

Ersatzica Wolf Princess

Prologue

<https://youtu.be/OykiLWjpOzY>

Half past Moon Howl, the cat warriors stalked swiftly through the night. Their glowing green eyes streaked through the darkness. On their silent paws they skated through the forest, seeking their target. Their golden fur swayed in the wind. They carried nothing but their courage in their hearts and their spears in their hands. They filtered through the rough forest path until they came upon a steep hill. Their legs sprang them into the air and their claws grabbed onto the cliffside. One claw hand at a time they climbed up.

Their leader reached the top first. She leapt onto the plateau and peered with a deadly gaze. She surveyed the outpost, revealing the predictable locations of the enemy troops. She beat her drum twice, but it didn't make a sound.

Her clanmate received the message. He tiptoed behind a clueless wolf soldier. He brandished his knife and swiped it at the wolf's back.

The wolf's ears pricked and it turned around, blocking the attack and sending the knife flying. With one quick counter strike, the wolf slayed the cat soldier. The wolf plunged his sword into the cat carcass laying on the ground.

The wolf's head rose up to eye level as its tail swayed. Its gaze challenged anyone to try and ambush it again. It stared into the darkness and growled.

Suddenly, its gut was pierced from behind. It held its belly as it bled out. Its knees buckled, but something stopped it from falling. It looked up and behind at its killer.

The cat leader stood there in the moonlight. Her hair flowed in the wind, royal red and maroon. Her face was cast in shadow but her eyes still glowed a bright green. Just below her chest were two drums held up by a band. They were well worn on the top, but the golden trim showed no sign of age. A rolled up scroll hung tightly in the band. Her hands could be mistaken for furry white gloves and her arms for orange sleeves. Her big round belly could not hide its very muscular shape. Her tail

floated high in the wind, orange striped and red tipped. Her paws were completely obscured by red gold-trimmed boots. They had an ornate mechanical quality to them, and although they were made of rigid materials, they made no sound when pounding the brick platform.

The wolf's eyes widened and its jaw fell agape. Its face paled and its limbs went weak. With one last breath, it let out a pitiful howl. The sound nonetheless carried throughout the outpost, calling out to its kin. A loud howl erupted from the outpost, warning of the wolf pack that was about to descend onto the cat warriors.

The cat leader signaled to her comrades to advance into the outpost. But before they could get far, four wolves popped out of the woodwork and blocked their path. The cat leader holstered her spear and held her drums at the ready. She hit them several times, but they made no sound. Still, her soldiers got the message. They singled out the wolf on the left and defeated it easily. Now it was the wolves' turn. They struck back and injured quite a few of the felines. A wolf swung at the cat leader, and she just barely got her spear out in time to block. A second wolf appeared behind the first, pointing his sword at the cat leader. Blocking one sword with a spear was hard enough, but blocking two was inconceivable.

The second wolf swung his sword, and it hit its mark. The sword sliced through the torso of the first wolf. The sliced wolf let out a ghastly howl, and the cat leader lowered her spear. The second wolf pulled its face off to reveal that of a cat warrior. Its wolf body transformed instantly into an upright cat body. The disguised cat nodded at the cat leader, then put its wolf face back on, turning fully back into a wolf.

The rest of the wolves were easily cleaned up, but there were more on their way. The cat leader silently tapped her drums three times. Her fellow warriors assumed a battle stance and awaited the ambush of wolves so she could escape. She expertly stalked across the outpost, dodging left and right through the buildings and evading all the rushing wolves. She arrived at an official looking building, one of the few that still had its guards. With two quick strikes she slaughtered them in the throat. They gasped for breath, but no howl carried their spirits.

She stormed through the door and down the halls, taking out any and all guards along the way. She arrived at the most important room. Spear at the ready, she barged in. The room was a small chamber built up with brick and supported with thin log pillars. Moonlight beamed through the open ceiling and reflected off the walls. Across from the cat leader, a figure shrouded in shadow squirmed and writhed on a cot. The cat leader held up her spear as she approached the cot. Soon, she could hear heavy breathing, and realized her foe was weak. Now was the time to strike.

She pantomimed a roar and charged forward with silent footsteps. She lunged at the figure lying on the bed, holding her spear up in a perfect arc headed for the heart. Then she noticed something odd: there was more than one figure.

She stopped in her tracks. Her wide eyes darted back and forth at the moonlit scene. It was a new wolf mother feeding her newborns. The four newborns were all wrangling each other vying for a turn. The cat leader put her hand on her own belly. Lumps from inside her squirmed and rubbed against her hand. She turned her attention back to the wolf mother. The wolfess had a soft smile on her face, and her eyebrows were relaxed. She stared into those deep green eyes of the cat leader.

<https://youtu.be/git6DCXSqjE>

"Pantrinome," the wolf mother gently whispered, as if welcoming a friend. "Meet my babies." She took Pantrinome's hand and placed it on the first pup. "This is Wryonin. He's the first one." Pantrinome's claws sheathed as her hand was moved to the next pup. "This one's Lemilay. She's got this pretty birthmark on her forehead." The wolf mother rubbed a thumb lovingly over the second pup's head. Then she brushed some dirt off the third one. "This is Mudrich. I don't know how she manages to get so dirty." Pantrinome's muscles relaxed as her hand lay on the fourth pup. "Meet Ersatzica. She lets the other pups have so many turns, I'm worried she's going to get sick."

Pantrinome let her hand rest on Ersatzica, the fourth pup. Her fur was very soft and her heart very warm. It was like cuddling with siblings in a bed of humog leaves, like laying on a stone patio in the morning sun. Its heart beat like a little

drum. *BUM. BUM. BUM.* Then with a little squeak, she woke up. She rolled over, and licked the hand blanketing her.

All of a sudden, the fuzzy warmth of the pup grew. It crawled up Pantrinome's arm and lodged itself in her heart. It overtook her chest in a big fireball of emotion, pushing out the mechanical drive to wage war. Her pulled back ears pricked forward, her furrowed eyebrows eased, and her downtrodden countenance turned up. An inexplicable euphoria filled her chest cavity. Ersatzica, the newborn pup, had melted her cold heart.

Pantrinome reached down for the wolf mother's hand, and placed it on her own pregnant belly. She looked into the wolf mother's eyes and smiled. The wolf mother closed her eyes. The kittens wriggled inside Pantrinome as the wolf mother held her hand there.

