whispered in her ear. "Do you still want to become a wolf?"

Ersatzica's eyes lit up. "Yes. Is there a way?"

"I found a book that talks about a deer mage who lives in a herd just beyond the wolf village, queRen..." Fisher flipped through a book. "queRenari-Ko. ...'has the power to transform those who do not resemble their true self.'"

"What does that mean?"

Fisher whispered, "Well, your true self is a wolf, right? So because you don't look like a wolf, she can turn you into one."

"Permanently?"

"Hmm..." Fisher scanned the page. "Yes, I believe so."

Ersatzica thought about it for a moment, chewing on the fish. *If I go there, I'll become a wolf permanently, finally! It might be dangerous, going through the wolf village and trekking through the forest to get there, but it'll be worth it. Right? She looked at Fisher. But what about Fisher? If she becomes a wolf, will she ever get to see him again? Hang out with him? Kiss him?*

"Well," Ersatzica whispered. "I am a wolf, so... Can we try finding the wolf skin first? That will... make it easier to pass through the wolf village."

His ears pinned back for a split second. "Sure." Fisher helped her to her feet.

Ersatzica put the drums and wolf foot back on, then they exited the cave and navigated to the spot Yotleph was found.

"I don't see it anywhere!" proclaimed Ersatzica.

"We've been searching for awhile now. Maybe one of your siblings picked it up? They're probably waiting to give it to you."

"That doesn't make any sense. How did they find me, and if they did, why did they take it and not wake me up? And last time, they tracked me down to give it to me. This doesn't make any sense."

Ears pinned back, the hairs on Fisher's neck stood on end. "I'm sorry, Ersatzica."

"I can't believe this! Someone must've stolen it!"

"If we get to the deer herd, we won't have to worry about it ever again, right?"

Ersatzica stopped searching. "I guess so. It just sucks to lose the wolf skin."

"Yeah, it's ok, Ersie." Fisher nervously hugged, neck hair still on end. "We still got the Phantom Guard tooth, right?"

"Right."

They went back to the cave to talk to Auntie Seamtrust.

"I'm going on a mission, Auntie."

"Back into the wolf village?"

"Yes. And this time, I might be gone a few days."

"Ok, be safe, kitten." She sipped from her teacup.

"Thank you." Ersatzica grabbed Fisher's hands. "Come on, let's go."

"Hold on." Auntie Seamtrust put down her teacup. "Scoundrel stays."

"But he's very crucial to our—*my*—mission."

"I need him here."

"This is just because you don't want him near me, isn't it?"

"Nothing of the sort. I will simply get more use out of him than you will."

"Don't lie. I see how you treat him. You treat him like crap. I'm taking him with me, because then he'll at least be treated decently." Ersatzica held her head high. "We'll be leaving now." She walked with Fisher to the cave exit.

"Scoundrel." Auntie Seamtrust cooed. "If you leave with her, I will confiscate your hat, and then there will be no place for you here, or in the Cat Kingdom. You will be exiled."

They stopped in their tracks.

"Auntie, you can't mean that."

Auntie smiled smugly. "I do."

Ersatzica looked at Fisher.

His worried expression told her everything.

"Come here, Scoundrel, and sit." Auntie said.

"No, Fisher! Come with me." Ersie insisted.

Fisher cowered and put his arms over his head.

"Well, you have your answer, Majestra. Go do your mission without him."

"Fisher?"

"I'm sorry, Your Majesty. I want to go, but I can't. I just can't..."

Ersatzica hung her head in disappointment. "I understand." She walked out of the cave alone.

===

Wryonin, after finishing his morning tasks, went to the town fountain to talk with Lemilay. It turned out, she wasn't there. That was strange, she normally never leaves her post while on duty. He walked around town, looking for her. He eventually found her, walking up the stairs from the forest, with a black-and-white wolf behind her. That's strange. Normally Lemilay is at her post, and Ersatzica is in her workshop. Never spending time together. Wryonin decided to keep his distance and listen in.

"And so that's what I use the spyglass for." Lemilay said, taking back the spyglass of Sureye from Ersatzica.

"Uh huh." Ersatzica said.

They walked to town to Ersatzica's workshop.

"So this is your workshop, Ersatzica. This is where you spend all your days, and sometimes nights, banging away on whatever it is you do in there."

"You don't know?"

"It's really quite dusty in there, I hate to even step foot."

"Ew."

“Don’t worry, there’s a window, you can get a breeze.”

Lemilay opened the door and gestured to Ersatzica to go inside. Their footsteps creaked across the floor boards. Cupboard doors opened and closed. Papers were ruffled through, and random objects were scattered about.

“There’s lots of cat heirlooms in here. Where did they all come from?”

“Most are gifts from our Great Uncle Yotleph.”

“So what do I do?”

“You just stay here in this building all day, and don’t leave until I come get you for the night.”

“What do I do for water or waste?”

“It’s only a few hours, you won’t die. As for waste, find the chamber pot.”

“Chamber pot? You mean you don’t have plumbing out here?”

“Plumbing’?”

“Never mind. I guess you’ll tell me what to do with this pot after a few hours?”

“Yes.”

“And remember,” Lemilay said sternly. “If anyone comes in asking you to fix something, tell them it’ll be ready tomorrow.”

“Ok. What about our deal?”

“We’ll do that when I finish my job for the day.”

“Ok.”

Lemilay left Ersatzica’s workshop and headed to the fountain. Then Wryonin entered.

“Hello, Ersatzica.”

“Hello...” She replied.

“Can you fix this for me?” Wryonin took a compass out of his utility pouch.

“Sure. I’ll have it fixed by tomorrow.”

“Are you sure?”

Ersatzica looked left and right. “Yes.”

“Can you tell what’s wrong with it?”

Ersatzica turned it around in her hand. Then she tried to use it like a normal compass. She turned around to point in the direction it did (it pointed in the direction of the cat outpost), then confidently stated, “It points the wrong direction.”

Wryonin sighed. “You’re still directionally challenged, huh?” He took back the compass.

“Hey!”

“This is north, and it’s pointing North.”

“No. I’m just... inside a building, that’s all. What did you want anyway, to humiliate me?”

“You’re acting strange, Ersatzica.”

“No, this is how I always act.”

“Did Lemilay put you up to this? Is she holding something above your head or something?”

“I couldn’t tell you even if she did.”

Wryonin squinted. “I see. Bye.” He went to the fountain and spotted Lemilay.

She was sitting on the fountain edge, singing a ballad. A few wolves sat around, singing along as they ate.

Wryonin leaned against a wall and waited for her to finish her song. He didn’t want to interrupt, be seen, or take sonic damage from Lemilay’s horrid voice. Ok, maybe not *horrid*, but less than pleasant, and definitely way too loud.

When Lemilay stopped singing, another wolf dipped a cup into the fountain and gave it to her. While she sipped, Wryonin approached.

"Lemilay." He said.

"Wry—" she choked on her water. "Wryonin, don't sneak up on me like that."

"I have a question for you."

"Well, I'm busy right now."

"I see." Wryonin picked up the spyglass and looked into it, not focusing on anything in particular.

"Hey! That's mine! Put it down."

"But Mother confiscated it, remember?"

"Well what if she gave it back to me?"

"Ok, then I should thank her for doing so. For showing my sister such *compassion*."

Lemilay grabbed the spyglass. "Ok, what do you want?"

"I want to know what you did to Ersatzica."

Lemilay looked away. "What do you mean? *I* didn't do anything."

"She's been acting really funny lately, haven't you noticed?"

"Yeah, she seems really insecure with herself lately. She's been asking me for advice, trying to become a better leader. I've been helping her as much as I can, but you know, some wolves just aren't cut out for it. You could also use a few lessons from me." She said with a smug smile.

The wolves around Lemilay laughed.

Wryonin's eye twitched. "Ok, let's hear it. What's your advice?"

"First of all, stop sticking your nose in other people's business. Oh wait, I forgot, you don't have one." She booped him on the nose, drawing attention to the scar he had there.

The wolves laughed.

Wryonin squinted at Lemilay. He lifted his cheeks up for a growl, but decided to keep it cool instead.

"Struck a nerve, did I?"

"I have some hunting to do." Wryonin walked away.

"Don't let the trees bite!" Lemilay snarked. Then she sang a song, "The Drunk Hunter" as he left.

Wryonin went back to Ersatzica's Workshop. If she really was looking for leadership advice, he wasn't going to let her get all of it from Lemilay. At least some advice she receives should be good advice.

"Ersatzica?" Wryonin opened the door.

"Come in."

"Lemilay told me she's giving you leadership advice, is that true?"

"Um, yes. She's teaching me... I'm learning a lot from her."

"That's great, Ersatzica. Would you like some more advice?"

"Ok."

"It's not nice to humiliate your peers in front of others. It makes them feel small, and like dirt. It doesn't make them respect you or want to follow you, it makes them want to *avoid* you. If you truly want to lead, you should lead by example."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means you do what you think everyone should be doing. You don't have to tell people how to behave, you show them, and they can follow your example."

"Why are you telling me this now?"

"Because I thought you needed to hear it."

"Well what if the people we lead are beneath us?"

"They still deserve respect, and they will respect you more for showing it."

"Not in my experience."

"Wow, Lemilay really has gotten into your head, hasn't she?"

