

Awoomoon's Story

Chapter 1

AWOOO! A young grey and white wolf howled at the moon in the daylight. "Prey here!" she howled again.

She jumped into the creek from the bank and grabbed at a fish. She missed. The fish wiggled away. She grabbed again, and caught it in her hands! But the fish was slippery, and was able to wiggle out.

She chased this larger-than-normal fish up the creek. The creek's many twists and turns were littered with fallen logs, twigs, and the occasional low foot bridge. She expertly dodged all of them on her quest for the big fish.

She rounded a corner, jumped on the fish, and caught it! She tightened her grip, but the fish still was wiggling out.

WHACK!

A stone came out of nowhere and hit the fish straight in the head. It stopped wiggling as a bruise formed next to its eye.

The wolf pup turned to the bank. "Wow! That was a great shot!"

A young peacock stood on the bank with a slingshot. His eyes went wide as he realized that the wolf pup had seen him. He turned around and ran off.

"Wait!" The wolf pup climbed up the bank and ran after. She easily caught him and got in front of him. "Don't run. I'm not going to hurt you. Do you want to be friends?"

The peacock blushed and looked away.

The wolf pup held out a hand. "My name is Huripka. What's yours?"

The peacock looked at her. "Aw... Awsoodoo." He put a winged hand in hers.

"Nice to meet you, Awsoodoo." Huripka licked his wing.

Awsoodoo cracked a smile, which he hid by turning away and sheepishly withdrawing his hand.

Huripka moved into his vision. "Do you want to go catch some more fish?"

He looked at her, and then nodded.

"Great! Let's go!"

They tried the same strategy again. Huripka caught the fish with her hands, and Awsoodoo struck the fish with a rock before it could get away. They caught quite a few more fish. They stopped when Awsoodoo missed and hit the Huripka in the hand.

AWOOOOO! "Injury!" she howled.

Awsoodoo dropped his slingshot and rushed to her side. He wrapped his feathers around her hand and rubbed through them with the underside of his beak.

Huripka stopped howling. She looked down at it. "Wow, that... actually feels better."

Awsoodoo then leaned down as if to kiss her hand, and rubbed the side of his face against her paw. Patting it gently, he looked into her eyes.

In the distance, peacock sounds came closer.

A look of panic overtook Awsoodoo. He grabbed his slingshot and ran off.

"What is that?" Huripka followed.

"My brothers."

No sooner did he say that, than three older peacocks with fully splayed tails show up. They immediately noticed the wolf pup caressing her hand. "Awsoodoo, did you hurt this poor wolf pup and cause her to howl in pain?"

Awsoodoo froze.

"It was an accident." Huripka cut in.

"So you did!" His oldest brother got up in his face. "How could you?" He pushed him.

"Hey! Leave him alone!" Huripka growled.

"Aw the little doggy is standing up for the cowardly birdy." Another brother knelt in front. "You gonna let this wolf pup fight your battles for you?" He shoved Awsoodoo, knocking him to the ground.

Huripka barked and dove on one of their feet. She grabbed it with her hands and squeezed tight.

"I've been bit! I've been bit!" The peacock ran around screaming, dragging Huripka around.

Huripka let go and let the peacock run off.

The other two brothers stayed. "That wasn't cool. You better run off before a fight starts."

Huripka growled.

"I am trained in Pea-Fo." He swirled his wings gracefully in the air, then made three swift punches.

"I'm good at fighting too!" Huripka barked.

"We'll see about that." The Pea-Fo trained peacock sent a quick punch flying at Huripka.

Huripka didn't see it coming. She got hit straight in the face and went flying back.

The peacock stood over her. "Ha. 'Good at fighting', sure. You're weak." He looked at his younger brother. "Just like your friend. Leave now, wolf pup, while you still can."

A tear formed in Huripka's eye as she sat up. She furrowed her eyebrows and bared her teeth. She growled as she stood back up.

"So be it." He spun around and knocked her on her back with his tail.

Awsoodoo got up and ran over to Huripka, but he got tripped. "Awooo!" He tried to howl, but it didn't come out like he thought.

"Did you just try to howl?" His older brother laughed as he grabbed him by the legs and held him upside down. "You really suck at it."

Huripka propped herself up on her elbows and turned her muzzle towards the moon. *AWOOOO!* "Injury!" *AWOOOOO!* "Injury!" Her howls her pitiful but determined. They rang out loud and carried far and wide. They echoed off the trees. *AWOOOO!*

The peacocks looked around hastily. "Shut her up! Shut her up!"

They grabbed her from behind and wrapped a wing around her face.

She opened her jaw and clamped down on it.

"Ow! Ow! Ow!" The peacock held his wing. "I've been bit! I've been bit!"

"Idiot!" The other peacock grabbed her. "You have to hold her like this!" He forced her muzzle shut and wrapped a wing around her muzzle.

She tried to open her mouth, but couldn't. The peacock had a tight grip. She squirmed like a fish and broke free. She grabbed Awsoodoo by the hand and they ran off.

The other peacocks caught up quickly, but by the time they did, they were in sight of some wolf guards.

"What's the trouble? Are you the wolf crying injury?" The wolf guards looked down at Huripka.

"Yes, sir." She nodded.

"Yeah she cried injury!" The older peacock brother cut her off. "We heard her cries too, and when we got to the scene, this runt—" he kicked Awsoodoo. "—was hitting her with rocks." He hid his bit wing behind his back, taking great care to make sure the wolf guards didn't see it.

Awsoodoo hung his head.

"That's not true! That's not true!"

The guards ignored her. "We'll take it from here. You're free to go."

The peacocks left.

"You two come with us." They escorted Huripka and Awsoodoo to the peacock village. They walked through the market place and to the prison. "We'll hold you two here until your parents come for you." They put them in separate cells.

Huripka looked up at the light shining through the roof. She sat on the bench and crossed her arms. A low growl emanated from her throat.

Awsoodoo grabbed onto the bars and peered his head out between them. "Hu... Huripka?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm sorry... I got you into this."

"No, you're my friend." Her growl subsided. "Friends stick together."

"Friends stick together." Awsoodoo smiled.

Chapter 2

Huripka and Awsoodoo met every day at the creek to fish and hang out. They ran to the wolf guards whenever they heard Awsoodoo's brothers approaching. This went on for several weeks. Eventually Huripka told her papa about it.

"So someone is bullying you?" Huripka's papa, a silver and white wolf, stood next to a doorway, scanning the perimeter. His spear hand steadily held it straight up from the ground.

"And my friend too, Papa!" Huripka hugged his stable leg.

"I see. That is quite troublesome."

"What should I do, Papa?" She looked up at the underside of his muzzle with a tear in her eye.

"You shouldn't have to learn this so young." Without looking, he reached down with his free hand and wiped the tear from her eye. He sighed. "But you'd have to learn it someday."

"Learn what, Papa?"

"To defend yourself." He patted her on the head, rubbing behind her ears. "I have a friend who's a master of martial arts."