She looked up at the expecting cat mother. "I hope someday I can meet yours, too."

Pantrinome closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

"Take this! You howl-bereaving feline!" *KACHINK!* A sword burst through Pantrinome's lower chest. *SCHIK!* Its blood-tipped blade dripped as it retreated.

Pantrinome held her neck and mimed choking, but did not make any noise. She released her spear. It hit the floor, *klink klink*. She dropped to her knees. She fell to the ground, bleeding.

"Awoomoon!" The wolf chief sheathed his bloody sword and knelt next to the cot.

"Are you alright, my dear?"

"Yes, I am fine. So are the pups."

"I'm never leaving your side again." He grasped Awoomoon's hand in his.

"I love you, Feisty." Awoomoon ran a hand through his thick head fur.

"Raawr!" An enraged cat warrior cut the reunion short. It charged down the hallway to introduce a wolf to the end of its spear tip. The cat hurled the spear at Feisty with deadly accuracy.

"I'll keep you safe, always." Feisty ripped his moonstone-hilted sword out of its sheath and deflected the incoming spear. He marched up, shanked the cat warrior, and charged out to engage the other attacking cat warriors.

Awoomoon laid there, feeding her pups, content amidst the death and war to just be in the moment with her newborns. But she wasn't alone. A clawed finger appeared on the edge of the bed. Then another, and then a whole paw. Then a second one. Finally, the top of the dying feline leader's face overtook the top of the bed. She mouthed something to the feeding wolf mother.

"Don't worry, Pantrinome, I will," assured Awoomoon, one mother to another.

Pantrinome blinked her green eyes slowly, then collapsed onto the floor without a sound. Her hands fell neatly onto the drums around her chest.

Not long after, another figure ran through the hall to greet the scene in the bedroom.

"Oh my coons!" cried the midwife. "Are you alright, my highness?"

"I am, yes, however, we have an emergency on our paws."

"Is one of your pups sick? Defective?"

"No, but this fallen warrior is pregnant."

"Oh my coons! I'll go get Clounch!"

"There isn't time. Use your knife. You'll have to do it manually."

"Oh my! No! Ahhheeew!" the midwife squealed. Nonetheless, she grabbed her knife and reluctantly cut a shallow slit in the feline husk's lower abdomen. Inside, four slimy larvae writhed in pain. They seemed to be trying to make some sort of noise, but it was silent. Not even the knife cutting through the flesh made any sound.

"Oh, poor babies!" The midwife reached in and fished for a kitten.

"Hurry, bring them here, they won't last much longer."

"Oh-" the midwife found one and pulled it out. "This one doesn't seem to be breathing!"

"Give it here."

The midwife handed it to Awoomoon, who grabbed it in her mouth, and rubbed it with her paws.

"Oh, I don't know anything about birthing felines!" The midwife pulled out another one. "But the prognosis is not good. This one's cold!"

"Bring it here," Awoomoon repeated. She took the cold kitten and held it to her chest.

"Ahhh... ooo... Things are looking dire." The midwife pulled out another one, covered in blood.

"Here," Awoomoon held out her hand. Despite the midwife's gentle touch, the kitten landed with a squishy squirt of blood. Awoomoon tore a piece off her cot sheet and wrapped it around the kitten.

"How are they doing?" The midwife turned away from the bloody mess on the floor and addressed Awoomoon.

"Where's the fourth one?"

"I only found three."

"There's a fourth one in there. Find it."

"Ahhh... ooo..." The midwife tiptoed back to the body and plunged her hand into the bloody pot again. She swished her hand around, squirming as it scraped the edges.

"Where is it?"

"It's not in here."

"We're running out of time."

"Ahhh... ooo..." She dug around. Suddenly her eyes widened. "There's a hole! There's a hole!" The midwife punched her hand through the hole. A small current blew under the carcass and cooled the wet blood on her hands. Her eyes widened. "We've got to move the body!" She pushed and pushed, but the body was too

heavy. She went to unstrap the drums but Pantrinome's hands were resting on them. So she unclasped the boots first.

Bum. Bum. Bum.

The midwife pulled the boots off one by one. She pushed the cat body over on its side with a great effort and a big breath. Underneath where the body had been, laying in a pool of blood, covered in a blanket of guts, was the fourth kitten.

Bum. Bum. Bum.

The midwife reached in and extracted a kitten burrito from the messy pile. "It's breathing!"

Bum. Bum. Bum.

"It's still warm!"

Bum. Bum. Bum.

"It's not bleeding!"

Bum. Bum. Bum.

Awoomoon held out her hand and received her kitten. "Hello, little one." She licked it. "Here you are." She gently pushed some of her own pups aside and laid the kitten down in the new spot. "There you go."

Bum. Bum. Bum.

The midwife's heart raced. She knelt there on the ground, staring into the cot. Finally her breathing normalized. "How are they fairing?"

"They're going to need some help." Awoomoon looked over the critical kittens.

"I'll go get help!" The midwife ran off.

Awoomoon licked the wounds of the dying kittens, but it was too late. The breathless one deflated and stopped moving. The cold one didn't warm up. The bleeding one leaked out, soaking its bandage and the cot in blood. They had been slain with their mother. There was nothing she could do, so she licked them.

She licked the suffocated kitten. *AWOOO!*

She licked the frozen kitten. *AWOOO!*

She licked the shanked kitten. *AWOOO!*

She held the dead kittens in her hand, and lifted them up to the moon. Gazing up into the shining moon, she thought of her former nemesis. "May you rest in peace, Pantrinome."

Awoomoon looked over her newborn pups and kitten. She stroked each one, smiling as they each responded with a little squirm. Then a tear fell from her eye.

AWOOO!

Chapter 1

"Ok, I'm all ready." A slender, black and white wolf pulls a strap tight around her waist. In her hands she holds two identical sticks with a ball at the end. In between, strapped to her front via a harness, is a faded red drum with freshly tightened material. She pounded the drum once and then twice, and then more in a rhythm.

The leaves of the trees around her bounced in time with the drum. Up and down. Up and down. She stared ahead past the drum down the dirt path they were about to take. It was narrow but well-worn. Navigating it would be easy. As the wind blew over her along the path, she pounded the drum at a regular pace.