"Or is it that she's gotten into *yours*?"

“Don’t listen to Lemilay. She’s a stuck-up she-wolf who thinks she’s better than everyone. You have a good heart, Ersatzica. I know you do. Do what you think is best.”

Ersatzica looked down at her work table.

Wryonin walked over to her and licked her on the forehead. “Take care, sis. I’ve got hunting to do.” Wryonin left.

He left to go do some hunting, but then he heard the door to Ersatzica’s Workshop open. It was Ersatzica herself, sneaking out to go do whatever.

Wryonin smiled to himself. She’s disobeying Lemilay’s orders; he’s proud of her.

===

Ersatzica walked back to the cave, orange tail swishing, just when Fisher was coming out.

“You’re back!” Fisher greeted her with a smile and a kiss.

“I... didn’t actually leave.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t really know the way, and I don’t know how to approach the deer. Are they as murderous towards cats as the wolves are? I don’t know. And it scares me to face them alone.”

“Let’s find out.” Fisher flipped to the relevant page in the book, and skimmed it. “It doesn’t say anything about what they think of cats. For all we know, it could be they really like us.”

“You really think so?”

“Yeah, why not. You’ll go over there, they’ll welcome you, and then turn you into a wolf.”

Ersatzica looked down and frowned. “I appreciate your optimism, Fisher, but I... I’m don’t really want to make the journey alone.”

Fisher took her by the hands. “You know I would happily go with you, Ersie. But I can’t.”

"I know."

"But I *can* read you a story."

"Did you find something new?"

"I think I did, yeah." Fisher took out another book. "This one's a bit dry. It's a log of shipments to and from the cat kingdom and the wolf village."

Ersie tilted her head. "How is that a story?"

"Let me show you." Fisher led Ersie to a tree, where they both sat down.

"Remember that story about Quivester getting exiled?"

"Hm mmm."

"These dates on the left line up with the approximate publication date of that story. You can see how, at first, the orders put in for wolf slaves were being fulfilled on time, in extraordinary numbers. Then, one or two of them fail to get delivered, with no reason given. Then as we go on—"

"More of them aren't getting delivered! But why?"

Fisher shrugged. "It doesn't say, but one of these entries over on this... page. It gives a reason: bandits."

"You think that is Quivester?"

"I think so, because of this." Fisher flips to a page where an entry was written in red.

BOUNTY PLACED – QUIVESTER – [AMOUNT] – CLAIMED – [DATE]

"So he *was* caught. Was this before or after Monassus was given to Princess Retriyoan?"

"I'm not sure."

[make this relate to fishers hat somehow, or have it give them the idea to also turn fisher into a wolf]

[maybe about telling a story about himself]

[rewrite this]

"Anyway, the cat army is invading soon." Fisher said.

"It's been coming for a while." Ersatzica nodded.

"No, I mean really soon. Like within the next week."

"They won't get past our defenses."

"It's a whole army, Ersie. They outnumber your village 100 to 1."

"They need my help."

"Yes."

"Wait, why are you telling me this?"

"You should run. Or stay away. Or they'll kill you all. They want to wipe out the entire village. Like you wiped out our outpost." The way he said sounded like it was directed at her.

"Oh, you saw that?"

"I know you helped them wipe us out."

"I was just following orders."

"No, you were leading the pack. You played the drums of Retriyoan, and you ensured their victory."

"I... I didn't mean to harm you, Fisher. I-I was going to warn you, but I didn't know they were going to do this, and they sprang this on me, and I didn't have time to warn you—"

"Save it. You showed who you're loyal to. And now, I'm showing you who I'm loyal to."

"But what about us?"

"There is no 'us'."

"But we kissed!"

"You came onto me, I just went along with it so Majestra could get your wolf skin."

"You mean..."

"Yes, and she's pretending to be you right now."

Ersatzica's mouth dropped in shock. "Was it ever real? Didn't you ever have feelings for me?"

"No, I—" Fisher's fist clenched and he looked away. "Look, Ersie, it doesn't matter. You have to go."

"I thought we were happy." Ersie turned away and ran. She found a tree to sit under and buried her face in her knees, pouring tears over them.

[Majestra interacting with muddy, or ersie coming back to wolf village]

[this scene might come before or in place of a previous scene]

Ersatzica dug up the boots and unwrapped them. "I'm here"

The blue glimmer in the boots hugged her back.

She put them on and latched them. "You're Pantrinome, right?" She said silently.

The boots flashed blue.

"It's good to meet you. I've learned a lot about you."

Ersatzica opened the locket to turn invisible. She walked normally to the cave entrance where the cats were hiding. "Great Uncle Yotleph, please extend your invisibility protection to whoever I hold." I'm going to kidnap Fisher if Auntie Seamstress won't let him go with me.

But when she got to the entrance, she heard them talking.

"I just got word from a messenger," Fisher said, out of breath from running. "The beavers are building a damn for us." He panted a bit.

"And?" Auntie Seamstress asked.

"They're planning on drying up the river. When the river stops running, the army will arrive."

"How many days away is the army?"

"About 5."

I always knew they were coming, but this soon? I have to warn the others! I thought the river would hold them back, but with this news, I'm not sure if we can hold them off long enough to survive. Ersatzica ran to the river. But how am I going to tell them as a cat? I'll have to find the deer village by myself. Or, maybe Nephalie knows where the deer village is?

With the help of Nosalen's foot, she easily crossed the river on an ice bridge. The boots slipped a little on the ice, but it wasn't anything she couldn't handle.

Invisible and quiet, she snook into the wolf village. She searched around for Nephalie. She found her fixing a building by herself.

Unlatching the boots, she whispered, "Nephalie!"

"What? Who's there?" Nephalie looked up from her task.

Ersatzica closed the locket to reveal herself. "Don't scream, it's me, Ersatzica."

"So you are a cat?"

"...it's complicated."

"When is it not?" She went back to fixing the building.

"And that's why I need your help."

"I can't turn you into a wolf, Ersatzica."

"I understand. But I'm hoping that kay... kay-raneario?"

"queRenari-Ko?"

"Yeah, her! I'm hoping she can. You know her?"

"Yeah we visit Adavin every year. But she won't turn you into a wolf just because you want her to."

"What if I need her to?"

"Do you?"

"Yes, of course."

"Hand me that brick." She pointed to a brick well within her reach.

Ersatzica obliged, putting it down where Nephalie gestured her to. "So, can you help me get there?"

Nephalie finished up her task. "Here, take this." She gave Ersatzica the hoof clipping from the job. Dusting off her hoof hands, she thought out loud, "I'm really don't want to, but I suppose I can help."

"Oh thank you, Nephalie!"

"Don't get too excited, this counts as your request for the week."

"I understand."

"Follow me." Nephalie led (invisible) Ersatzica to the deer barracks. There was no one there at the moment. It was structured much like the wolf barracks, but some space had been carved out for a pedestal on which sat a pair of decorated antlers. They were attached to together at the base, and curved around an imaginary lens to form something one could look through.

"Is this the shrine to your god?"

"Goddess." Nephalie corrected. "But no, this is the Antlers of Truth, a sacred heirloom that helps us remember who we are. Or at least, a copy of it."

"Does it lead the way to Adavin?"

"No, but it does something important." She lifted it and held it like a magnifying glass over Ersatzica. "You see, queRenari-Ko, the leader of Adavin, will only transform those who need to it become their true self."

"And my true self is a wolf. So she'll help me, right?"

Nephalie looked through the antlers at her own arm. "Hmmm." She gave the antlers to Ersatzica. "Careful with these now, but look at the pedestal."

Ersatzica looked at the pedestal with her own eyes. It was basically a stretched piece of rock, as if the stone tiles that made up the floor were goo that had been stretched up into a new shape and then left to dry. Then she looked at the pedestal through the antlers. The pedestal wasn't there at all, just the stone tiles that had made it up.

"You see?"

"It shows what would happen if you broke the hoof clippings."

"No you stupid mutt." Nephalie grabbed the antlers from Ersatzica and forced her to look through it. "It shows the true version of that thing. And yes, it shows what's there after we break the lie on it, but it's more than that."

"It can me my true self."

"Yes. And look." Nephalie turned it on Ersatzica.

Through the antlers, Ersatzica saw her arms, and her legs. They looked exactly like they did without the antlers. "But wait, that can't be right."

"It is, Ersatzica."

"Let me see my face. How can I use it to see my face?"

"Do you expect it to be any different for your face?"

"I need to know."

"Here." Nephalie took her to a window, where she stretched a brick to cover up the outside, letting the inside reflect like a mirror.

Ersatzica held the antlers of truth up to the makeshift mirror, eyes closed. When I open my eyes, it'll show me a wolf. It'll show me a wolf. I'm a wolf. She opened her eyes. The shocked yet jubilant expression of an orange feline greeted her. Her red hair flowed over her green eyes, around her white muzzle, and down to her orange-striped shoulders. "I'm a cat." She smiled. She stared at her reflection through the antlers.

I'm... a cat. I can't believe it. But then, why am I surprised? Mother told me I was. So it makes sense that I would be. But why... Why am I so happy to see this? Did I want to be a cat? Have I always wanted this? Well, no... but this? This feels like me. But if I'm a cat, how do I stay loyal to my wolf pack?**

"You happy now?" Nephalie interrupted.