While Huripka and Awsoodoo were playing by the creek the next day, Papa met with his martial arts friend. They met at a tea shop in the marketplace.

"So, Soofawkoo, my daughter has been having trouble with a bully."

Soofawkoo let his tail feathers spread a bit, letting his grey-eyed feather show.

"Well, Fristiyen, there must be something wrong with her."

Fristiyen furrowed his brow but continued nonetheless. "It's time she learned how to defend herself. Do you have any room in your Pea-Fo class?"

"Whether or not I have room, that's not the question." Soofawkoo took a sip of his tea. "Can your daughter keep up?"

Frestiyen grumbled under his breath. "Give her a week, then we'll evaluate from there. Think of it..." He swirled his cup in the air. "Think of it like a challenge."

"Hmmm." Soofawkoo smiled. "I have never trained a wolf before. It shall be an... interesting challenge."

"Then you'll do it?" Frestiyen downed the last of his tea.

"No, I'll perfect it."

The next day, Huripka ran to the creek excitedly.

"Awsoodoo! Awsoodoo! Awsoodoo!" When she found him, she ran up and tackled him. "Guess what Awsoodoo?"

"What?" Awsoodoo answered despondently.

"My dad signed me up for fight class! Wait, what's wrong?"

"My dad's forcing me to take classes."

"What kind of classes?"

"Pea-Fo. But I don't want to fight. I want to play by the creek." He looked at Huripka. "With you."

"Oh you mean fight class! Maybe we'll both be in the same class, and then we can do *that* together!"

Awsoodoo's eyes brightened. "Yeah! Maybe this won't be so bad. Except..."

"Except what?"

"I'm still going to be in class with my dad."

Huripka and Awsoodoo show up to class the next day to find that the teacher is indeed Awsoodoo's father.

Class took place in a field at the top of a hill, surrounded by a flower garden. Rows and rows of flowers cascaded down the side of the hill. Although there was a wide variety of colors and flower types in this garden, all the flowers immediately on the edge of the clearing were thorned roses. Deer gardeners roamed the garden, watering them, pruning them, and planting them.

At the head of the field, the Pea-Fo master stood over his class. "Today class, you will notice we have two new pupils." Soofawkoo pointed a winged hand to Huripka and Awsoodoo.

"A wolf?" The rest of the class, entirely all peacocks, laughed in unison.

"How is she going to do Light From Above?"

"Or Stone Slicer?"

"I want to see her try Woodpecker."

Huripka growled at the mockery.

Soofawkoo shared in the laughter. Then he straightened his face. "Silence! This wolf is now part of our class. It will not be easy training her in the ways of Pea-Fo, but it is up to me, up to you, up to *all of us* to train her. We have one week."

The class fell silent.

Huripka looked puzzled. "One week?"

"If you don't achieve at least a white-yellow sash by the end of the week, you will be expelled from this class." Soofawdoo ran a feather finger along the black sash hanging tightly around his neck. "Are you up to the challenge?"

Huripka growled with fire in her eyes and took a fighting stance. "I'm up for it."

"Perfect."

Soofawkoo led them first in a series of drills, all of which involved a lot of punches, swipes, tail spins, and other movements that Huripka could easily do, but not perfectly.

"Higher!" Soofawkoo yelled at Huripka when she spun around with her tail extended. "Faster!" He'd yell when she'd punch. "Wider!" He'd say about her stance when she swiped.

They trained for the whole day.

"Do better tomorrow class. Dismissed." Soofawkoo bowed slightly to his class, barely opening with wings.

The class responded by bowing their head as far as they could, and opening their wings as wide as possible. "Yes, master."

Huripka bowed and fell on her face.

The class laughed at her.

"Look! It's that wolf girl! She's eating dirt!" A peacock peeked up over the hill.

"Shh! We're trying to sneak in!"

Three peacocks took their place in class bowing to the master of Pea-Fo.

Huripka's eyes widened and her mouth fell open. The three peacocks were Awsoodoo's older brothers, who had been bullying them.

"Where have you three been?" Soofawkoo scolded.

"Um... we were..." One of them stammered. "Being detained by..." He looked around and landed on Huripka. "A wolf. A wolf taskforce. They wanted to know what we witnessed."

"And what did you witness?"

"Um..."

Soofawkoo didn't let them finish. "That is no excuse. You must arrive on time or lose your place in class."

"Yes master." The three peacocks bowed.

Huripka leaned over to Awsoodoo. "What are *they* doing here?"

"They're my brothers. Dad wants us all to be fighters. Of course they'd be here."

"I can see why you're not thrilled to be here."

Awsoodoo nodded.

"What are *you* doing here?" The three brothers encircled the two.

"I'm taking fight class!" Huripka puffed up her chest. "And when I'm done, I'm going to beat you and your tail feathers!"

The peacocks laughed. "*Fight class*? You don't even know the name of the class! It's called Pea-Fo, you know, as in *Peacock* Fighting. It's not for females, and it's most definitely not for wolves." He poked Huripka with a sharp feather.

"Boys! It's time to go home." Soofawkoo yelled.

"Well, I have to go home now." Awsoodoo waved goodbye.

"See you tomorrow." Huripka left to go home.

The next day, they trained like normal, this time with Awsoodoo's brothers. They tripped up Huripka and got in her way every chance they could. And by the end of the day, it was clear Huripka wasn't going to earn the first sash. At the end of class, Soofawkoo dismissed everyone but told Huripka to stay. He trained with her until the sun went down.

Soofawkoo sighed. "You're not as capable as I thought you would be. Still, there's five days left. Maybe you'll yet impress me. Dismissed."

Huripka looked down. She kicked a rock that was glowing in the moonlight.

AWOOOOOO! A wolf howled off in the distance. It was Papa's howl! "Where?"

AWOOO! Huripka howled back. "Here!"

Papa came to get her and walked her home. "How is training going?"

"Master says I won't get the first sash on time."

"Even if you don't, you're still my daughter." He kissed the top of her head. "But I know you can do it, no matter what those bullies say."

She hugged him. "Thanks, Papa."

The next five days went by in a blur. Soofawkoo moved Huripka to the front row so she'd be away from the three peacock brothers. The peacocks she stood next to now acted cold towards her, but didn't actively get in her way. She tried her hardest, but a lot of the moves required wings, feathers, and a beak. By the end of the week, things looked bleak.

On the last day she had to prove herself, there was no training. There was only sparring. The new pupils had to prove that they learned the moves, and had to show they could effectively use them on an opponent.

The class was given "neck socks", protective sleeves that went around their necks. They were thick enough to protect against cuts.

Huripka struggled to put hers on. It constricted her breathing and clumped up on her shorter neck. She stopped breathing, and Soofawkoo pulled it off her.

"Well if you can't wear the neck sock, then you will have no protection, and thus are disqualified from the tournament." Soofawkoo ruled.

"I want to compete!"

"But you will die."

"Wolf necks are thicker than peacock necks. And mine is especially thick." She grabbed the scruff of her neck to show how thick it was. "I can compete safely."