Three wolves of similar age marched in place around her, syncing themselves up to the beat of the drum. A shorter, stockier, white wolf punched the air in front of her, incidentally shaking off some of the caked mud that had accumulated on her fur. Then she picked up a hammer and swung it wildly to the beat of the drum. A grey and white wolf danced elegantly in place while doing reps with her eyes. Her grey and white fur blurred with the background, but the bald spot on her head was still clearly visible. A black and grey wolf stretched his muscles, flexing them with each drum beat. A slingshot rested on his waist, attached to his belt.

The first wolf slowed down the beat of the drum, and the other three slowed their motions immediately. After a brief pause, the beat of the drum ramped up, beating faster and faster. At first it seemed the other three wolves were moving faster of their own accord, but soon they began moving faster than humanly possible. Even

the short wolf, with her hammer swings, swung her hammer so fast it became a blur. Their rapid movements matched the drum's insanely fast tempo.

"Everyone in sync?" asked the wolf with the drum.

"*Everyone* in sync?" the bald-spotted wolf spoke over her, as if she hadn't said anything.

"I am!" said the white stocky wolf.

"Affirmative," declared the wolf with the slingshot.

"Take us away, Ersatzica," ordered the wolf with the bald spot.

Ersatzica pounded the drums on both sides at the same time, signaling the other three wolves to go. And go they did. They ran faster than should be possible, even for a wolf. Ersatzica ran after them, but was not in sync with the drum, and could only go so far before having to stop and take a breath. Despite this, she kept beating the drum at a rapid pace, rapid enough to keep the other three wolves moving quickly.

The wolf with the bald spot rolled her eyes into the back of her head as her bald spot glowed. She pulled out a scope and pointed it at the reflective undersides of the tree tops. "There's three cats in the forest, two on the shore, and one in the boat. Tell me your strategy."

The wolf with the slingshot flicked it off his belt, spinning it up into the air in front of him. In a single motion he caught it, loaded it, and fired a rock from it at the same time. It flew seamlessly in the desired direction. "You go distract them over there. Mudrich and I will come up behind them and knock them all out." He nodded at the white wolf.

"Yeah!" Mudrich tightened her grip on her hammer.

"That's stupid. I'm not going on a suicide mission for you. Come up with another plan."

"Ok, Lemilay... How about we all three rush in and take out as many as we can?"

"I could have come up with that." Lemilay slammed her scope shut.

Trees rushed by them as ran. They were almost there.

Lemilay opened her eyes and her bald spot dimmed. "That's not a plan. We want to get them off our side of the river, remember Wryonin?"

"Ok fine," Wryonin huffed. "I'll shoot my noise shot at a tree, and then Mudrich will come out and knock one of them out. From there, we take out the closest cat to Mudrich." He looked at Lemilay. "Is *that* a good plan?"

"Hmmpf." Lemilay smiled. "I'll accept it. Ready your shot, Wryonin. Fire in 3..."

They approached the clearing where a cat guard was stationed. Wryonin loaded his slingshot. Mudrich peeled off from the group.

"2..."

The cat guard was holding a mace, wearing body armor and a helmet. Wryonin aimed his slingshot. Mudrich licked her lips and prepared to engage.

"1!"

Wryonin let loose. The shot hit the tree with an initial thud. The following sound was a crack of lightning and thunder of such intensity it could shatter ear drums. Shattered bark from the tree went flying everywhere: flinging into the air, shooting past the three wolves, and bouncing off the startled cat's helmet.

The cat jumped and fell down in shock, landing on his butt and tail in an awkward way, breaking several tail bones. He didn't have time to contemplate his pain though.

Mudrich jumped out of the bushes behind the tree with the speed granted to her by the drums. This white wolf put all her might into an over-the-head hammer swing, coming down hard on the cat. The helmet didn't save the cat from the blunt-force trauma. The hammer crushed the cat's helmet, shattered its skull, and mashed its brains. Mudrich had put him out of his misery for good. Crimson droplets decorated Mudrich's blank muddy canvas.

Not missing a beat, another cat on the beach pulled its horn from its belt and blew into it. A voice from another tree yelled, "Retreat!"

She pointed to the horn blower cat and shouted, "You're next!"

The horn blower cat took off to the boat, followed closely by the remaining two cats in the forest and the other cat on the beach. One of them carried a pair of mud-covered golden boots.

"Hmmpf." Mudrich smiled. The blood on her furry chin stretched into a weird pattern. With a mighty howl that said, "Charge!", she ran ahead to the cats. But she found that they were too fast.

They outran her easily, and escaped into their boat. They rowed into the river and escaped.

Mudrich swam after them, but it was no use. She couldn't catch them. Her ears perked. The beat of the drum was gone. But she could still fight them on the other side of the beach.

"Mudrich, come back!" Wryonin shouted. "Ersatzica has fallen behind, again!"

"I can take them!" Mudrich swam on.

Wryonin shot her in the back with a rock. "Now!"

"Fine!" Mudrich turned around. When she got to the shore, she waded out of the water. "I was so close!"

"Well, look who finally took a bath," commented Lemilay.

Mudrich gave her a dirty look.

Across the river, the cats escaped from the boat, abandoning it on the sandy shore. They ran together into the woods on the other side, bringing the muddy golden boots with them.

Lemilay turned to Wryonin. "They got away with an heirloom. That pair of boots."

"How do you know it's not just a regular pair of boots?"

"Don't question me. We need to get those boots back! Come up with a plan."

"Why didn't you tell me this sooner?" Wryonin grumbled, but lowered his head and closed his eyes anyway. His ears snapped to a direction. Without moving his head, he lifted his slingshot.

"Wryonin, I said a *plan*—"

"Quiet!" Wryonin refocused his attention, shifting his ears. He pulled the band of his slingshot back and loaded a rock. After a brief readjustment of his position and aim, he let go. The rock flew through the air, over the river, and deep into the woods. After a brief delay, Wryonin's ear twitched ever so slightly, and he smiled. "Ok, done."

Lemilay folded her arms across her chest, ears pinned back and brow furrowed. "Now how do we get it, genius?"

"Just send Mudrich over, she's already wet."

"No, I'm not!" Mudrich shook her body violently, spraying droplets of water, mud, and blood all over Wryonin and Lemilay.

"Go behind a tree next time!" Lemilay scowled and shook it off.

"See? I'm not wet." Mudrich smiled and rested her hammer on her shoulder.