Ersatzica took a deep breath and handed back the antlers. "I'm... conflicted."

"Well, wolf or cat, it doesn't matter to me. You're still a pain in my tail." She put the antlers back on the pedestal.

“Thank you, Nephalie.” Ersatzica hugged her. “For your help.”

Nephalie smiled. “Don’t let this happen again.”

“It won’t.”

Ersatzica latched the boots and opened the locket before she left. *If queRen—the deer leader of Adavin—won’t turn me into a wolf, I’ll have to manage as a cat, somehow.*

Stepping outside, Ersatzica spots Mudrich, nose to the ground, sniffing.

Mudrich follows a scent for a while, closing in on Ersatzica.

She must be smelling my cat scent!

Chapter 11

“Ersie! There you are!” Mudrich exclaimed. She slapped the workshop door open.

“Oh, it’s you again.” The black and white wolf turned around.

“I’ve been looking all over for you, Ersie!” Mudrich hugged her.

Ersie patted her on the back. “I’ve been here this whole time.”

“Really? I checked here earlier and you weren’t here.”

Ersie shrugged. “So what do you want?”

“It broke again!” Mudrich put a dirty broken stake on the workbench. “I tried pounding it in with my fists this time, but it still broke.”

“Ok.”

“So, can you fix it?”

“I’ll have it fixed by tomorrow.”

“Thank you, Ersie.”

“Uh huh.”

“Is... everything ok?”

"Yeah, why do you ask?"

"You just seem... like not yourself lately."

"I'm fine, dirty. Now go away."

Ears back, head down, Mudrich left emptyhanded. She was stupid, afterall. Ersie didn't outright say it, but there was something that she said Mudrich wouldn't understand, and that she didn't trust her enough to tell her about. And now, not only is Ersie not speaking to her, but she's being mean. She was like letting a friend slip from your grasp, watching them fall off a cliff, and getting harassed by their ghost.

Mudrich leaned on the wall overlooking the stairs. "Alpha, Wolf God of the Loyal Moon, if you're listening, please guide me. Please help me say the right things and do the right things so that Ersie talks to me again. Awoo."

Mudrich rested her head on the wall, eyes slinking back and forth as they followed the wolves going up and down the stairs. Her eyes drooled on the bricks.

"Muddie?" A voice said from behind her.

"Ersie?" Muddie turned around, but no one was there. "Where'd you go?"

"Meet me in the room where we found the boots." The voice was as clear as day, as if someone was standing right in front of her.

"Ersie?" Muddie looked around, but didn't see anyone.

A metal-on-metal clang.

Muddie sucked in her tears, and nodded. She knew what she had to do. She rushed to the puddle with the hoof clipping, broke it open, and ran to the hidden room in their barracks. The room was dark.

Music: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dzNvk80XY9s>

"Ersie?" Muddie stepped cautiously into the room.

"I'm here."

"Where? I can't see you. Let me get the light."

"No, stay."

"Ersie, I don't like this. Why do we have to meet in the dark?"

"It's ok Muddy. You'll see why."

"Ersie, it stinks in here."

"Oh right. Hold still." An orange paw wrapped tape around Mudrich's nose.

"Ersie, is that you?"

"Yes, Muddy."

"Can I see you?"

"Not yet. There's something I need to tell you."

"Anything."

"Last time I tried to tell you, I... wasn't very... direct."

"Whatever it is, Ersie. I *promise* on *Alpha*, I'll understand."

"I'm glad to hear you say that, Muddy, but I'm not convinced."

"Please just tell me what's wrong, Ersie!"

"Ok, but you have to promise me, that you won't try to kill me, and you won't even howl."

"What? Why would I—Of course I wouldn't!"

"Muddy, I..."

A warm, fuzzy feeling knocked on Mudrich's chest. She invited it in, and it made itself a cozy home in her heart. "No matter what you're about to tell me, you'll always be my sister." The feeling gave her the words, and placed them at the tip of her tongue, but she hesitated.

"You know how you gave me the wolfskin, and it turned me back into a wolf?"

"Yes."

"And you know that the wolfskin can come off again?"

"Mmm... I guess so."

"Well, it did. And... I lost it."

"Ersie, noooo...."

"And, what's more is, I don't know where it is."

"So... you're a wolf now without it?"

"No, Muddy."

Muddy whimpered. "So can I see you?"

"Muddy, I'm a cat. Do you really want to see me?"

"Is there any way to fix it?"

Ersie chuckled. "No, Muddy, in fact, there's nothing to fix."

"Huh?"

[move this moment of realization to when ersie soul-searches in the jail]

"I realize now, that you said that, that I'm a cat, and that's ok. It's not *that* important whether I'm a wolf or a cat. I'm still your sister, right?"

The door opened.

"Don't sweat it, it's an easy mistake to make." Lemilay said as she entered the room. "Wait, Mudrich? What are you doing in there?"

"I'm talking to Ersie."

A metal-on-metal clang.

"But Ersatzica is right here."

"Yeah, I'm right here." The black and white wolf said.

"But if you're Ersie, then who am I talking to?" Mudrich swatted around in the dark. "Ersie?"

Some water droplets silently splashed on her legs.

"Mudrich, get out of there." Lemilay ordered.

"Give me the light." Mudrich grabbed the lantern and lit it. She shoved it into the room. There was nobody in there but her. Her, and the cat skeleton. "IT... WAS... A GHOST!" Mudrich screamed, nearly jumping out of her fur.

"What are you on about... *Muddy*?" The black and white wolf said.

"I was just talking to you, Ersie, just now, but you said you were a cat."

Ersie's eyes widened. "You don't know that."

"Was I just hearing things?"

"Mudrich, why do you have tape on your nose?" Lemilay asked.

"Because Ersie put it there to stop the smell of the room." She took it off. "I know I saw you, Ersie, in here with me, but you were a cat."

"I don't know what you saw, but it wasn't me. As you can see, I'm clearly a wolf."

"What's this? Who's a wolf?" Wryonin asked, suddenly jumping into the room.

"We all are." Lemilay fake smiled.

"Then why are we talking about it?"

"No reason."

"Right." Wryonin shut the door. He picked up the table in the center of the room and set it on end in front of the door, blocking it.

"Wryonin, what are you doing?"

"Taking a nap, what's it look like?"

"What an odd place for a nap."

"And what an odd place for a lie."

Lemilay gasped.

"Mudrich," Wryonin said. "Have you noticed Lemilay and Ersatzica acting strange?"

"Ersie's been acting strange ever since the boots."

"Anything in particular?"

"She called me 'dirty' today, and other insults."

"Interesting. You know what else she did? She didn't work on a single thing today. She just stood there in her workshop, staring at the wall. And then she snuck out at midday to snoop in Mother's office."

"Ersatzica!" Lemilay put her hands on her hips. "How could you!"

"I'm sorry. I was looking for info about... the boots. I didn't know that area was off limits."

"And where are the boots? Where are the drums?"

"In my workshop, of course." Ersatzica looked away.

"Well, I just came from your workshop, and they weren't there. How come you don't know where they are?"

"Because they're right here!" A voice from inside the room said. *BUM BUM BUM*. An orange red-tipped cat appeared in the room, wearing the boots, the drums, a locket, and the foot of Nosalen.

The black and white wolf tried to get out the door, but Wryonin blocked her.

"I am Ersatzica." The orange cat said.

"It's a cat! Kill it!" The black and white wolf said.

"No." Lemilay said. She hung her head.

"Why not?" Wryonin asked.

"We should put her in the pit instead."

"Listen, listen to me." The orange cat said. "I can prove I'm Ersatzica. Look, I'm wearing the drums, and the boots. I made them to fit me."

"You stole those from my workshop!" The black and white wolf said.

"I can tell you exactly how I fixed them up, and what they do, and how they work."

"Those are the famous Drums of Retriyoan. Everyone knows how they work."

“And everyone knows what this is, and how it works.” The orange cat jiggled the wolf foot on her foot. “Tell me, whose is it and what does it do?”

Lemilay put her mouth up the black and white wolf’s ear—

“Shut up, Lemilay. Don’t tell her.” Wryonin said.

“Nosalen’s foot, Freezes water.” Lemilay said aloud.

“Lemilay!” Wryonin shouted.

“This game doesn’t matter anyway. I’m Ersatzica.” The black and white wolf said. “Afterall, is your sister a cat or a wolf?”

“A wolf.” Lemilay answered.

“And I’m a wolf. And whoever that is, in there, that’s a cat. Clearly not your sister.”

“Yeah, obviously.” Lemilay said. “Right, Mudrich?”

“What do you think, Mudrich?” Wryonin asked.

The warm feeling in Mudrich’s heart spoke up again. “It’s her. It’s her.” It said, as loud as it could. It placed the words directly on her tongue. “My sister is a wolf.” She said.

The orange cat was taken aback.

“Ok, well I guess that means we have to take care of the orange cat.” Wryonin said.

“No wait!” The orange cat said. “I can prove I’m Ersatzica.” She split the fur on her stomach, to reveal a horizontal scar. “I have the scar! Look!”

Mudrich’s ears perked. “That’s Ersie’s scar! That’s Ersie’s scar!”

The black and white wolf gulped. She exchanged glances with Lemilay.

Wryonin looked at the wolf expectantly. “So?”