"Very well. We will see if you are good enough to survive."

Awsoodoo and Huripka were paired up to showcase their skills.

"Go easy on me?" Huripka asked Awsoodoo, rubbing her neck.

He looked left and right, but nodded anyway.

"Awsoodoo! Go!"

Awsoodoo punched Huripka rapidly in the chest, swiped her twice with his wing feathers, and then softened his tail feathers for the final move. He spun around and brushed his tail feathers harmlessly across Huripka's neck.

"Pass!" Soofawkoo yelled. "Perfectly executed. You have earned your white yellow sash."

Huripka high-fived Awsoodoo.

"Huripka! Go!"

Huripka curled her fists and sent them flying into Awsoodoo's chest, knocking him off balance. He staggered backwards as she swiped at him, causing her to miss. She stepped forward as she spun, but she lost her center and her spinning tail went wide.

"Fail!" Soofawkoo looked at Huripka angrily. "You have failed to earn your white-yellow sash. It turns out you were not good enough. You are now expelled from this class. You are dismissed."

"But..."

"You are dismissed!"

A tear formed in Huripka's eye and she looked away. "Come on, Awsoodoo." She grabbed his hand as she walked away.

Awsoodoo resisted. "I have to get my white-yellow sash." He pulled his wing back.

She looked in his eyes as another tear formed in hers. His face betrayed no sign of sympathy or distraught. It was all excitement and glee for his success. Huripka froze.

"He said you're dismissed." Awsoodoo pushed her.

She looked back one more time before walking off. Soofawkoo pulled the neck sock off Awsoodoo and replaced it with a thick white sash with a single yellow length-wise stripe. Awsoodoo bowed enthusiastically. Huripka broke into a crying rage as she ran home.

The next day, Huripka sat by the creek and waited. The fish jumped up and down the bends, over the logs, and into the ripples. They taunted her, but she sat on a log on the bank, twiddling a stick in the dirt. Finally, in the late afternoon, a certain peacock strolled in with his white yellow sash.

"I'm here!" He held his head high. "Did you see my new sash? Dad says I did all the moves perfectly, even though I was sparring with a wolf, and that I'll earn my next one in no time!"

"That's great." Huripka curled up, crossing her arms over her knees.

"Well it was nice seeing you, Huripka, but I have to go to dinner. I'm super hungry after training today. See you tomorrow!"

As Awsoodoo walked away, Huripka didn't say goodbye. Instead, she cried.

Chapter 3

It was a long time before Awsoodoo met Huripka at the creek again. This time he came back with a yellow sash, proudly holding his beak high.

Huripka abruptly stopped what she was doing, which was a haphazard subset of the drills and moves she learned in that one week. "Awsoodoo."

"I earned this by perfectly executing the next set of moves." He ran a feather down along the sash.

"That's great, Awsoodoo."

"Father says I'll get my black belt in no time at this rate."

"Great..."

"It's too bad you didn't even earn a white-yellow belt."

"Yeah..." Huripka tossed a stone into the creek. "Hey you wanna go fishing?"

"No, I have to practice my moves." His eyes widened. "We could do them together!"

"Mmm, sure."

Awsoodoo showed her his new moves, and she practiced blocking them so he could learn them better. Things were going well, and they were both having fun by the end of it. But then it happened again. Awsoodoo's brothers showed up.

"Hey it's that wolf who thought she was a peacock."

"Yeah what kind of wolf would try to fight like a peacock?"

"Still haven't forgiven you for what you did to my wing."

"What did I do?" Huripka raised an eyebrow.

"Nothing." He recanted.

"He didn't go to the doctor after you bit him and now it's getting infected."

"Shh!" He hissed. "Well, yeah. And now it hurts like crazy, and it's so hard to hide it *and* fight Pea-Fo."

"Just go to the doctor bro!"

"No, I can't let anyone know I got bit by a wolf pup! And you better keep quiet about it too!"

"Sure thing."

"You're weak to wolf bites?" Huripka bared her teeth. "Well you better stay away! Unless you want another one!"

"I don't want to get bit!"

"Me neither!"

"Well then it's a good thing now we got yellow sash here." He pushed Awsoodoo.

"He'll take care of this wolf pup right, Awsoodoo?"

"Yeah Awsoodoo!"

Huripka looked at him. "You wouldn't."

Awsoodoo looked left and right. "I... I..." He looked at the ground.

Then with a sudden swiftness, he uppercut her muzzle and tail swiped her chest.

She fell backward onto the dirt. "Awssoodoo?"

Awssoodoo looked down. "Sorry, Huripka."

She turned her attention to the three brothers, pointing at all three of them. "You!"

She got off the ground. "I'm going to tell everyone about your wing!" She turned around and ran off.

"But if you do that..." The brothers called out.

Huripka stopped in her tracks. She faced them. "What?"

"If you tell anyone about the wing." They stroked Awssoodoo's head menacingly.

"Your friend here gets hurt. Irrecoverably."

"Irre... Irre-what?"

"You can't undo it once it's done."

"What friend are you talking about?" Awssoodoo looked up, but they forced his head back down. "You're not talking about me, are you?"

"Of course not, yellow sash brother."

"Fine." Huripka growled. "I won't tell, and you don't harm him."

"Deal." They smiled. "Come on, yellow sash brother, let's go to the special fish pond."

"Can Huripka come too?"

They laughed. "It's peacocks only."

They all four left Huripka alone in the clearing by the creek. She burned in anger and loneliness.

Weeks went by. She trained by herself as much as she could, perfecting the first three moves she learned the best she could. Awssoodoo was hardly there, and when he was, he was accompanied by his brothers. Despite them hazing him and harassing her, Awssoodoo was content to become their groupie.

They blackmailed her into letting them beat her up. She'd block as best she could, but sometimes they got through. Most times she could just shrug it off, but occasionally she would come home with a bruise or cut. She explained it away as "rough housing in the undergrowth".

Months went by. Awssoodoo frequently carried a new sash of a higher status. And his moves got faster and more potent. Every time Huripka learned to consistently block his attacks, he'd learn new ones that tripped her up.

Years went by. Huripka and Awssoodoo grew taller. Huripka's skin and bones thickened and her growl got louder. Awssoodoo's neck gained brilliant new colored feathers and his tail grew splendid. He even got his grey-eyed tail feather. These bodily changes took time for both to adjust to, but they trained through them, maintaining their combat prowess.

Finally it was time for brown-sashed Awssoodoo to earn his black sash. But to do so, he had to win a Pea-Fo tournament. The combatants were all brown sashes or lower. Whoever won the tournament earned their black sash. The tournament was held whenever there were enough brown sashes to have one, maximum of once per month.

All the brown-sashed peacocks in Soofawkoo's class signed up, as did some lower-tier sashes, and some independent candidates.

"Name?" The peacock at the table didn't look up as he moved the pen to the next blank line on the paper.