Ersatzica finally caught up. She trudged towards the group, sighing and panting, and dragging her tail. "I'm... I'm here." She leaned her head up against a tree using her arm as a buffer and took rapid short breaths. She placed a hand under the drum to hold a particular spot on her belly.

Wryonin and Lemilay exchanged glances. They smiled at each other.

"'The last one there is the snapped twig.' Ersatzica, sister, you're the last one here." Lemilay loomed over her. "You're the snapped twig."

"What does that mean?" Ersatzica looked up at her.

"The cats got away with a pair of boots. We need you to go fetch it."

Ersatzica moved from the tree to her knees. "Can't one of you do it? You know I'm not great at swimming."

"Non-sense, sister." Lemilay unstrapped the drum from Ersatzica's waist. "You're the best swimmer of us all, right guys?"

Wryonin slyly nodded.

Mudrich scowled. "What?!"

Lemilay gave her a glare.

Mudrich stared back blankly.

"Oh." Mudrich stumbled back. "I mean, yes, yes you are."

"I am?" Ersatzica smiled. "Wow, thank you so much."

"Now we need you to go over there, across the river, and fetch those boots."

Lemilay confiscated the drum sticks and pushed Ersatzica towards the river.

Ersatzica walked confidently to the shoreline, but when she got close, she looked back at them. They waved her on.

She looked around instead. On the other side of the river, there was a log sticking out of the water close to the beach. The cat's boat was still parked near it. There wasn't much along her side of the river, mostly pebbles and shells. And a stick! She picked it up and popped it in her mouth. Looking back one last time, she waded into the river.

"Hurry, before the tide comes in!" Wryonin yelled.

Ersatzica waded in deeper and switched to a swim, keeping her head focused on the tree sticking out of the water. "Paddle, paddle, paddle, focus on the goal." She whispered to herself. Water flowed across her tongue as she gnawed and licked the stick. She paddled with both hands and legs. But as she got further out, her breathing became faster and more exasperated. She stopped paddling for a moment to hold that spot on her stomach. But while she did so, the water carried her further down river, past the outpeeking log. She tried standing up, but the river was too deep. The water pushed her aside and swept her away. She pulled the stick from her mouth and flailed it wildly around her, desperately hoping it would catch on something, anything, but she wasn't close enough to the log. She tried to let out a howl, a cry for help, but her mouth flooded with water and stopped her. The water washed over her and into her, allowing only the slightest opportunity for breath. The dull pain spread through her chest even as she held her belly.

Then the stick tried to free itself from her grip, but her thumb got caught on its twig branch and stopped it. Her arm stretched, pulling her whole weight from the river. She was dragged onto the shore, where her lungs expelled all the water. She coughed, took a breathe, and took in all the air. She looked up at the stick.

On the other end of the stick, a black furry hand gripped it tightly, while another furry hand dislodged a fishing lure from the stick. This hand didn't look very wolf-like, however. The hand belonged to a furry black arm, which in turn belonged to a creature with a white furry chin and black furry face, with a green hat on top, complete with a red feather. It was a cat!

Ersatzica jumped. She tried to get away, but her thumb was still caught on the stick that the black cat held. She growled. "Get away from me!"

The cat jumped and hissed, but it got the fishing lure out of the stick. It put its tail between its legs and backed up slowly, holding its hands up.

Ersatzica barked.

The cat's ears pinned back and it winced. It turned around and ran off into the woods as fast as its two legs could take it.

Ersatzica's heart beat rapidly. She looked around to her left and right, for any signs of other cats. She had made it to the cat side of the river.

A distant howl asked, "You ok?"

Ersatzica howled back, "Here." She pulled her thumb out of the stick. "Where?" she howled.

"West." The howl replied.

She took a deep breath and got to her feet.

Ersatzica examined herself. Her hand was bruised where the stick caught her, and she had several sore spots from tumbling in the river. She had a cut on her leg, and several more on her arm, but nothing too serious. She parted her stomach fur to examine the skin beneath. Her scar was still intact and not bleeding.

Ersatzica looked at the stick that was still in her hand. A wet paw mark still showed on the other end. "This doesn't make any sense. Why would that cat save me?" She pondered as she hiked along the river, using the stick as a walking stick.

It didn't take long for her to find the boat. She looked across the river. The other three wolves were still on the beach. Mudrich was prying the armor of the cat she killed, Lemilay was looking at a hole in the ground with her bald spot glowing, and Wryonin was standing at the shoreline. His slingshot was loaded and ready, and his gaze followed her as she walked.

Ersatzica howled. "Where?"

Wryonin lifted his muzzle for a howl, "Woods."

Ersatzica found the cat footprints that led into the cat and followed them in. It didn't take long for her to find the boots. Next to them, a cat was laying facedown on the ground unconscious. The side of its head had a huge dent in it. She felt for a heartbeat, but there was none. The cat was wearing metal cuffs on its wrists, and a leather belt on its waist. She took them off and put them in the boots. She also snagged the shovel that was on the belt.

She carried the haul to the boat in one hand, and carried the stick in the other. Plopping them all into the boat, she held the stick for a moment. Then she set in the boat and rowed it across the river. When she got back, she held up the boots. "I got them!"

"Ersie! You're alive!" Mudrich ran up and hugged her. "I thought you had drowned!"

"I almost did." Ersatzica looked at the stick as she hugged Mudrich.

Mudrich pulled back but still held on. "Next time I'm going to swim across the river, ok?"

"Ok, Mudrich," Ersie agreed.

"Did you get the loot?" Lemilay peered into the boat. "That cat was carrying more than just the boots."

"I put it all in the boots."

"Ew!" Lemilay daintily pulled out the cuffs. "That's nasty. Who knows where those boots have been? And you expect me to wear these cuffs after they've been in there? No thank you." She dropped the cuffs on the ground. "Hmm... Could you have maybe gotten something for me, and NOT dirty it up?"

"Fetch off, Lemilay." Mudrich picked up the cuffs and put them back in the boots. "Ersatzica almost drowned! Don't you care?"

"She might as well have, with her terrible performance. It's not that hard to run with a drum."

"She has a condition! Have you forgotten about her scar?" Mudrich parted Ersie's stomach fur to reveal a long, thick scar that stretched diagonally from her breast to her belly button.

"No, she's right, Mudrich. I should try to keep up better." Ersie batted her hands away and brushed her own belly with her hands.

"Wryonin?" Mudrich looked at him while gesturing to Ersie's scar.