“Ok, you want to know the truth?” Lemilay said, defiantly.

“Yes.” Wryonin said.

“Well here it is. Ersatzica is a *cat*. And she has been all along. And this wolf here, is actually a *different* cat, who put on the wolfskin, and has been impersonating her for the last day or two.”

“What are you saying?” Wryonin shook his head. “That’s insane.”

“It’s hard to believe, isn’t it? Or would you rather believe that this here is Ersatzica—” she placed her hands on the white wolf’s shoulders. “—and that cat in there is an intruder, who we need to imprison.”

Wryonin put a hand on his forehead.

“Are we loyal to cats, Wryonin? Would a good wolf of loyalty side with the cat? Or with the wolf? Cat. Or. Wolf.”

“...wolf.” Wryonin muttered.

“Hmmpf.” Lemilay smiled, head held high.

Wryonin put the table back in the center of the room.

“Mudrich?” Lemilay motioned to her sister.

“It’s her! It’s her! It’s your sister!” The feeling in Mudrich’s heart was practically screaming at her. “I’m sorry, Ersie.” Mudrich said. She grabbed the orange cat and picked her up, carrying her in her arms.

“Wryonin, lead the way to the pit. I don’t want any trouble.” Lemilay ordered.

Wryonin grumbled, but helped with the escort.

[mention the key to the cell being dropped in the mud]

They walked through town, down the stairs, and into a cave. They put the orange cat in a jail cell with iron bars. Water flowed in from the wall and across the floor, puddling up a good portion of the stone floor. The lonely wind blew through the cell, sending the cat into shivers.

“Are we all good now, Ersie?” Mudrich asked.

“Yes, all is forgiven.” Ersie, the black and white wolf, said.

As they were leaving, Mudrich looked back at the orange cat.

She didn't say anything. She just solemnly stared at Mudrich, as if she was shocked speechless. She reached an arm out, but had nothing to grab onto.

"Forget about her." Lemilay said. "She's a cat, she deserves to rot in here."

"Ha. Ha." Mudrich nervously chuckled. "Right."

"It's her. It's her." The feeling in her heart continued. "Shhh. My sister is a wolf, and everything is just fine." Mudrich said to herself.

===

Ersatzica reached out to Mudrich as she left. She wanted to scream, to yell, to cry out, "Don't leave me!" but all that would escape her mouth was *meow*.

She clung onto the iron bars holding her in the cell, as if they could somehow hug her in return.

All my siblings abandoned me. Lemilay, Wryonin, even Mudrich. They all hate me for what I am. If only I could be a wolf, then they would love me. Like they used to.

She found the latch on the boots, and flipped them open and shut. Open and shut. It gave her a modicum of comfort.

"I wish they would just accept me as I am. Accept me as a cat. Wait, am I really saying that? Am I finally admitting to myself that I'm a cat? *Ersatzica chuckled to herself.* I guess I am. It's ironic, isn't it? I get rejected by everyone I know and love, and that's how I come to accept myself for what I truly am.

Did I deserve this? I removed the spike from Wryonin's slingshot against his wishes. I prioritized working on the drums instead of fixing Lemilay's pillow. I took the boots back despite Mudrich telling me to leave them alone. I went to the cat outpost despite Mother telling me not to. I've been... disloyal. I broke all the promises I made. I strayed from Alpha's guiding moonlight.

The water dripped from the hole in the wall. *Drip. Drip. Drip.*

Ersatzica shivered. It was cold down here under the town.

"I never should have trusted Fisher." She bit her tongue. *Fisher is a good cat, and a good friend. I can't blame him for what he did, or why he did it. I'm the one who*

destroyed his home, who almost killed him, who recklessly endangered his life. I betrayed him. It's my fault.

Ersatzica took a deep breath. "So what now? What am I?" *Yes, I know I was born a cat, but I was raised a wolf. And assuming I can get the wolfskin back, I can still be a wolf. But I don't know, it feels... different, now. Like I don't deserve the wolfskin. Or maybe, that I don't want it? "Is it something we can fix?" Mudrich said. No, Muddy, no it isn't. Because I'm not broken. I'm just different. Funny how it took me getting put in jail to realize that.*

She sat in a corner. "So what do I do now?" *In the heat of the moment, I forgot to tell them about the invasion plans. But I'm a cat now, and what happens to them no longer effects me.* Images of war flashed before her eyes, scenes of death and destruction, of her siblings skewered on spears and chopped to bits, of Mother's skin draped like a trophy around Seamtrust's shoulders. The thought brought a tear to her eye. "Mudrich..." she sobbed. "Wryonin, Mother, Lemilay..." *Well, one thing's for certain: even though I'm no longer a wolf, I'm still loyal. I'll do what I have to to save my family, and my village.*

Ersatzica opened her mouth to howl, but all that escaped was a *meow*. "Oh right." She looked around the cell for a way to escape.

The lock was only accessible from the outside of the cell, but her arms were thin enough to slip through easily. Fisher had taught her the lockpicking trick with a cat's claw, but she wasn't very good at it, and she couldn't get her claw in the right way from this side of the lock. Uncheck.

She reached into her fur and produced her trusty screwdriver. It fit in the lock ok, but it wasn't the right shape for it pick the lock. Uncheck.

She had the boots, the drums, Nosalen's foot, Yotleph's tooth, and of course, her screwdriver. If only she had Roseblood's Spear...

She took off a boot and examined it, looking for any pieces that could be the right shape. *I don't want to have to do this, but I can take the boots apart if needed.*

Then she spotted something odd, just outside the bars. It was an indent in the mud, and it was shaped like a key. "Wryonin dropped the key!" Ersatzica exclaimed. Maybe she could take pieces from the boots, and reconstruct them in the shape of the key, using the indent as a guide.

drip, drip, drip

Or... she could just fill it in with the water!

She cupped her hands to catch the water, but the drops came too slowly, and the water drained from her hands before the next drop came. At this rate, it would take hours to get the amount of water she needed.

“What did the book say about the drums? That they can also control natural effects?”

Ersatzica beat the drums every time a drop fell.

drip, BUM. drip, BUM. drip, BUM.

Then she beat the drum a little faster.

drip, BUM. drip, BUM. drip, BUM.

drip, BUM. drip, BUM. drip, BUM.

It worked! The drops fell faster with the beat of the drum. Now she just had to collect the water and transport it. She used the boots for that, placing them under the hole in the wall. She beat the drums faster and faster until the boots held enough water.

She poured the water from the boots into the indent. Then she put Nosalen’s foot over it, and it froze instantly into a solid key. She pried the piece of ice out, and examined the result. A working key. Check.

She put the ice key into the lock, and it fit nicely into it, but it wouldn’t turn. Uncheck.

The lock was rather old and rusty, and it turned hard. If only she had some oil or grease.

She turned the ice key harder, but it snapped off in the lock.

Maybe, if the ice had something solid in it, it would be stronger. She held up her screwdriver to the boots. “I’m sorry, Pantrinome.” She paused. “Mother.” She sighed. “But I need to escape, and that means I need a piece of you.”

The blue streak in the boots beamed with pride, welcoming the dismantling and accepting its sacrifice to help Ersatzica.

Ersatzica hugged them. "But don't worry, I'll put you back together afterwards."

[make the boots dismantling more emotional by adding thoughts of her mother]

She unscrewed the bolts of the boots, and removed each piece carefully. She found a piece that was exactly like what she was looking for: an L-shaped piece. She found enough of them to fill in each tooth of the key. "Thank you, Mother."

She filled the indent half way and froze it, added the metal pieces, then poured and froze the rest of the water. A working, stronger key. Check.

She put it in the lock and turned it. The key actually turned! Then, with a satisfying *CLINK!*, the lock unlocked.

She pushed the door open. It creaked slowly, resisting her push. She leaned into it with all her weight, and finally popped it open.

Ersatzica stood in the cell, looking out into the cave hallway that she was now free to walk into.

Would I be betraying their trust if I escaped? Shouldn't I wait here, for them to decide to free me?

AWOOOO! ("Intruders!")

Ersatzica shook her head out of it. *They need me, I have to help!*

Chapter 14

She stepped out of the cell with one foot, then the other. She took a deep breath.

She twisted the key to get it out, but it wouldn't budge. Then the key snapped in her hand. She tried to grab the metal pieces, but they were trapped in the lock and the ice.

No no no! I need these pieces in order to put the boots back together!

She shoved her screwdriver in to chip away at the ice. Finally, the ice was gone, but the pieces were still stuck in the lock. She couldn't turn the lock because the pieces didn't have anything good to grab onto.

She heard a commotion outside, a lot of yelling, and howling.

She collected her things, tossing the miscellaneous pieces of the boots into the main part of the boots, all except the two pieces in the lock.

I'm sure I have some scraps that'll work in my workshop.

She opened the locket and ran out of the cave and up the stairs. Getting up the stairs and through the town wasn't so hard. All the wolves were focused on the incoming cat invasion, so no one was around to focus on an invisible cat. Along the way, she caught a glimpse of the cat army. It was massive, and stretched beyond where she could see, even from the top of the plateau.

What am I going to do? What I've done the last few times: play the drums.

But the drums had limited range, and only a few of the cats and wolves would be in range at any one time. Unless... they were louder.