The next contestant approached the table, casting a peculiar non-peacock shadow on the attendant. "Huripka."

The attendant scoffed. "That's not a peacock name. You need a peacock name."

Huripka looked around, and saw the moon in the daylight sky. "Moon."

"That's only one syllable!"

"Moon, Awooo... Awoomoon!"

"Awoomoon?"

"Yes."

"Ok." The attendant gave her a number. "Make sure to wear this during combat."

"Ok what now?"

"Next!" he shoved her along.

The next day, when the attendants had arranged everybody into brackets, Huripka faced her first competitor in the ring.

She stood face to face with a peacock with a blue-brown sash. He looked confused, unsure how to apply Pea-Fo to a wolf opponent. Huripka gave him a toothy grin. In response, he checked to make sure his neck sock was on. Huripka raised her chin, showing her sockless neck.

The caster spoke with a booming voice. "Here we have two first-time competitors, both vying for the black sash. In this corner we have Ootawroo, an independent trainee with a blue-brown sash, just one shy of the max you can get without a tournament. But feeling prepared, he enters with high confidence!"

The crowd cheered. Two or three peafowls cheered the hardest, most probably his family.

"And in this corner—" The caster stammered. "What do we have here? Awoomoon, a wolf? With a sash of color... oh actually she has no sash."

The crowd laughed and jeered.

"That's right, fowl! This wolf entered a peacock tournament with no prior experience! This should be an easy fight for Ootawroo!"

The crowd cheered at the mention of his name.

"Now let's go to the referee to start this match."

The referee stood just on the outside of the circle, placing the two competitors on opposite sides within the ring. "Slice the neck sock, score a point. Knock the opponent out of the ring, score a point. First to three points wins. Flying ok, petrification banned. Round 1: Go!"

Huripka wasted no time crossing the arena. She closed in on Ootawroo faster than he expected, punching him straight in the chest. He staggered back, stepping outside the circle.

"Point: Awoomoon!" The referee raised his right wing. "Places!"

Huripka jogged back to her spot. Ootawroo spat outside the arena, then cautiously approached his spot.

"Wow! What a start! This wolf might be more capable than we thought!"

The referee yelled, "Round 2: Go!"

Huripka charged and punched, but this time Ootawroo shot straight up into the air, dodging her completely. She managed to stop herself before running off the edge of the ring, but she was in a bad position. Ootawroo landed on her shoulders and pushed her down, landing her outside the ring.

"Point: Ootawroo!" The referee raised his left wing. "Places!"

"Is that all she's got? Ootawroo easily saw that coming."

Back at there places, Huripka stared into Ootawroo's eyes. He met her gaze for but a moment before turning away.

"Round 3: Go!"

Huripka ran at him again, and he flew up in the air again, as she expected him too. Instead of stopping her run, she jumped in the air and spun around, swinging her tail into Ootawroo. He blocked it with his wings, but it stunned him enough to make him drop to the ground. On the way down, he held out his beak right over Huripka's skull. She dodge rolled away, landing on all fours. Ootawroo switched positions and landed feet first, taking only a moment to reorient. But that was all Huripka needed. She lunged at him, swiping with both paws at the same time. They hit the neck sock.

"Point: Awoomoon!" The referee raised his right wing. "Places!"

"What a stunning display! Awoomoon actually jumped to Ootawroo's flight height! This could go either way!"

This time, Ootawroo stared intently back at Huripka. He blinked before he could get her to look away.

"Round 4: Go!"

Huripka lunged at Ootawroo, preparing to swipe. But at the last moment, he turned around, and splayed his brilliant tail feathers. Huripka landed in them and onto his back. Just like he planned. He flapped his wings with one powerful flap, launching himself into the air and an unexpected angle, causing him to flip in the air, and come down upside-down beak first onto Huripka. He was quick enough that she didn't have time to dodge. He connected his beak with the back of her neck.

"Point: Ootawroo!" The referee raised his left wing. "Places!"

"Wow that was incredible! Yet again, Ootawroo took advantage of Awoomoon's predictable moves to do something unexpected. He really shows off the unique perfections of the peacock body."

Huripka rubbed her neck, but her gaze didn't waver. Ootawroo gulped.

"Round 5: Go!"

Huripka lunged again. Ootawroo blocked it this time, or he would have. But Huripka only short-lunged, stopping just in front, and dodge rolling to the side. Once there, she tail swiped him to the side. Ootawroo was knocked over, but he channeled it into a roll onto his back. Huripka jumped onto him, but he pushed her off with his clawed feet. Huripka moved a paw into position midari so that it would land on his neck. He saw it coming and paddled out of the way. Huripka landed on all fours. Ootawroo got back on his feet as fast as he could, but by the time he did, Huripka was already there with a sprinting punch. This sent him staggering to the edge of the arena. He used his wings to slow his momentum, keeping himself in the arena. Huripka jumped at him with two swipes and a tail spin. He blocked it all with his winged feathers, then went for a winged uppercut. Huripka leaned her head to the side, dodging it. With his wing outstretched, she leaned over and punched him right in the neck. He gagged for a moment.

"Point: Awoomoon! Winner: Awoomoon!"

"Wow what a turn out! Even though this wolf only knows three moves, she sure knows how to use them!"

"Awoomoon! Awoomoon! Awoomoon!" The crowd cheered. Or at least, part of it. Huripka didn't look to see.

Awoomoon advanced up the tournament, defeating a green sash, a blue sash, and even a brown sash, which was a major upset.

The only brown sash left to face her in the tournament was Awsoodoo. He climbed through the bracket, landing him in the final match against Awoomoon.

"In this corner we have Awsoodoo, a first-time competitor. Waiting until he had his brown sash, Awsoodoo excels at perfecting the moves he learns, earning him this place in the tournament. Once he wins, he'll perfect his black sash and the moves beyond."

"Aw-soodoo! Aw-soodoo! Aw-soodoo!" His brothers and others in the crowd chanted his name, even as the caster tried to hype up the other contestant.

"And here we have Awoomoon, the unknown surprise wolf contestant who happens to be surprisingly good at peacock combat. No one expected this to be the final fight, fowls, but here it is!"

"Places!"

Huripka smiled. "Hey Awsoodoo!"

"Huripka? How did you get this far?"

"You're not the only one who's been training."

"Hmmm." He smirked. "Sure, but I bet you won't put up much of a fight."

"We'll see."

"I mean, you *won't* put up much of a fight." He shrugged. "I've watched your fights. I know all your moves. All three of them."

"Round 1: Go!"

Awsoodoo blocked, bracing for a charge punch. When that didn't happen, he looked around. Huripka was standing at her spot, staring menacingly at him.

"Looks like we got a bit of a stand off here! Neither combatant wants to make the first move!"

"What are you doing?" Awsoodoo whispered vehemently, putting down his blocking stance.

"Like you said, not putting up much of a fight."

Awsoodoo's eyes widened. "Oh." He smiled.