He was still looking out across the river. He looked at her when he called his name, but hung his head and went back to looking across the river.

"Wryonin!" Lemilay shot him a glance.

"Um," Wryonin approached, tail between his legs. "Ersie, I'm glad you..." He gulped, looked over the river again, and then hung his head, ears strained. "...didn't die today." He patted her awkwardly on the shoulder.

Mudrich stuck out her tongue at Lemilay.

"We really need to..." Wryonin glanced at the river again. "...get this all back to base before mother wonders what happened to us."

Lemilay smirked. "Especially with *someone* slowing us down." Lemilay turned her back and walked ahead.

Ersie sluggishly followed, holding the stick in one hand and her stomach in the other.

"Aw, you poor thing. I'll carry you!" Mudrich grabbed Ersie by the waist.

"Mudrich!" Lemilay yelled back. "Carry the stuff!"

"Why do I have to carry it all the time?"

"Because you're the strongest." Wryonin turned his back to the river, but kept an ear on it as he followed Lemilay.

"But I'm also the shortest!" Mudrich flung her arms up in outrage.

No one responded.

"Ok, fine." She looked up at Ersie. "Ok, you hold this, and then I'll hold you."

"Ok." Ersatzica grabbed everything, making sure to save room for the stick.

Mudrich tried picking up Ersie, but got poked in the face by the stick. "Ow." She rubbed her face. "Can you put the stick down?"

Ersie looked at the stick, then back to Mudrich. "No?"

Mudrich sighed. "Ok, for you, Ersie." Mudrich picked Ersie up again, this time dodging the stick. She contorted her neck so she could awkwardly see forward with one eye past the stick without it poking her.

They made it back to the village before dusk. It was a sizable village, made up of several buildings and huts, all out of brick and mortar. Wooden doors and shutters kept the draft out. About one in a dozen buildings had a second story, dwarfing the common houses with their higher importance. One such building was the Grand Barracks, where Ersatzica and her siblings lived, along with their mother, whenever she was actually home.

Mother opened their bedroom door without knocking. A tall black and white wolf, her figure occupied the majority of the small doorframe. Her eyes were focused with intent. Her mouth betrayed no sign of a smile. The necklace dangling from her neck consisted of a single canine tooth. Her chest fur was neatly brushed. Her tail was half the length that it should have been. "What's the report?"

Lemilay poofed out her chest, imitating her mother, and spoke like she was giving a speech. "Hello, mother. We found six cats on our side..."

"I was talking to Mudrich." She pushed Lemilay aside.

Lemilay swallowed and continued, "...On our side of the river. We..."

"Shut up, Lemilay!" She turned her attention back to Mudrich. "Go on, pup, tell me what happened."

"We found... six cats... on our side of the river. We..." Mudrich panted. She looked to Lemilay.

Lemilay shrugged.

"Go on, pup, I'm listening." Mother sat down in front of her.

Mudrich looked around. She jumped up in excitement. "I totally got one today!" She smiled. "It was so scared! It used its litter when it saw me! Then I took my hammer and splatted it! It went everywhere! Then I chased the other cats, but they all ran too fast. Ersatzica was a bit behind, so..."

Mother shot Ersatzica a disappointed glance. Ersatzica's ears drooped.

"So we chased the cats away," Lemilay redirected.

"But did you get the boots?" Mother scooted closer to Mudrich.

"Yeah, we did!" Mudrich slapped the ground. "They tried to get away with them, but Wryonin sniped them from like a mile away, and Ersie didn't drown!" Mudrich covered her mouth.

Mother looked at them all quizzically. She looked at Wryonin.

He hung his head, avoiding her gaze.

Mother looked at Lemilay.

Despite her ears folding back and shoulders tensing, Lemilay forced a smile. "She means she didn't drown in saliva. From all that panting she was doing trying to catch up with us."

"Right." Mother turned to Ersatzica. "Well, Ersatzica, it's high time now," she ran her finger along Ersatzica's belly scar, "that we get you more physically fit. You can't stay handicapped forever, now can you?"

"No, mother." Ersatzica looked down at her belly and held her scar.

"Tomorrow we will get you started on some training exercises. And we will..."

"Chieftess Awoomoon?" A wolf knocked on the wooden door.

"Be right there." Mother turned back to her pups. "We will see tomorrow. But for tonight, rest up. All of you three pups did really well today." Mother pulled them all in for a group hug. "See you tomorrow, my pups." And with that, she left and shut the door behind her.

Wryonin held the lantern up to the bunks so his sisters could get into bed. "So, Ersatzica, you're finally going to get rid of that scar, huh?"

"If Mother says so, I guess." Ersatzica tightened the straps under her bed before climbing up into her bunk. "I'm not looking forward to it though."

"Well why not?" Mudrich used the lantern's light to find the softest spot on her bed and jumped into it. The impact shook the whole bunk bed, and Ersatzica braced herself for the jolt. "Don't you want to be able to run like us?"

"Yes, of course. But it hurts every time I try."

"That's no reason to give up." Lemilay fluffed her pillow in the lantern's light, rolled her blanket to the edge of the bed, and then gracefully sat down and rolled the blanket up to her neck. "You may now climb into bed, Wryonin."

Wryonin rolled his eyes and turned off the lantern. "It'll be fine, Ersatzica. The pain is only temporary, but the reward lasts forever." He climbed into his bunk and flopped the covers onto him.

"Ok, goodnight." Ersatzica yawned.

"Goodnight," they all whispered.

The crickets outside and the calls of the night birds sang them softly to sleep. But while they slept, their mother, Chieftess Awoomoon, was wide awake. She hiked outside the village to a tall lonely rock jutting out of a grassy field. There, she howled at the night moon, waiting patiently for its sliver self to wax full.

"Oh, Wolf of the Moon," she howled sorrowfully. "My daughter is in distress, and I fear that she may soon know the truth. Please guide her through it, so that she may be steadfast in her faith, and remain on the narrow path to your lunar paradise."

The canine tooth around her neck glowed blue. Awoomoon caressed it.

"Thank you, Wolf of the Moon. We will remain loyal to you." Awoomoon closed her eyes and shivered in the night breeze.

Chapter 2

In a dark, damp room, a flicker of light squeaked through the cracks around the seams of the window and door. Dirt, grease, and fabric splinters were suspended in the air, and whisked around when the door opened. In stepped Ersatzica, with the sun behind her shining on her black fur and making her white belly fur illuminate the interior of the workshop.