She opened the door to the workshop. The scent of her former wolf body hung in the air. Familiar, yet strangely foreign. The first thing she noticed, other than the fact that all her stuff had been moved, was the wolfskin of Monassus draped over the stool. It gave her pause.

[put in part where mother tells each sibling their responsibility when the invasion happens]

Mother told me that it was my responsibility to make sure the towns people were evacuated when the invasion happened. Now that I have the wolfskin, I could honor that responsibility.

She picked up the wolfskin. She stared into the holes where the eyes would have been. "Thank you, Monassus, for giving me this choice." She hugged the wolfskin close. Then with a quick kiss on the forehead, she hung it up on a cabinet. "But I'm a cat, and I have a battle to fight."

She placed the boots on her worktable. Her workshop was in disarray, even more so than it usually was. *Majestra moved all my stuff!*

“So, I have an idea. But, that requires me to take you apart, are you ok with that?”

The blue streak in the boots bounced with excitement.

“Oh! Thank you so much Mother!” She hugged them. “This’ll be amazing!”

She took the boots apart and took off the mouth. She turned it inside out and wrapped it around her arm to measure, then pinched and stitched it so it fit. Then she sewed a latch onto it. The arm band fit on her arm. Check.

Leaving the other latches unlatched, she latched the one on her new arm band. The world went silent. Check?

“Mother, could you—” Ersie covered her ears. Her own voice was so loud, it hurt her own ears!

Boots reversable? *Check!*

Ersie tapped on the drums. It was super loud. Check. It hurt her ears. Uncheck. She pulled out some stuffing she used for Lemilay’s pillow and a roll of tape, taping it to her ears.

“I hope this—” she flinched. *I hope this works.*

She unlatched the armband. The world was flooded with howls and cries and screams, all louder and more constant than before. A chill crept up her spine, and she felt a dread she had only ever felt in nightmares. She latched the armband again, and the world was again at peace.

Stepping outside, she noticed something odd: the town was practically deserted. Exploring around, she found that several chunks of the town were just... gone. Chunks of the ground that had been there for ages were crumbled away, and the buildings they supported were lying in ruins on the forest trees below.

The wolf soldiers were fighting in the forest below, trying to keep the cats on their side of the river. But the river was gone. In its place was a dry bed of mud, that became the main location for the battle. The wolves tore through the cat soldiers, but every now and then, one would catch fire, and burn slowly, and die.

Ersatzica found the sturdiest railing she could, and leaned up against it. She beat the drums.

BUUUUUUUUMMMMMmmmmm....

She tensed. A sharp pain stung her ears. But the sound rang out, and the soldiers all looked up at her for a quick moment. It could work.

BUMMMM BUMMMM BUMMMM

Each beat brought an incredible pain to her ears, but she pressed on.

BUMMMM BUMMMM BUMMMM

She could see the wolves swinging to the beat, knowing exactly what to do.

BUMM BUMM BUMM

BUM BUM BUM

BUM-BUM-BUM

She quickened the pace, and the wolves tore through the cats faster than before. Shockwaves shot from her ears down her spine. Her belly scar quivered.

The wolves cut down so many cats, the river bed was now home to a river of red, with icebergs of flesh.

One of the notable wolves swimming in the new river was a short, stocky wolf, with a hammer just about as big as she was. *Mudrich!*

BUM-BUM-BUM

Ersie focused on her sister, making sure she was keeping up to the beat.

Mudrich swung her hammer wildly, with inhuman speed. The hammer was a blur in front of her, and her arms were invisible. She rushed into the battle, mowing down cat after cat. It didn't matter that the cat had a sword, hammer, or spear. It didn't matter that the cat had a helmet and metal plating. As soon as Mudrich got close, they turned into a carcass standing in a new puddle of blood. It was like watching a watermelon smashing contest.

The single was given to retreat. The cats ran away, many dropping their weapons on the ground. Ersatzica breathed a sigh of relief, and gave the drums one last beat before stopping it. She rested her hands, sore from the blunt force trauma they had just endured, and tried to feel her ears, which felt like they were going to explode.

Mudrich's muzzle raised in the motion only used to howl.

Oh no. Mudrich, don't!

But Mudrich didn't hear her. She charged in, leading several other wolves on all fours. Even without the drums, they ran faster. Even when crossing the muddy bloody river bed, they ran faster. Even with their weapons in their mouths, they ran faster.

Mudrich and her wolves caught the cats in the back, slaughtering several in quick succession.

The order was given to turn and attack.

Ersie placed her hands on the drums and—

THWACK!

Ersie found herself hurling towards the ground. Thankfully, on this side of the railing. If her ears weren't bleeding before, they sure were now.

Towering above Ersatzica, was none other than Lemilay.

Ersatzica unlatched the leg band so she could hear again. But the world stayed silent.

Lemilay's mouth moved, but no sound came out. The expression on her face said how angry she was.

Ersatzica checked the locket, it was still open. She quickly took the leg band off, hoping she could hear again. She couldn't.

Lemilay struck her again, this time hitting her in the arm. She swung again, but hit absolutely nothing.

"Lemilay, why are you doing this?" Ersatzica could barely even hear her own voice.

"EEE-awwwz UUUU uuu-n EV-EEE-ING!" Lemilay's yell was muffled and barely audible. But it was something.

Ersatzica scrambled to her feet and dashed away, hiding in a corner.

Lemilay looked around, but didn't seem to see her. Then her eyes rolled into the back of her head and her bald spot glowed.

Ersatzica's breathing turned frantic. "I know I'm a cat, Lemilay!" Ersatzica shouted, if only just so she could hear herself. "But I'm doing this for the wolves!"

Lemilay ran at her and swiped her with the side of her hand.

Ersatzica tried to dodge, but took it full force to the neck. She fell to the ground, with the wind knocked out of her.

"Lemilay, please! I promise, I'm playing the drums for the wolves. They're winning because of what I'm doing."

[Lemilay is attacking her because she's getting in the way of her plans, but ersie thinks its because shes a cat. Subtly hint that Lemilay is attacking her for a different reason than she thinks]

"UU eye-ing KAT ummm. UU eet-ayyed us, n eye ILL KILL UU!" Lemilay swung down her hand onto Ersie's back, preventing her from getting up. Then she put her muzzle close to her eye, and shout whispered, "AS IT TURNS OUT, YOU WERE NEVER MY SISTER."

AWOOOO! (gibberish)

Ersatzica looked up. It was that strange black and white wolf again, who had one eye covered up, and several scratches all over his arms. And he held a sword. Not very confidently, but very determined. The fire in his eyes was unmistakable.

"Leave that cat alone!" He ordered.

"What are you doing here?" Lemilay said, placing a foot on Ersie's back. "You're supposed to be evacuating like the rest of the town."

"I'm here to save Ersie."

"Ersie's not here."

"*That* is Ersie. Get off her."

"Run along, little wolf. This is a cat. And I'll take care of it."

"That cat is *Ersie*, and you will not harm her."

“Fisher?”

“Hi Ersie,” Fisher said. “Don’t worry, I’ll get you out of this.”

THWACK!

In the moment he was distracted, Lemilay dashed to him and kicked him in the stomach, sending him hurling and dropping his sword.

Fisher held his stomach, keeling over as he coughed up blood.

“Fisher!”

“Don’t worry, I’m fine. I’ve taken worse.”

Lemilay stood over him, head held high. “Fisher? That sounds like a cat name.” Without bending down, she sniffed. “You’re a cat in a wolf’s skin.”

“I’m a cat by choice. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“If you’re a wolf, prove it. Prove your loyalty. Obey my orders and run. Go help the other villagers who are evacuating.”

“I won’t let you hurt Ersie.” He stood up, fists ready.

“Fisher, she knows Pea-Fo! You don’t stand a chance!” Ersie cried.

“We’ll see about tha—”

Lemilay swiped at his face.

He lifted an arm to block.

She punched him in the belly.

But he swatted it down with his hand.

She finally lowered her gaze to look him in the eyes. He stared back into hers with a determined focus.

Then he looked past Lemilay to Ersatzica. His eyes prodded her to move.

Ersatzica scrambled to her feet and put the leg band back on. She latched it, winced, and beat the drums. She scanned the battlefield for Mudrich.

Mudrich was in the thick of the battle, fighting off cat after cat. She was surrounded on all sides by the enemy. Despite showing signs of wearing out, she was still giving it her all.

Ersie beat the drums.

BUM. BUM. BUM.

But Mudrich seemed unable to sync to it, and every time Ersie sped up, Mudrich lagged behind.

Mudrich swung her hammer at a large cat. She had no beat. It blocked and scratched her arm up.

Ersie came back to the present. *If Muddy can't sync to the beat, I'll sync everyone else up instead.* She watched the cats around Muddy, and beat the drums every time they moved. Then she tested it out, speeding them up suddenly. Cats synced up to the drums. Check! Then she slowed down the beat. The cats slowed too. Check! She slowed the beat down to a crawl, increasing the duration between beats. It seemed that the pauses didn't matter, as long as the next beat was coming, it slowed the cats.

Mudrich easily wiped out the immobile targets. The cats swung like molasses, making their swings easy to dodge and punish with a swift hammer to the face.

Ersie did her best to sync up the incoming waves of cats and slow them down, but it was a struggle. It wasn't as easy as constantly speeding Muddy up. But it seemed to be working.