Awsoodoo went in for the attack. He used all his brown-sash moves on her, executing them perfectly. He flew up into the air and dived beak-first. Huripka dodge rolled. He clamped his feet into the ground, spread his wings, and flapped. The wind burst blew Huripka back, but she hunkered down and clawed the ground, losing no ground. He flapped up and dove feet first into her shoulder. She raised an arm and his claws latched onto that instead of her neck. In response, he twirled with wings, spinning him around, and thus dragging Huripka into the spin. She tiptoed on the ground, graciously directing the momentum. He finished with a downward dive into the dirt, and she landed on all fours, ready to attack. Preparing for a counterattack, Awsoodoo landed with tail feathers facing Huripka. Displaying them, he would defend a lunge attack, if only Huripka would oblige. And she did. She jumped onto his back, landing helplessly into his tail feathers instead. Awsoodoo flapped and flipped into the air, landing his beak onto Huripka's neck in one quick motion. Except, she dodge rolled and avoided it. Awsoodoo pulled his neck up and corrected his trajectory to amazingly not only land on his feet, but also face his opponent.

"What is this? A fight or a dance? These moves look way to practiced to be a spur-of-the-moment combat between two fighters."

Huripka took a fighting stance. Awsoodoo motioned for her to come forward. She ran at him and lined up a punch to his neck. He blocked, spun around, and swiped his tail feathers to her neck. She ducked. Her ears barely managed to come out uncut. At the end of the spin, he had an uppercut waiting for her. She side stepped it and punched him in the neck. He recoiled in surprise.

"Point: Awoomoon!" The referee raised his right hand. "Places!"

"Shocking! Desptie Awsoodoo performing all the moves perfectly, Awoomoon dodges all of them! Without wings or tail feathers! And then dodges one final time and follows up with a counter attack!"

"A-woo-moon! A-woo-moon! A-woo-moon!" Part of the crowd cheered.

"Huripka, that was a sloppy punch!" Awsoodoo scolded. "You have to connect the *center* of your fist to the neck!"

"Thanks, I'll remember that for next time."

"Round 2: Go!"

Another round like the last. Awsoodoo attacked Huripka, who expertly dodged all of them. At the end, she found an opening and took it. This time with a solid punch to the neck, *with* the center of her fist.

"Point: Awoomoon!" The referee raised his right wing. "Places!"

"This is match point for Awoomoon! She's close to shutting out the favored winner altogether!"

"Huripka! What are you doing?" Awsoodoo complained.

Huripka just looked at him as she got back into position.

"You're making me look bad."

"Oh, are you not so perfect without your little black sash?" She sneered.

"Huripka, *please*. I need this."

Her steel gaze fizzled out. She looked down to her right. Then she looked back at him and nodded.

"Round 3: Go!"

Huripka ran at him with a charge punch. He blocked it, but still got knocked back. He spread his wings to prevent getting out of bounds. He counter attacked by digging his claws in the dirt and flapping one powerful flap. Huripka leapt into the

air, taking it in full force, getting knocked down and knocked back. She landed on her back, head outside the ring.

"Point: Awssoodoo!" The referee raised his left wing. "Places!"

"Astounding! Despite getting hit hard by that swift attack by Awoomoon, Awssoodoo was able to keep from getting ring'd out and even knocked his opponent out instead! Amazing! This fight isn't lost yet!"

"What was that?" Awssoodoo complained.

Huripka raised an eyebrow. "You want to win, don't you?"

"You gotta make it believable or else it won't count!"

Huripka grumbled.

"Round 4: Go!"

Huripka leapt in close and went for a tail swipe. Awssoodoo blocked it but still got knocked aside. He jabbed her with a peck of his beak, but only caught her backside. Huripka jumped in the air and tried to do a backflip, but ended up on her back. Her hand swung wide and slapped Awssoodoo in the face, but he dodged it, and she hit him in the wing instead. He spun around in a tail swipe, cutting her on the underside of the chin. Her thick skin reduced the damage and it didn't start bleeding right away.

"Point: Awssoodoo!" The referee raised his left wing. "Places!"

"Wow, Awssoodoo is really making a comeback! Awoomoon is being really aggressive, which doesn't seem to be serving her well. Is she throwing the match?"

"Huripka, you have to make it more believable. The referee and the audience thinks that you're throwing the match on purpose."

"Well, that's because I am."

"Yeah, but don't make it so obvious."

"Round 5: Go!"

Awsoodoo put up his wings to preemptively block an attack. However, Huripka stood still, waiting for *his* attack. He circled her looking for an opening, and she circled him looking for a way in. They circled each other for a while.

“Come on, make a move!” Awsoodoo said.

“Why? Because you know that you can’t hit me and then I’ll counterattack.”

“And then I’ll block that counterattack and counterattack back.”

“We’ll see about that.”

Huripka charged in and punched Awsoodoo in the neck, but he dodged. He went for a counterattack. Huripka tail spun and Awsoodoo hit her in the back of the neck instead. Fortunately for Awsoodoo, Huripka’s spinning tail was blocked by his already-outstretched wing. Otherwise, he would have been hit in the neck. Huripka spun around to face him and punched him in the chest, knocking him backwards. He used his wings to stop himself, like last time, and then flew up in the air and dive bombed Huripka. She dodge rolled out of the way. They circled each other again.

“Wow, seems to be a stalemate! Both of them are equally competent. This is gonna be a close one!”

Huripka went up for charge punch but at the last moment she got on all fours and tail spun at his neck. Awsoodoo flapped into the air. He grabbed Awoomoon’s tail with his claw feet. He didn’t have enough power to lift her into the air, so he spun her around instead. But she was on all fours, thus stabilizing against the spin. She pulled her tail down, causing Awsoodoo to crash into the ground. She leapt into the air and swiped at his neck, but he dodge rolled. He tail swiped her and hit her in the belly. Huripka dodge rolled away too late, and ended up with a belly cut and an inch from the arena’s edge. Awsoodoo dug into the dirt and flapped up one big powerful flap. He used the power of his wings and the momentum of her dodge roll to blow her off the edge of the arena. Her tail slipped outside the circle and touched the ground.

“Point: Awsoodoo!” The referee raised his left wing. “Winner: Awsoodoo!”

The crowd cheered. “Aw-soodoo! Aw-soodoo! Aw-soodoo!”

The referee brought out a black sash and handed it to Soofawkoo, who had just walked up on the stage. Soofawkoo presented the sash to Awsoodoo. "For your triumph in this combat, you have earned this black sash."

Awsoodoo bowed to accept it. Soofawkoo placed it around his son's neck. He held up his wings in glory.

"Wow, what a fight. Awsoodoo and Awoomoon were equally matched, despite Awoomoon being a wolf and not having any sash or training whatsoever. This is truly a stunning. But of course, Awsoodoo as a peacock, naturally eeks it out in the end. Showing once again that peacocks are the superior fighters, even below black sash level. Speaking of black slash level, congratulations to Awsoodoo for finally earning the black sash. You're a rising star! We hope you go far!"