She reached over a table full of tools to open the window, letting more sunshine pour in. The walls were lined on all four sides with tables and tables of tools, materials, and projects in progress. The tables even sandwiched the door, making it rather hard to open the door all the way. The ceilings were lined with shelves, holding even more things.

In a corner was a muddy-wheeled cart leaning up against a table. Inside, among other things, were the things they had captured the day before: the boots, the cuffs, the shovel and its belt, and the armor and helmet of the smashed cat.

Ersie bounced up and down. "It's here!" She reached down and picked up the boots. She took them to the window to get a good look.

They had an immensely ornate design plated in gold and red. Its magnificence was apparent despite the wear and tear on it. Mud squeezed into all its nooks and crannies, and fell off in flakes and particles when Ersie flexed them. She put one on the ground and slipped a canine paw in. It went in a ways, but got stuck. Her wolf anatomy didn't mesh well with the boots.

"Of course!" Ersie slapped her forehead. "It's made specifically for cats."

She examined the gears, levers, and plates. None of them moved freely at all.

"Looks like we got some work to do."

"Yes, you do."

Ersie turned around. "Oh, hi Wryonin." She hid her rags.

"You ready to come to training?" He stepped into the room.

Ersie turned back to her work. "Um, yes, just gotta finish something up here real quick." She turned her head back to him. "I'll catch up."

Wryonin side-eyed her. "Ok, don't dwaddle too long."

"Don't worry."

"Ok." Wryonin left.

"See you soon." Ersie reached up to a shelf and pulled out some supplies: oily rags, bottles of oil, and goggles. "I should have time to do just a *light* cleaning before heading off."

She wasted no time clearing a spot on a crowded counter and setting the boots there. She blew the dust off the table with an effortful whistle. She hummed a tune as she set the boots on center stage and got to work. She took a bucket of water and wetted a rag to wipe off all the dirt. She carefully oiled the tiny moving pieces and polished the metalwork. It wasn't long before she got the boots looking decent, but the sun did move a noticeable amount during the process.

SLAM!

Ersie jolted out of her flow state to turn to whoever just opened the door. "Hi Mudrich."

"Ersie! Ersie!" Mudrich burst in, tail wagging. She bounced up to Ersie and hugged her.

"Muddy! I'm dirty!"

Mudrich pulled her hands off her and looked at them. They had little oil splotches all over. She shrugged. "What's the big deal?"

Ersie giggled. "Of course *you* wouldn't mind."

"Nope! Not me! But hey Ersie! Ersie!" Mudrich bounced up and down. Her chest floof jiggled. Her wagging tail knocked an empty can over.

"What? What?" Ersie set down her tools.

"Did you get it done? Did you get it done?" Mudrich licked Ersie's cheek.

"Get what done?" Ersie playfully pushed Mudrich away and wiped the slobber from her cheek.

"The armor!"

"The armor?"

"Yeah, you know? The one Mother told you to prepare for me?"

"Oh..." Ersie looked at the armor in the wheelbarrow. "Here it is!" She held it out to Mudrich and grinned widely. Too widely.

Mudrich side-eyed her. "You... didn't work on it yet, did you?"

Ersie set it down. "No, I've been..." Ersie twirled a screwdriver. "...sidetracked. Wanna see?"

"Ok!" Mudrich jumped to the counter and peeked up over the edge. "Oh! The booooots!"

"Yeah! Aren't these cool?"

"I could splash in so many puddles with those..." Mudrich drooled.

"Well, you could, if you were a cat." Ersie traced the shape of the boot, highlighting its intended wearer.

"Oh..." Mudrich's ears deflated. "Well that sucks."

"What, you wouldn't turn into a cat to wear these?" Ersie bumped her.

"No, they're fancy. But no fancy boots are worth becoming a cat." Mudrich turned her attention to the cart full of new items. "Cats are the most vile creatures in the whole land. They'd do anything to catch you off guard and they can kill you in an instant. Everytime I see a cat, I just want to smash it." She rummaged through the items, landing on the cuffs first. "The only good cat is a dead cat, you know." She examined the cuffs. A blue tint broke out of the dull shine. "But you know what?" She put a cuff on her wrist. "They got good loot." She grabbed the cart, and tried to

lift it. To her surprise, and despite her awkward grip on its edge, it floated up into the air with her hand.

"Whoa! How are you doing that?" Ersie dropped her tools.

"It's these cuffs!" Mudrich set the cart down to put the other cuff on. "I can lift anything with ease!" She grabbed Ersie by the tail and lifted. Ersie's tail moved up, but the rest of her didn't. She tried pulling it up further.

Ersie gave her a look.

Mudrich gently put her tail back down. An awkward moment passed. Then they both laughed.

"These are so cool!" Mudrich blurted out. "With these, I can swing my hammer with ease!" She mimed swinging a hammer, then pounded her fist on an empty can, crushing it flat. "Who needs armor?"

"Not you!" Ersie laughed.

"I can lift so much with these! I wonder..." Mudrich ran to the door and put her hands on its under side.

"Mudrich...?" Ersie warned.

Mudrich squatted and put power into lifting the door. So far it didn't move.

"Mudrich!" Ersie leapt across the room.

The door came off its hinges, and then floated around effortlessly. "Oops."

"Mudrich!" Ersie sighed. "What are you doing?"

"Ok, apparently you can't lift buildings." Mudrich leaned the door against the wall.

"But hey! These'll make carrying new loot home a lot easier!"

Ersie fished through her shelves for a new door hinge and bolts. She leaned over the counter and sighed.

"Ersie?" Mudrich tapped her on the shoulder.

"I'm out of hinges, bolts, *and* screws."

"Oh. No problem!" Mudrich ran to the door. "I'll go the blacksmith's and get those for you!"

"Thanks Muddy." Ersie grabbed a screwdriver.

"Be back in a muddy!"

And with that, Ersie was alone with the boots again. Finally.

She went at them for round two. Polishing, dusting, oiling, everything was on the table. When she was done, she could see a faint blue glimmer shine among the glorious red and gold. She sat them under the window to admire them under the setting sun.