As the fight wore on, more and more cats stepped up. Occasionally a wolf would fall, and then the wolf defense was that bit weaker. The cat forces, however, never seemed to flinch, despite losing comrades in droves.

Muddy was across the river, in an area she hadn't been in for very long. She didn't have any tunnels over there to dive into for safety. And she was tiring out. Ersie could see it in the way she swung her hammer. She was overexerting herself and had severely overestimated her endurance.

Suddenly, one of the cats next to Mudrich turned into a giant wolf, muscles bulging out, with a howl as loud as Ersie's drums. It fought off the cats around Mudrich, and

knocked her back to the wolf side, where other wolves could escort Mudrich away from the front lines.

Ersie noticed Mother fighting in the chaos, beating up the cats with her Pea-Fo moves. Ersie synced to her moves, speeding her up.

Mother seemed to move in slow motion, even with the drums boost. She moved in fluid ways, and some cats fell around her, as if being hit by an invisible force. Many cats died while charging up to her. Others hit the ground from just one punch, kick, or bite.

AWOOOO! (“Home!”) Mother howled, despite being surrounded by cats. She ran back across the river and held her ground on her side. The other wolves followed her.

Now the cats would have to come to them.

THWACK!

Ersie was on the ground again. Lemilay stood over her again.

Ersie unlatched the leg band. She looked around, Fisher was lying on the floor, motionless. “Did you kill Fisher?”

“He was a traitor, just like you. Do you have any idea what trouble you’ve caused for me?”

“Me? I’m helping the—”

“You’re sabotaging my plans! On purpose!” Lemilay stepped on Ersie’s belly scar, pinning her to the ground. “First it was pillow, then the spyglass, and now this!”

“I don’t understand.”

“Majestra and I had a plan. We surrender the wolf village, and in exchange, they make me the new chief of the village. But now, they might not take it, and it’s all your fault!”

“You *want* them to take over?” Ersatzica’s mouth dropped. “Traitor!”

“I’m not the traitor, *you* are. You mingled with the enemy and became one of them.” Lemilay held up Fisher’s sword. “But you won’t be ruining any more of my plans!”

“Lemilay, I despise you!” Ersie growled, with grit in her voice.

Lemilay held the sword above her head, ready to swing it down.

It started as a slight burning smell. Smoke wisps snaked out of Lemilay’s chest fluff. Then the whole thing caught on fire.

“Ah!” Lemilay screamed, she hopped around, patting her chest.

Ersatzica took the opportunity to ensure the locket was open, roll away, get up, and run as fast as she could. She latched the leg band and turned it inside out. The world was loud and she was silent.

Lemilay couldn’t follow her with sight or sound, and tracking by smell was not one of her skills. However, she could still find her with her Hindsight. Ersatzica wasn’t safe yet.

[mention this item in previous chapter, or make this scene use the drums instead.]

She ran to her workshop to get an item. It was a cursed set of cat armor she had picked up from the outpost. It had the effect of constraining the wearer’s movements to the point of being practically immobile.

She grabbed it, and climbed up the side of a building. Lemilay would be here soon enough, and probably would know she had the armor. Ersatzica was banking on the possibility that Lemilay didn’t know what the armor did.

Ersatzica waited on a roof top, and when Lemilay came by, she jumped down, and slipped the armor onto Lemilay. Then she punched her in the chest, hitting the armor.

“What is this?” Lemilay growled. She tried to take the armor off.

But Ersie hit her in the arm, preventing her from doing so.

Lemilay struggled, but eventually succumbed to the armor, and stood still, unable to move, or even fall over. She wheezed out a breath from her agape mouth.

“Sorry, Lemilay. But I have to do this.”

Lemilay’s eyes followed Ersie as she left.

Ersie returned to her position on the wall railing, and looked down at the battlefield below.

Mudrich and Mother were fighting side by side, tearing through waves of cats.

[describe the fence bc ersie doesn't know what it is probably]

Soon, the cats stopped coming. They waited on the other side of the shore. They brought something forward: a section of a white picket fence. They planted it in the ground on their side of the river.

Then a big group of cats huddled around a cat with another fence piece just like it. They rushed to the wolf side, blowing right past Mother and Mudrich. None of them died to the invisible force around Mother. Then, the cat in the middle planted the fence.

Even from up here, Ersie felt the seismic shift of the change. The bodies of the cats between the fence posts rose into the air and twisted into rectangular pieces which rose into the air and butted smoothly up against each other. These bloody bricks melded with the bricks made of dirt, forming an arch that arced over both fence pieces and across the river. It was wide enough for 2 cats to cross at a time. And cross they did.

The cats that came first had heavy armor and giant shields. They walked across the bridge made of flesh and mud as if it was a normal walkway. When they got to the wolf side of the river, they spread out, claiming an area within their shields as cat territory. Then with their spears, they poked any wolf who dared to get close.

Inside the claimed area, a tall old cat appeared out of a flame burst. He reached out with an open hand at a nearby wolf, snapped his fingers, and the wolf lit up in flames. Not just his chest floof like Lemilay had, but his entire body. Just poof! up in flames. He seemed to be the leader of the cat army.

Mother growled aggressively at the tall cat, but focused on taking out his underlings.

Mudrich howled and ran at the tall cat. Mother tried to stop her, but she couldn't contain her. Mudrich leapt into the air over the shield cats and slammed her hammer down on the tall cat.

The tall cat dodged to the side, twiddling his fingers as he stared Mudrich down. He wasn't making any obvious big moves, so he couldn't be forcibly synced to the drums.

Muddy swung relentlessly at the tall cat, but he dodged everytime. Mother's attempts to stop Mudrich failed.

[state that ersie gets the spyglass from Lemilay above]

Ersie focused the spyglass on the tall cat.

The tall cat's grin widened as he dodged. He was backing up into his army! Mudrich chased him, completely unaware of where she was being led: onto the bridge of flesh and mud.

Mother fought her way towards the duel, but the shield cats passively blocked her attacks, and didn't fight back. She was unable to get past their shields, and the invisible force killing cats around her didn't vanquish the shield cats.

Mudrich was cut off.

But not out of options. Ignoring the shield cats, she leapt over the tall cat, plowing her hammer into the fleshy bricks behind him. She broke through the floor, splashing blood and meat everywhere underneath. She swung the hammer at the picket fence, splintering it into a thousand pieces. Then she dug out the small pieces stuck in the mud.

The bridge immediately collapsed. The bricks of flesh and mud fell onto the river bed like rain. The cat soldiers fell into the squishy pile below, not suffering any injuries, but getting stuck in the corpses.

Mudrich smiled deviously, having cornered the tall cat on this side of the river. She swung wildly at him, more herding him than attacking.

He dodged in predictable ways, with predictable timing.

Ersie beat the drums everytime he dodged, and forcibly synced him to the drums. Then, she slowed him down, until he was slow enough to get hit by Mudrich.

Mudrich pulled back her hammer for a big slam.

The shield cats keeping Mother at bay refocused to protected the tall cat.

[make Wryonin more a part of this fight]

But as soon as they did, Mother bit them in the back of the neck, wiping them out quickly. Some shots came in from Wryonin, knocking more shield cats out.

Mudrich's hammer strike struck true. Hitting the tall cat in the side, breaking his ribs, cracking his backbone, and splashing his insides all over the dead shield cats' bodies.

The tall cat let out a short-lived cackle as he collapsed to the ground. His one last act, was to snap his fingers, and light *himself* on fire.

AWOOOOO! AWOOOO! AWOOOO!

The wolves all joined in a celebratory howl. The cat soldiers froze in fear, and stopped advancing.

[linger on this moment of victory a bit longer]

Mudrich stood on the epauling of the tall cat. She held it up in victory, then slammed into the pile of ashes that was the tall cat.

BOOM!

A burst of flame and smoke erupted out of the ash pile. The epauling rose to the shoulder height of the tall cat, and the form of the tall cat took shape. He cackled.

Mudrich stood in shock.

The tall cat seized his opportunity. He stared at Mudrich, and his thumb and index finger together. Mother noticed too late to intervene. Wryonin was still celebrating.

With a snap, the tall cat lit Mudrich on fire.

Flames erupted around Mudrich, causing her to yell and scream in pain. Then in an instant, the flames all went out.

The tall cat snapped again and again, setting her on fire. And each time, the flames died out quickly.

Apparently, all that mud caked all over her fur made her *very* fire resistant.

Mudrich howled, and charged up a super hammer swing. The hammer hit the tall cat, sending him flying up against a tree. She charged in again, going for the kill.

[make it clear that only his body gets burnt, his clothes aren't touched at all]

The tall cat snapped his fingers, lighting himself on fire. In an instant, he was a pile of ash on the ground.

Mudrich's hammer hit the tree, lodging itself in the trunk.

The tall cat rose from the ashes again, completely unphased, but with the same burn marks across his face.

He grabbed Mudrich's hammer, digging his fingers into the blood and mud that covered it. The blood lit on fire as the hammer heated up.

[chat gpt: maybe play up mudrich's defiance in the face of losing a bit more?]

Mudrich yelped as she let go of the hammer. Both her hands had burn marks around the spot where they touched the hammer. Her ears pinned back as she growled in defiance.

Mother leapt in front of Mudrich, cutting the tall cat off from her. She growled as she bared her claws.