"Aw-soodoo! Aw-soodoo! Aw-soodoo!"

Huripka stood off to the side. She smiled at her friend getting the glory he wanted. She silently walked off the stage. But the referee stopped her.

The referee pulled out a brown sash. "Awoomoon, for getting second place in the tournament, you automatically earn the brown sash. Congratulations on earning this brown sash Awoomoon!" He tried placing it around her neck, but it wouldn't fit, so she offered up her arm instead and he placed it around that. It fit tightly, but it worked. The referee held up her arm.

The crowd cheered. "Aw-woomoon! Aw-woomoon! Aw-woomoon!"

AWOOOOOO! Awoomoon let out a howl. "Victory!"

The crowd went wild.

The next day, Awsoodoo met Huripka at the river. "Huripka?" he called. "Or should I say, Awoomoon?"

Huripka didn't respond. Instead, she spun around, tail swiping him in the feet and knocking him off balance. She punched him in the chest. He staggered backward a few feet. More than enough to knock him outside of the ring, if there was one.

"Ow." Awsoodoo cried. "What was that for?"

Huripka smiled. "Now we're even. We're friends again."

Awssoodoo smiled through a wince. "Thanks for that win. Now I can start my black sash training."

"Wait, so black sash isn't the last stash?"

"No, it's only the first of the back sashes. There's three more after this. Naturally, my father has all four of them. Now, I get to start on the next one. Which is petrification training."

"Petrification, that thing where you turn people to stone?"

"Yes. And it's a bit more complicated than that, especially when you factor in combat. I'm gonna be a master fighter. Turning things to stone and destroying them. I'll be a formidable force!"

Huripka smiled. "Yes, you will. *We* will."

And they did. The next day, Awssoodoo showed up to Pea-Fo training, and behind him was none other than Huripka.

Soofawkoo nodded at her and held his head up high, higher than normal. He glowed like a proud father would.

She bowed back, humbling smiling.

"Class, today we have two announcements. First, as many of you may know by now, Awssoodoo has finally earned his black sash!"

They all cheered.

"Second, I'd like you to welcome a new pupil, Awoomoon!" He gestured to the wolf in the back row.

"But my name is Huripka and I've been here before—"

Soofawkoo held up a hand. "Awoomoon here has earned a brown sash by placing second in the tournament, getting bested by none, other than Awssoodoo. Welcome, Awoomoon!"

"Welcome, Awoomoon!" The class repeated.

Awoomoon took two bows.

"Welcome, *Awoomoon*." Awsoodoo bowed jokingly.

Awoomoon smirked. "Not you too." She playfully pushed him.

She trained with them, sparred with them, and exchanged tips with them. Although she couldn't learn any of the petrifying moves, and still didn't know half of the brown sash moves, she knew exactly how to counter them. Soofawkoo regularly had her present her counters to show to the newer pupils. She helped train a new generation of peacock fighters, enhancing Pea-Fo with her own wolf moves.

Chapter 4

"Dad!" Awoomoon burst through the medic doorway to find her father laying in a bed. "Are you ok? What happened?" She knelt down next to the bed.

"Huripka, daughter, there's nothing to worry about." Dad looked at her and rubbed her head.

"You were attacked!" She leaned into his hand. "Are you hurt?"

"Yes, the bandits did manage to hit me." He parted the fur on his upper shin to reveal a new scar. The closed wound itself had been sealed and cleaned, but the fur around it still had dried blood on it. "But I fended them off. It takes more than that to defeat your old man." He sat up and rested his hands on his knees, as if about to get up.

"And it's going to take more than my healing magic to get your old man back on his feet." A bear a head taller than Dad walked into the room. She wiped her fire-burnt palm on her medic apron. "Lay back down, Frestiyen, you need some time for your bones to heal." Her frown was accentuated by a long saber tooth protruding from her upper jaw, which was trickle bleeding from the gum.

"Ah, Lersha, how'd you know I was trying to escape?" Frestiyen smiled.

Lersha licked her saber tooth. She pushed Frestiyen back onto the bed. "Now lay back down before I give in to my temptations."

"How long is he going to be in bed?" Huripka asked.

"Hi, Awoomoon," she said, reaching down to ruffle the hair on Awoomoon's head. "Don't worry, Daddy's just got a little booboo in his leg. He's going to need to stay beddy-bye for a little whi-ghi."

Awoomoon's ears pinned back. "Dr. Lersha, I'm not a little wolf pup anymore. Please give me a straight answer."

"I'm sorry dear, you're just so cuuute that I keep forgetting." She patted her twice more on the head.

Awoomoon grumbled.

"Ok, Awoomoon. Your father's wound has been closed, yes, but—Frestiyen!" She pointed at his knee rising up on the bed.

Frestiyen lowered it, stifling a giggle.

"He still has a fractured tibia. He won't be able to stand or walk until it heals." She parted his leg fur to check on it, and gave it a gentle rub.

AWOOO! Frestiyen playfully howled. "Injury!"

"You're such a cry baby." She complained. She turned to Awoomoon to whisper. "I have him on pain numbifiers. He can't feel a thing. Make sure you watch him so he doesn't try to walk."

Awoomoon nodded. "Wait, he's coming home?"

"Yes, Mikus and Sinitid are coming to transport him home." She smiled and patted Awoomoon on the head one last time before leaving. "Take care now, Awoomoon."

"Thanks, Medic Lersha."

Awoomoon waited and talked with her father while waiting for the two beavers to come and transport him home. They came and floated him home on the stretcher they brought. Awoomoon stayed by her father's side the rest of the day, and even slept by his bed on the floor next to him. The whole she watched, making sure he didn't move his leg.

The next morning, she made him breakfast in bed. "Here you go, dad." She put a tray of food on the bed next to him.

"Oh wow that looks delicious!" He licked his lips. "Do you want to start, or shall I?"

"You go ahead."

"Ok." *AWOOOO!* He howled just loud enough for it to go through the room, but not much further. "Food!"

AWOOOO! Awoomoon responded. "Food!"

"Aw-Oooo!" came another voice. "May I come in?"

Awoomoon opened the door.

"Soofawkoo! My old friend!" Frestiyen held up a pancake. "Come to join us for breakfast?"

Soofawkoo pushed past Awoomoon to sniff the plate. "Needs more flour." His head twitched to look in Awoomoon's direction. He bowed his head. "Awoomoon."

Awoomoon bowed back. "Master Soofawkoo."

His head snapped back to Frestiyen. "How is your injury?"

"Can't feel a thing. Not sure if that's good or bad."

Awoomoon shut the door.

Frestiyen raised a finger. "Huripka—"

Soofawkoo gave him a quizzical glance. "Who?"

Frestiyen coughed in his fist. "Awoomoon?"

"Yes, dad?"

"You can go ahead and go meet your friend. I won't keep you."

"It's ok, dad. I told Awsoodoo to meet me tomorrow instead." She grabbed a pancake and chowed down.

"Of course you did, my little wolf pup." He patted her head.