From this angle, she could analyze its parts. It was shaped like a thick hind leg of a cat, but at the bottom, it had a steel plate that attached to the underside of the boot via springs and a piston. The underside of the plate held remnants of some kind of material that had since decayed. Straight gears and round gears worked in unison to let the boot slide forward and backward on the plate. A pulley system with a missing string could have potentially wound from a winch in the front, up the sides, and into a pull string at the lip of the boot. Two latches sealed the boot together, and widened the mouth of the boot when sprung open. The golden trim stretched from the circular lip of the boot, down the underside, and pulled up over the top for the toe protector.

Ersie leaned on the counter and looked up at her prize through dreamy eyes. How would she look in them? Probably better than Lemilay would. She thought that they might be an heirloom. What powers might they possess? Water walking? Swift speed? Wall climbing?

Ersie noticed a tension bolt on the heel. She focused in on it. It had gears on its head, that moved two gold-plated straight gears open or closed around the heel. She played with it, and noted that they indeed changed the size of the boot, to a limited degree.

"It might be enough!" Ersie jumped up and clasped her hands. "It's worth a shot!" She adjusted the tension bolt to its widest setting and placed the boots on the ground. She laid a rag on the ground and wiped her dirty bare wolf paws on it. One

by one, she wiped them cleaned and placed them gingerly into the boots. She held on to the counter and the cart to hoist herself up. This time, her paws slipped further, deeper into the boots. But alas, they still didn't fit.

"Grrrr..." Ersie growled. "I wish I was a cat right now, then I would be able to fit into these boots."

And just like that, a magic spell washed over Ersie, as if she had said the magic words to make her wish come true. It started in her feet. Her arch grew and her toes shortened and twisted into a new form. The transformation felt strangely like a rubber band being released. Whatever was happening down there, it made her feet slide right into the boots.

"Whoa." Ersatzica steadied herself. Her balance was a bit thrown off. "Magic boots? Yeah. I'll say." She pushed herself upright and tried to balance. She stiffened her wolf tail straight out and outstretched her arms. She took a deep breath. "Ok, the first step is always the hardest." She lifted one foot, lifting the boot with it. She put it back down. So far so good. She lifted her foot again, this time to take an actual step. But at that moment, her tail decided to warp and twist, grow longer and thinner, and throw her off balance. "Whoa!" She landed on her knees and palms.

The impact snapped the latches shut. She got back up to balance again, trying to ignore the twisted feeling creeping up her thighs. She mouthed, "ok, I got this," but no sound came out. She spoke silently. She grabbed her muzzle and touched her tongue. They were both still there and intact. She blew on her hands. Cool air flowed across her furry paws. It all seemed to work normally, but no sound came out. She lifted a foot up and stomped. Still no sound. She grabbed her wolf ears. They were still there, perked up like usual. She stomped her foot several times. Nothing. She reached for a screwdriver and tapped it on the counter. Nothing. Not even a little ping.

Her breathing increased in speed. She reached for anything. Nothing she picked up or slammed made any noise. Was she going deaf? Were these boots cursed?

SLAM! The wind came through and knocked the unhinged door to the ground. It was the first noise Ersie had heard in what felt like an eternity. She picked up a

screwdriver and dropped it on the ground. PING! She breathed a silent sigh of relief.

By now the tingling sensation had progressed up her legs, waist, and to her belly button. She ran her wolf fingers through her belly fur. Underneath, her scar was still intact on both sides of the transformation threshold. Her stomach fur was still white. She turned and examined her hips. Orange fur was creeping up her side, leaving darker stripes in their wake. This is an unusual fur pattern for a wolf. She grabbed a hold of her tail, now that she had a passable ability to balance. It was long, slender, and orange with dark orange stripes. A tuft of red fur tipped the end of it. The tail felt very alien, like an old friend getting a face change, but at the same time like a breath of fresh air.

A sharp pain arced up her back. Instead of transforming the fur, her old fur was peeling off! Her black fur on her back draped over her back like a jacket, and underneath was more orange-striped fur. She tried pulling it off, hoping to rip it off like a bandaid. No such luck; it moved at its own pace. She wanted to scream, but no one would hear. No one would hear. She screamed as loud as she could. She didn't make a single sound, but letting it out gave her a modicum of comfort. Her back skin hung over her shoulder like a cape, flapping in the breeze.

Luckily, the transformation remained somewhat pleasant in her front, sweeping over her belly, chest floor, and clavicle. Her white areas remained white, but her black areas became orange. It rolled over her shoulders and down her arms. It relocated her elbows and wrist joints. It spread over her hands and into her fingers, painting them all orange. Her fingers cracked and stretched into new forms. The third joint on all her fingers and both her thumbs snapped backward, and long, sharp claws protruded out of her once-sanded finger claws. The third digit disappeared into the fur on the back of her hand. She looked intently at it, wondering where it went, and how it hid so easily. The sensation in her fingers was similar to that in her toes.

The transformation strangled her at the neck. The back of her neck peeled off in an increasingly painful separation, pulling the skin tight around her throat. She grabbed her throat, but nothing she did helped. It was hard to get a grip with only two finger ligaments. But it, too, soon passed. She took a deep breath.

Her facial expression contorted as it peeled off her face like plastic wrap. Her cheeks wrinkled and softened, and her ears stretched as they resisted departing from the outer skin. The transformation reached into her eye sockets and threatened to pull them out, too. Luckily it subsided around the eyes, and settled for restructuring the eyes as they were in place. Her vision went blurry, and then dark, and then she could see again, but the world was slightly lighter than it was before. Everywhere she looked, a strange glow illuminated what she was focusing on, even as the sun went down.

The transformation crept across her muzzle. Her skull snapped toward her face, shortening her muzzle, squishing her teeth together, and contracting her tongue. She stuck her tongue out. It didn't go as far as it did before.

Finally, as her old skin peeled off her nose, the transformation ended. Her old skin hung over her new face like a greasy rag. She shook violently, trying to shake off the old skin. It didn't work. For some reason, the water-shaking move she was so accustomed to using failed. She carefully lifted the old skin by the nose and flung it over her head. It landed on the floor behind her with a soft thud.

"Ok, now that that's over," Ersie mouthed to herself. "Let's test this out." She walked up and down the workshop, around various obstacles, and then finally jumped in the air. She barely landed back on her feet. Taking a moment to balance, she righted herself. "Ok! Test successful. Now to get out of these boots and back to normal." She sat on a counter and unlatched the boots. When the last latch was unbuckled, she could hear her heart pounding in her chest.