[have mother tell muddy to tell the other wolves to cover themselves in mud]

[have ersie learn to read lips earlier, so she can see what they're saying]

The tall cat smiled evilly. He spoke some words to Mother.

Mother circled him, responding in kind.

The tall cat's eyes darted around, but not straying long enough to lose focus of Mother. His fingers stood at the ready, but he didn't snap at all.

[have tall cat sneak in a snap to light wolf warriors on fire]

"What are you doing Mother?" Ersatzica asked. "Kill him already!"

Mother and the tall cat circled each other. The cats and wolves continued to fight. The other wolves kept most of the cats off Mother, but the ones who got through

magically dropped dead before they could reach her. Shield cats surrounded the tall cat, protecting him from getting flanked by other wolves.

Meanwhile, the cats crossed the bloody river of corpses. It didn't matter that they got slaughtered while traversing or when they got to the other side, they just kept coming. Occasionally, a wolf would get hit by a spear or get lit on fire, and the wolf defense would weaken.

Mother can't kill the tall cat. And their army outnumber us. We'll all die before we fend them off.

Chapter 15 – Mudrich's Hammer

Ersatzica, convinced that the wolves were about to lose the battle, decided the best course of action was to find Lemilay.

Ersatzica unlatched the leg band. She rushed over to where she had stashed Lemilay. "Lemilay!"

"Mmmph!" Lemilay grunted, unable to move.

"You said you had a plan?"

"Mm-hmmph!"

"Does that plan mean we survive?"

Lemilay nodded with her eyes.

"Ok, tell it to me." Ersatzica taped Ordaent's lock to the armor Lemilay was wearing. Then she helped Lemilay out of it.

Lemilay elbowed Ersatzica, pushed her to the ground, and kneed her chest, claws bared. "Why should I?"

"Mother can't kill the cat leader. We need a non-combat option."

"How do I know you won't ruin my plan this time?"

Ersatzica searched around for a response. "Ok, I concede. I won't try to go for the chief position anymore."

“And you’ll fully back me as the next chief? Even over Wryonin and Mudrich?”

Ersatzica bit her tongue.

“Promise?”

“Alright, yes, ok.” Ersatzica huffed.

“Ok.” Lemilay let up and helped Ersatzica to her feet. “I can stop this, but I need to find Majestra.”

“That’ll be hard, because she has a tooth of Yotleph. But for you, it should be easy.”

“I found you even while invisible because you made a lot of noise, and then I knew your general location. Tracking down Majestra’s location will take a lot of time.”

“Use the spyglass.”

“Even with that, it will take a lot of time.”

“Wait! I know how to find her!” Ersatzica opened the locket and held the tooth within. She grabbed Lemilay’s hand so she could see her. “Great Uncle Yotleph, please help us find Majestra.”

“What’s he going to do? He’s dead.”

“He will grant us vision of others using his skull to be invisible.” Ersatzica took off the locket. She hesitated to give it to Lemilay. “I don’t feel I can trust you with this. But I don’t feel I have any other choice.”

Lemilay grabbed it and put it on. “You know I’m never giving it back, right?”

Ersatzica let go off Lemilay, and Lemilay turned invisible. “Just find Majestra and stop the fighting!” Ersatzica beat the drums. “Oh, and sync to the drums.”

Ersatzica beat the drums, keeping in good faith that Lemilay was synced. After a while of running around the town, Ersatzica’s hand was grabbed, and both Lemilay and Majestra appeared. Majestra stood in all her glory: orange-striped fur, red-tipped tail, and flowing red hair tied up in a battle bun.

“Majestra?” Ersatzica exclaimed.

“It’s ‘Your Majesty’ to you.”

Lemilay growled.

"Fine. *Ersatzica*." Majestra said.

"We'll go down the stairs and talk with the wolf and cat leaders." Lemilay said.

"You beat the drums to speed us up."

Ersatzica nodded.

She escorted Lemilay and Majestra down to the battle, going through the prison cave to avoid confrontation.

When they arrived at the scene, Mother and the tall cat were still locked in stalemate.

Lemilay closed the locket and Majestra stowed her tooth necklace, becoming visible.

"Play *Approach of the High One*." Majestra told Ersatzica.

"I don't know that one."

"Then play a regular beat."

"Ok." Ersatzica beat the drums at regular, steady intervals.

AWOOOOOO! ("Here!") Lemilay howled. *AWOOOO!* ("Hour!")

All eyes turned to them, even Mother's and the tall cat's.

"We have fought long and hard, honorably and bravely," Lemilay began. "But we must put our weapons down, relax our tired muscles, and welcome peace."

"We don't need to take the village by force," Majestra continued, "We will take it by peace."

"Brothers and sisters of Alpha, let us welcome our cat brothers and sisters of Ajig. Let us dine and bathe together in harmony. Let us—"

"You are NOT the chief, Lemilay!" Mother growled. "Stand down!"

"Mother, we can't win this fight! But we can survive. Agree to a peace settlement."

"The High One doesn't do peace settlements, do you?"

The tall cat grinned. "As much fun as I'm having here, I will agree to a peace settlement. Under my conditions, of course."

"I will handle the negotiations," Majestra said. "With the help of Lemilay-Ko, of course."

"Mother." Lemilay pleaded.

Mother growled. "I made a promise, Lemilay. To never let the cats in. I intend to keep my promise."

Some cats with spears tried to throw them at Mother, but they mysteriously fell before they could.

"Mother, please." Lemilay said.

Mother scanned the countenances of the young ones. "But I will agree to a cease-fight. But under no circumstances will the High One or his followers be allowed in."

"That just won't do." The High One cooed. "Always in the way of my plans, you wolves."

"We ended your plans a long time ago, and we will do it again."

The High One laughed. "The march of progress cannot be ended, only delayed."

"Once we find a way to kill you, your—"

"YAWN!" The High One mimed yawning. "My first stipulation is that you are replaced as the boss of the clog."

Mother growled.

Lemilay stepped up. "I will replace her. Will you negotiate with me?"

"A wolf who has hindsight. An actual worthy leader. Ajig's jolly!"

"Lemilay don't you *dare* let him in!"

"Mother, this needs to end."

"You don't know what you're doing. You don't know what he's done."

“But I know what he will do. He’ll spare our lives if we let him in. He’ll bring us infrastructure—”

“Stand down Lemilay.”

“Listen to your daughter, Awoomoon.” The High One said. “She’s very wise for one so young and naïve. Besides, you can’t kill me. What other options do you have?”

“I know how to kill him.” Mudrich stood next to Mother, hands caked in mud.

“You can’t possibly be serious.” Lemilay scoffed.

“He’s wearing clothes. Get him naked, and he’ll be powerless.” Mudrich said, staring straight into The High One’s soul.

“Ha!” The High One chuckled nervously. “I’m afraid my weakness is merely an illusion—”

Mudrich walked up, grabbed her hammer with her muddy paws, and ignored the searing pain of the heated metal with a mere wince. She approached the High One. A rock landed right at The High One’s feet. Wryonin was watching.

The High One backed up. “Guards!”

[mention Majestra and Lemilay holding hands, raised in the air]

“Wait, are you serious?” Majestra asked. She broke her peace gesture with Lemilay and drew her weapon, turning on the High One.

“Fleeting, I see, your loyalty.” The High One grimaced.

“I was always doing this to replace you.” Majestra said. “This will just make it happen faster.”

[chat gpt: make the berserk potion feel more like a desperation play]

The shield cats surrounded the High One.

The High One opened his hand, and four vials containing red liquid appeared between his fingers. “Drink up.” He one to each of the shield cats.

They drank it, and their eyes turned red with anger. Their muscles bulged and their skin thickened. More concernedly, their steady and practiced soldier gaze was overcome with a crazed anger that thirsted for blood.

“Attack!” The High One ordered.

[make it obvious that the berserk cats don't actually take orders, they just attack whatever is closest or attacks them most recently]

The blood-crazed cats dropped their shields and lunged at the wolves and Majestra.

Majestra and Ersatzica flinched, trying to escape.

Mother and Mudrich dove right in. Mudrich, though tired and fighting back the inferno that was her hammer, swung with all her might at the frenzied cats. She branded one in the face and singed another in the stomach, sending them flying. Mother went toe-to-toe with the third, creating an opening that Wryonin took to rock it straight between the eyes.

Lemilay, for her part, bravely fought against the fourth, giving Majestra and Ersatzica time to reposition.

But the berzerking cats recovered from their wounds quickly and came back for more. They lunged at Mudrich and Mother, frantically trying to claw their way through their faces. It took everything Mudrich and Mother had just to keep from getting hit.

“I know what to do!” Ersatzica exclaimed. She beat the drums, syncing up to the flurry of blows that the berserk cats were making. It was hard though, because they didn't attack in sync, and their movements were quick. Finally, after 1 minute, she synced with one of the berzerking cats. She slowed down the beat, eventually freezing it.

The berserk cat froze mid-leap. Not only did it stop moving its muscles, but it also froze mid-air, like it was frozen in ice. Just floating there.

Until Mudrich smashed it with a hammer! She angled the hammer below the cat, so when it hit, it launched it further and higher than it usually would have. Who knew where it landed? No one, but it didn't matter. Because it was out of the fight.

“What a fiine parlor trick.” The High One mused. Then he snapped his fingers and lit the berserk cats’ ears on fire.