"Dad..." Awoomoon whisper-grumbled. "Not in front of Master Soofawkoo."

“Right right.” He coughed. “Well, it’s ok. Soofawkoo is here, he can take care of me for a little bit while you go have fun.”

“What?” She looked at Soofawkoo.

He nodded. “Take a break, Awoomoon. Dismissed.”

She eyed them both suspiciously, but left all the same. But not before taking another pancake. She left and shut the door behind her. Ears pinned up against the door, she listened in.

“So what can I help you with?”

“I got word from the guards. A lot of them are pulling double duty trying to fill in for me. Apparently I’m hard to replace. Which is why—” *COUGH* “I need to—” *COUGH COUGH*. He cleared his throat. *TOK TOK. CGH*. “Which is why I need to get back out there as soon as I can.”

“I advise against this course of action. Your leg will not heal perfectly while standing.”

“Which is why I need your help. If you petrify my leg, I can go back out there on guard duty.”

“But then your leg won’t heal.”

“Eh, I don’t walk around that much anyway. Might as well be a statue for as much as I move.” He chuckled.

Soofawkoo didn’t laugh. “Ok, I will do it. But only as a temporary measure, understood?”

“Agreed.”

Awoomoon burst through the door. Soofawkoo was standing askew, tail splayed, grey-eyed feather fully bared. Frestiyen held his leg down in isolation. “Stop!”

“Awoomoon!” Frestiyen jumped. “You’re supposed to be meeting your friend!”

“And *you’re* supposed to be resting!” She pointed a finger at him. Then she looked at her teacher. “And you! How dare you try and petrify my father! Out!”

"It is undignified to talk to your—"

"Out!" She growled.

Soofawkoo turned around and left.

"Huripka! What are you doing?!" Frestiyen yelled. He snapped straight up and let his legs hang off the bed.

"Making sure you heal up!" Huripka swept his legs back onto the bed and forced his head back onto the pillow.

"Huripka, you're meddling—" *COUGH* "Stop meddling in my affairs!" He tried to sit back up, but was forced back down.

"Do you want Medic Lersha to come bite your leg off? Do you?"

Frestiyen growled. After a moment of thought, he simpered down, whimpering.
"No."

"Then stay in bed." She sat on the edge of the bed, positioning her tail to prevent his knee from moving.

He sighed. "Huripka, things are getting bad. The thieves I encountered, they weren't just any ordinary thieves. They were cats."

Huripka's ears perked. "Cats?"

"Yes. They're unlike anything you've ever seen. They sneak around, climb trees, climb buildings, climb *cliffs*. They're the most dangerous predator around. They don't give up. They hunt until their prey is captured."

"I've never seen one."

"The wolf tribe at the river border keeps them at bay. Ask your siblings. They've probably seen one or two. They've probably fought one or two."

"So how did cat thieves get all the way out here?"

"We don't know. Which makes this pair extra dangerous. We need that room they were after under watch at all times. We need all guards on duty. We need *me* on duty."

Huripka turned away. Her ears pinned back.

"So you see now? I need Soofawkoo to turn my leg to stone so I can get back out there. You need to let me do this, Huripka."

Huripka's head sunk into her shoulders as she hunched over.

"I know, Lersha said I need to let it rest. But she doesn't know what's at stake here. Please, Huripka, *please*."

"So you say there's not enough guards?"

"Yes."

"And one more guard will make a significant difference?"

"Yes."

Huripka sighed and turned around. "Then I'll go."

"Huripka? No."

"I'm a great fighter, I'll make a great guard. I've got nothing going on right now anyway." She pulled his helmet off the wall and inspected it.

"Huripka, no!" He sat up. "There's more to being a guard than just being a good fighter! You don't even know how to use a spear! How will you keep yourself awake on those long night shifts? You don't have the experience. Besides, you're too young! The guard chief won't allow you to—"

"Dad, it's fine. This job is important to you, right?"

"It's important to everybody."

"And you are currently incapacitated. I'll go do your job to fill in the gaps. That way, you won't be tempted to run off." She put on his belt and grabbed his spear. "I'll send Awsoodoo to take care of you. Rest up."

"But, Huripka!"

She was out the door before he could protest. Then the door opened again and Huripka peeked in. "I love you, dad!"

"I... I love you, too, my little wolf pup." He looked down at the ground, where a tear had just landed. "Be safe out there."

"Always!"

Chapter 5

Huripka marched to her dad's post. She emulated his movements from memory, but all the passersby could tell this was her first day on the job. Her ears were folded up inside the helmet instead of sticking out through the slots, preventing the helmet from resting squarely on her head. She kept adjusting the shoulder pads because they slid off her shoulder as she marched. The spear plinked loudly as she held it like a walking stick. Her memories of her dad marching only served her so much; it was much harder to mimic.

She got to her dad's post and greeted the guard there with a salute. She also saluted the guard on the other side of the door. "I'm here to relieve you."

"You're not Himbalun!" The guard saluted nonetheless. "Who are you?"

"I'm Frestian's daughter, Huripka."

"Who?"

She sighed, taking off the helmet. "Awoomoon."

"Awoomoon! Wow! You're taking over for me?"

"Yes." Awoomoon put her helmet back on.

"Where's my Pea-Fo master replacement?" The other guard complained.

"Maybe next, Matteti." The guard took off his helmet and stretched. "I'm so glad you're here. I've been doing double duty since Frestian got injured. Those thieves are something else. I have no idea how he managed to fend them off."

"I'll make sure to keep a look out for them." Awoomoon said in a stern voice.

"I'm sure you will." The guard saluted her and marched away, talking to himself.

"Awoomoon! Taking over for me! Wow!"

Awoomoon went through the motions she saw her dad do so many times, albeit rather sloppily. She stared straight ahead, knees locked, shoulders, raised, eyelids unmoving.

"Pssst!" said the other guard.

Awoomoon looked at him.

"Keep your eyes straight ahead!"

Awoomoon snapped her head back into place. "Sorry."

"Ever do a shift before?"

"This is my first shift."

"Ok, well, good on you. Would you like some tips?"

"Uh-huh."

The guard gave her some tips.

"Thanks."

Awoomoon kept them in mind, but she still wound up nodding off as the day grew short and night fell. She leaned on her spear as she took a short nap. She woke up when her spear slipped on the stone apron of the doorway. Losing her balance, she fell forward, but managed to catch herself by stumbling forward. She looked around to make sure no one saw. At this time of night, no one had. Not even the other guard.

Where was he? Awoomoon examined his post. His helmet rolled on the ground and his spear lay flat. Awoomoon's eyes went wide. She took in the full light of the moon. The door was ajar. In all the years that her father guarded this door, she had only ever seen it open once, maybe twice. It was not supposed to be open.

She reached to close it, but stopped. Who opened it? Where were they now? How did they even open it? She squinted at the door handle. It was intact.

TOPPLE OPPL E OPPL E...