The cats didn’t seem to notice. Where they used to have ears, they now had holes with crispy hair chunks inside it. But their already aggressively angry behaviour didn’t change.

Nonetheless, Ersatzica beat the drums again.

BUM BUM BUM

This time she synced up with two at once. Ersatzica paused them while they were on the ground, so she beat again just to get them into the air.

With a one and a two, Mudrich swung and batted them away.

The High One grumbled.

Ersatzica synced up with the last one.

The High One extended his arm and his gaze towards Ersatzica.

Majestra stepped in the way, and grabbed Ersatzica’s shoulder, causing them both to turn invisible.

The High One closed his eyes, still tracking Ersatzica’s movements with his hand. Then he snapped his fingers.

The drums caught fire! The silky top burned away immediately, and the metal around it heated to intolerable temperatures. Luckily Ersatzica was between beats, and didn’t get her hands burned, but the drums quickly started searing into her hips. She instinctively clawed at the belt, tearing it.

Majestra raised a clawed hand and scratched Ersatzica with all her might in the belly, and in the process, shredding the belt in one swipe. The drums rolled away, burning the grass as they tumbled.

Ersatzica hurled to the ground from the force of the swipe. After a relatively relaxing fall, she found a clawed hand stuck in her face. She glanced at it, then grabbed it, allowing it to pull her back to her feet.

“Thanks, Majestra.”

"I'm your cousin."

Mudrich and Mother fought off the berserk cat. It was as strong as a wolf, and fearless like cat. It seemed to either shrug off all damage, or complete ignore it. Its neck had multiple puncture wounds, Its belly was all bruised up, its jaw was a bloody mess. It had to be suffering from blood loss. But it kept coming.

Just then, a small cat appeared, holding a candle. The High One snapped his fingers, lighting the candle. Then the small cat opened his hand, revealing a tooth, and disappeared.

With a spectacular glow, the High One disappeared as well, and reappeared in the middle of the battlefield, burning corpses.

That's strange. Why burn corpses in the middle of the battle?

Lemilay jumped into the fight, swiftly punching Mother in the stomach then darting out. "Give up, Mother! You've lost!"

Mother flinched, and failed to block a strike from the cat. The cat landed on her, striking rapidly at her face. More puncture wounds appeared on its neck, and an invisible force tried to drag it off Mother. But it kept going.

"Mother!" Mudrich screamed. She flung her hammer at the cat, knocking it off Mother. Tears in her eyes, she grabbed the cat's head in her mouth, despite it being bigger than her, and bit down hard. She squeezed her claws around its throat, and squeezed as hard as she could.

The cat, in turn, clawed at her chest, digging through all the mud and blood, and the fur and skin, and into the muscle.

Mudrich clamped down, crushing the cat's skull.

The frenzy slowed, and eventually halted.

Mudrich bit down one more time, ending with a satisfying crunch. Then she flopped over onto the ground.

Mother got up, her face in shreds, and picked up her daughter. "Mudrich! Mudrich! Wake up!"

The wounds on Mudrich's belly were severe. The cat had tore through the muscles and bones, and organs of her insides.

"Muddy!" Ersie cried. She ran over, holding Muddy's head.

"You can save her." Majestra stated.

"How?" Ersatzica looked up at her.

"Do the medic bear thing."

"I don't have the blessing of Garoffle."

"No, but you have Heart Fire. Seal her wounds, stop her bleeding."

"Ok." Ersatzica looked up at the moon in the mid-day sky. "Alpha, Wolf God of the Loyal Moon, please help me save my sister." Then she looked down. "Muddy, don't die on me!"

She pressed her hand into her sister's wound. She didn't know how to use Heart Fire, and it didn't work.

But wait! The hammer! It was burning hot!

Ersatzica got up and fetched Muddy's hammer, the one she had made especially for her. She took a cuff off Muddy's wrist, and used a belt she had as a glove to hold the hammer. She easily moved the hammer and gently placed it on Muddy's wound.

"Come back, Muddy, come back!" She cried.

She stopped the bleeding with the burning hot hammer. She checked for a pulse. There was a heart beat. There was a breath.

"Muddy, come back! We need you! *I* need you! You're strong, and smart, and I... I don't know what to do without you. I can't fill your role, Muddy. I'm not strong enough—"

[add line in ch1 "youre smart in your own way, muddy"]

Muddy's muzzle opened, just a crack. "You're strong in your own way, Ersie."

"Muddy!" Ersie smiled, a tear rolling down her cheeks.

Muddy smiled. Then her head went limp.

"Muddy? Muddy!" Ersatzica stared at her sister. She had a funny feeling, and turned to the hammer. A blue shimmer flashed over it, and for a moment, it smiled at Ersie.

Ersatzica sobbed, holding her sister. "Awoooo!" She yelled, unable to properly howl.

AWOOOOO! ("Moon") Mother howled in unison.

"Awooo!" Majestra joined in.

AWOOOO! ("Moon") Wryonin's howl could be heard from a distance.

The whole world stood still for just a moment of mourning.

[flashbacks to good times with muddy]

"Lemilay, how could you!" Mother growled. "You threw off my guard. Are you trying to kill me?"

"We can't kill the High One." Lemilay said. "The best we can do is cooperate and negotiate a peace treaty."

"You traitor!" Mother swiped at her, striking her in the face and catching her off guard.

Lemilay looked stunned, but assumed the starting Pea-Fo pose. "I was hoping I wouldn't have to do this, Mother. But if you won't cooperate, I will have to take your place."

"My place? You should take *your* place!" Mother swiped again.

Lemilay blocked it, then landed a kick in Mother's belly.

"So you know Pea-Fo."

"I learned from the best." Lemilay nodded, tapping her bald spot.

"I should've trained at night." Mother circled Lemilay.

Lemilay flipped over to Mother's side and tried to punch her from a flanking position.

Mother stuck out her arm, letting Lemilay run into, clotheslining herself. She punted Lemilay to the ground and stepped on her belly.

"You've got a lot yet to learn."

Lemilay struggled under Mother's weight, but soon realized she wasn't going anywhere. *AWOOOOOO!* ("Help!")

"Aw, did the stupid stubborn one die?" The High One strutted toward the group. "Finally."

"You did this!" Mother jumped off Lemilay and lunged at the High One.

He easily dodged. "Tie her up. Be careful not to kill her."

Behind him stood a small battalion of cats, who all had various burns all over their bodies. They grabbed a hold of Mother.

Mother fought them off, maiming and killing several of them. But eventually, too many of them held her down.

Lemilay kneed her in the stomach. "Well then, it's a good thing you'll still be around to teach me. Maybe this time even face-to-face."

Mother growled as her face was forcibly stuck into the mud by the horde of cats on her.

AWOOOOOO! ("Hour!") Lemilay howled.

The High One blew a bugle, signaling the cats to stop fighting.

"Attention everyone!" The High One yelled. His voice boomed through the valley.

"We have a new leader of the clog village!" He raised up Lemilay's hand. "Bumpy! Congratulations, Bumpy! You are the new leader of the clog village."

"My name is Lemi—"

"No, it's Bumpy now. I chose your name."

The wolves gathered around. "Where's Awoomoon?"

"Your former leader has been defeated."

"I am your leader now!" Lemilay said. "Pledge your loyalty to me, loyal wolves of Alpha."

A hand full of wolves resisted, and the High One lit them all on fire. After that, the other wolves pledged loyalty to Lemilay.

The High One took Majestra's hand. "And you, my dear Majestra, shall guide Bumpy in her task as leader."

"I'm going to lead the march forward into the eastern lands." Majestra proclaimed.

"No, you're going to stay in the clog village helping Bumpy. You will be her assistant."

"That's not what we agreed to."

"Yes it is, you just didn't understand."

"Rejoice! A great accomplishment has been made this day! We have finally achieved peace between cats and wolves!" He put Lemilay's and Majestra's hands together.

Lemilay and Majestra raised their hands in unison, begrudgingly celebrating victory.

"And you my dear, Majestra's twin." The High One grabbed Ersatzica. "You are coming with me. Rumor has it you don't know what it's like to be a cat. We'll change that." The High One laughed. He pulled Ersatzica along, ripping her from Mudrich and her hammer.

Then General Seamtrust arrived, with the other cats under her command.

"Ah, just in time! I'm sure you will see to it that the liberation force achieves their goal from here?"

"Yes, High One." Seamtrust nodded.

"Good. Off to the High Tower then." He handed Ersie to his cat soldiers, who sat her down on a pillow. Then they picked up the floor under the pillow with long rods that rested on four soldiers' shoulders.

"Where are you taking me?"

“Where all the royals live.”

“The Cat Kingdom?”

“Ha! Is that what you wolves call it?”

“Yes.”

“Well, are you a wolf or a cat?”

“I’m a cat.”

“Very well.”

“But I want to stay with my family.”

“Well you’re in luck! If you’re truly the daughter of Pantrinome, you’ll have lots of family to stay with in High Tower.”

Ersatzica found it hard to forget about her wolf family, Mother, Lemilay, Wryonin, Mudrich, while riding to the Cat Kingdom.

[have coronation scene for Lemilay]

[give ersie time to prepare to leave for the cat kingdom, maybe even give her the decision to leave or attempt to dodge and stay]