The noise came from inside the building. They were definitely in there. It was probably the cat thieves. Driven half by duty and half by curiosity, Awoomoon pushed the door open. *SQUEEAAAAAK...* Inside, pots and urns lined the shelves and the floor, dusty lines holding the places where they were supposed to sit. A single pot rolled out and stopped at Awoomoon's feet. It was a petrified clay pot decorated in blood. The perfectly stenciled text on the side read:

DANGER. DO NOT RELEASE. DANGER. DO NOT RELEASE.

Awoomoon looked inside, but the opening was sealed shut in stone. She set the clay pot just inside the doorway. She looked around. The space was small, like a closet. Just enough room to hold the pots, which all had similar decorations. She squinted, but there was no sign of any thieves. Whoever was in there must have left already.

The pots were all over the floor, but all setting upright, as if someone carefully moved all of them off the shelves and onto the floor. They should be back on the shelves, right? That would be a good reason to enter the forbidden room. Just long enough to put them away, and then never again. She put a foot inside the room.

crunch

Her ear locked onto a motion behind her. She ducked.

A thin object whizzed above her. Undoubtedly some kind of weapon. She spun around, grabbing the object and facing her attacker in one move. The object turned out to be a sword, and she cut her palm on the blade.

Her attacker pulled the sword back. Before her stood an orange-furred biped with glowing green eyes, a white stomach, and yellow stripes. His pointy ears pinned back and his fangs protruded from his mouth as he hissed. *HHIISSSSSS*. The satchel strapped over his shoulder and the sheath attached to his belt flapped as he lunged forward with his blood-covered sword.

Awoomoon dodged, stepped forward, and punched his sword hand. He dropped his sword and jumped back. Awoomoon jumped on him, knocking him onto his back. She knelt over him on all fours. "So, you're the cat thieves? I'm disappointed. I thought you were a threat."

The cat hissed, spraying saliva on her muzzle. "Get off me, canine!" He pushed her off with his feet, and jumped onto his own.

She tail swiped his legs, toppling him once again. "What are you doing here?"

The cat reached into his satchel and pulled out a wool blob, that he then pulled over his head, covering his pinned ears completely. "Pantrinome!"

CLICK. CLICK.

Awoomoon stepped on the cat to keep it down, but her ears drew her attention towards the building.

BUM.

BUM.

It started out soft and slow. The steady beat of a drum, like a heartbeat.

BUM. BUM.

Then it got louder, and more frequent.

BUM. BUM. BUM.

Awoomoon winced at the increasingly painful drum beats.

BUM. BUM. BUM. BUM.

Awoomoon covered her ears to keep them from bleeding. With each beat, her skull shook and her ribs rattled. She was so focused on dampening the sound she forgot about the cat.

He painlessly waltzed up to the sword at the entrance and grabbed it. He opened the door all the way, revealing another orange striped cat.

She orange fur practically glowed. Her red hair bounced with each drum beat. Her paws struck the drums at her waist with such force and confidence, it made Awoomoon's tear ducts water up. Her tail waved in time with the ear-piercing song, resting regularly against the red metal boots she wore on her feet. Awoomoon's heart thumped with the beat.

What was this feeling? Who was she?

Whatever it was, whoever she was, she was about to be gone. She placed a vase in the satchel., then he pulled a stopwatch out of it. He threw it on the ground away from him. The strap was long enough that he still held onto it. He smiled at Awoomoon as he pressed the button on the top of the stopwatch. In an instant, time shattered. The drum cat's hands beat almost backwards, her tail swished in reverse, and her pony-tailed hair bounced oddly. Next thing, the sword cat set his sword on the ground, ran backward back to Awoomoon, fell on the ground of his own accord, got up without using his arms, and ran back to the doorway. There, the sword flew into his hand, he did a few sword swipes, and ran around the corner of the building. The whole time, the satchel awkwardly followed him like pups in the weening phase, making trails on the ground.

The drum cat hid behind the door, then walked out backwards a few seconds later, rounding the corner like the other cat.

Awoomoon ran after them. Why were they walking backwards? She followed them around the building. They were still running backwards, but getting away. They were running faster than she possibly could. And how did they manage to do it so *fast?*

She took a step, but tripped. She fell onto all fours. Turning around, she saw a huge lump with some pieces of shiny metal reflecting the moonlight. Awoomoon sniffed it. The guard!

AWOOOOOOO! She howled. "Injury!" *AWOOOOOOO!* "Injury!"

Despite being in the middle of the night, help arrived quickly.

"Awoomoon, is that you?" The silhouette of a bear rounded the corner.

AWOOOOO! "Injury!"

"I'm here, Awoomoon, what's the matter?"

"Medic Lersha! My fellow guard has fallen!"

"Oh my coons!" She knelt down next to him. "What happened?"

"The cats got him. I didn't see, but I think he was shanked."

Medic Lersha patted him down, checked his pulse, and his breathing. "He's still alive but he's critical."

"What do we do?"

"Let me work. I have to find the wound." She roared and bared her saber tooth. Blood squelched from her gum and dripped down her saber tooth, glistening in the moonlight.

Awoomoon jumped back.

Medic Lersha hovered her muzzle over the body up and down. When she got to the waist, her lip leaked even more blood onto her tooth. "Underside." She growled. She effortlessly rolled the body over and found the wound. There was a large puddle of blood where he had been laying. She held up her hand. The burn mark on her hand glowed yellow, and she slapped it down on the wound. She swiped her hand across the wound, leaving scarred, but sealed, skin in its wake.

"Is he going to be ok?"

"Call for help."

Awoomoon nodded. *AWOOOOO!* "Alone!"

Two beavers waddled to the site, rolling sleep out of their eyes.

"Mikus and Sinitid, this wolf needs to be taken to the infirmary. Critical condition."

Mikus gave a thumbs up through a yawn.

Sinitid floated over a stretcher. Their flat beaver tails glowed blue as the wolf levitated off the ground and onto the stretcher. Then the stretcher hovered between them. They waddled off to the infirmary, magically pushing the stretcher to its destination.

Medic Lersha stood up and addressed Awoomoon. "He's lost a lot of blood. The prognosis is not good." She laid a dim-lit hand on Awoomoon's shoulder. "But if it weren't for you, he would have been dead for sure. You may have just saved his life."

Awoomoon hung her head. "Thanks."

Medic Lersha gave her a quick hug. Awoomoon hugged her back, placing her bleeding hand on the bear's back.

"Oh, you're bleeding. Let me take care of that." Medic Lersha's burnt hand glowed yellow and she grabbed Awoomoon's. They held hands for a bit as she shook it heartedly. "Now get back to your duties." She patted the top of Awoomoon's helmet.

Awoomoon went back to the front of the building. She closed the door. She stood at her post, unmoving, waiting for the next guard to come and relieve her. If she hadn't fallen asleep, her fellow guard might not have gotten stabbed. And now the cat thieves have gotten away with a vase. And it's all her fault. Well, she won't fall asleep again. Not after that incident. She's going to stay awake and make up for her mistake.