She let out an audible sigh. "Finally! It was rather suffocating not being able to make noise."

She pushed the first boot off when a familiar set of footsteps made their way to the door, now lit by moonlight.

"Ersie!" Mudrich knocked on the doorway, glancing at the door laying on the floor. "I didn't get the supplies, but the blacksmith says he's working on it, and will have it ready by..." She squinted into the workshop, trying to see Ersie better in the dim light.

Ersie closed the window blinds. "That's great, Muddy, thank you," Ersatzica spoke the words with an unknown pitch. She covered her eyes, and cowered further into the corner she sat in.

"Ersie, is that you?" Mudrich cautiously approached.

"Of course it is, Mu-uh-udrich!" Ersatzica gulped, and stuffed a rag into her mouth.

"Are you ok?"

"Mmhmm!"

"You don't sound like yourself!" Mudrich stepped into the workshop.

Ersatzica unragged herself briefly. "I... uh... put the boots on... and they... changed my voice..."

"Voice changing boots, huh?" Mudrich shrugged. "I guess I've seen weirder. Kind of a disappointing heirloom for a pair of boots though..."

"Yeah..." Ersatzica chuckled. "Disappointing... boots."

Mudrich approached.

Ersatzica swallowed. "Hey, um, Mudrich?"

"Yes?"

"I've... got something to finish up here. Why don't you go back to our quarters. I'll meet you there, ok?"

Mudrich squinted at Ersatzica. The light was still too dim for her to see clearly.

"You sure you're alright? You're acting weird."

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine," Ersatzica coughed. "Just gotta tidy up my workspace."

Mudrich glanced at the piles and piles of things on all the worktables in the room, then back at Esatzica. "Ok, see you there." And with that, Mudrich left.

Ersatzica breathed a sigh of relief. "Ok, now time to take these boots off and go back to wolf form." She slipped the first boot off. It silently fell to the floor. "Cat form was fun and all, and perhaps... mildly useful." She slipped the second boot off.

"It feels... kind of good actually..." Ersatzica shook her head. "No, no, no. It's a cat

form. It feels unnatural." She nodded with a grunt. "I'm ready to go back to wolf form!"

She winced. A moment passed. And another. She looked down. The boots laid on the cold floor, which greeted her cat paws with a pleasant chill. Her slender tail flicked anxiously side to side. Her cat hands felt safe, knuckles neatly tucked away. Her ears pricked in a familiar fashion. Her vision was unobstructed by her formerly large muzzle. She was still a cat.

"I said, I'm ready to go back to being a wolf!"

Nothing happened.

She found a can on the counter and batted it with her front paw. CLINK. It bounced off the wall and back to her. CLINK. She batted it again. CLINK.

"Oh that's right! I have to make a wish!" She stood in the center of the room, arms outstretched. "I wish I was a wolf!" She waited a moment. She looked down. She shook her paws. She was still a cat.

A chill ran up her spine as her fur stood up on end. Tensing her shoulders, she pulled her arms over in front of her chest. Her ears folded back, and her tail curled up between her legs.

"This is bad! This is really bad! This is really *really* bad!" Ersatzica shivered.

"Mudrich!" She cried out, running out into the night in her new cat skin. In a town of wolves. That hate cats. And would kill any cat on sight.

Chapter 3

As soon as Ersatzica stepped out of her workshop into the poorly lit night, she knew she made a mistake. Her cat paws, although smaller, pounded loudly on the stone walkway on account of her inexperience with her new form. Several lanterns turned to her direction, scanning eyes searching behind them. She jumped back into the workshop. She would've closed the door, but it was still busted.

"Mudrich would know what to do... but she's already gone to the barracks by now..." Ersatzica whispered to herself, peering out the doorway for an opening. "How do I get to her without being detected?"

She looked around her workshop. A faint light glowed on everything she looked at, making the dark area seem bright. She blinked. She winked. The light seemed to be coming from her eyes. And it flickered off various objects in the room, especially the boots.

"Well, they got me into this mess. Might as well use them to get me out." Ersatzica slipped them on with ease and buckled the latches. "Ok, let's go," she whispered to herself, but no sound came out.

She looked both ways before crossing the doorway. She ran silently into the shadows, avoiding the lantern lights. Not every building had guards 24/7, but there were a fair number of wolves walking around with lanterns winding down for the day. In an hour or so, they would all be gone, leaving only the night guards. But if she didn't show up to the barracks before then, they would start a search party for her, and that would stir up the whole town.

She approached the Grand Barracks, and watched as Mudrich entered through the front door. She had just missed her.

Inside, Wryonin and Lemilay sat impatiently.

"Where are they?" Lemilay tapped her foot.

"Mudrich will be here soon, but Ersatzica? I haven't seen her since this morning." Wryonin stared at the lantern.

"You didn't see her at training today?"

"No, she was absent..." Wryonin rolled his eyes. "Again."

That's when Mudrich opened the door.

"Oh good, you're finally here."

"Hold on, we can't start yet, we have to wait for Ersie." Mudrich took off the cuffs.

"Where is she?"

"At her workshop." Mudrich stashed the cuffs under her pillow. "She said she'd be right over. Something about cleaning up a project or something."

"I've heard that one before," Wryonin groaned.

Ersie walked up to the door and listened in. She held up her hand to knock, but hesitated. She let her hand down. She peeked in through the window. Mudrich was not looking at the window, but Lemilay was. Ersie quickly ducked.

"Did you see that?" Lemilay pointed.

"No, what?" Wryonin looked at the window.

"I thought I saw a cat." Lemilay got up and walked to the window.

"I didn't hear anything." Wryonin pricked his ears. "There's no cats outside, Lemilay."

Lemilay closed her eyes and her bald spot glowed. She stared intently at the door. Then she jumped to her feet. "There was! There was a cat outside!"

"That doesn't make any sense." Wryonin got up and walked to the door.

Ersatzica dashed to the side of the building, staying out of sight.

Lemilay navigated around the side of the building, bald spot still glowing. "The cat came to the door, peeked through the window, and ran over there."

"Are you sure? I'm pretty sure I would've heard footsteps." Wryonin pulled Lemilay's tail to get her to be quiet. "I still don't hear anything."

Lemilay rolled her eyes from within her skull. "The cat left footprints next to the puddle." Lemilay pointed down at them.

Wryonin knelt down. There were indeed cat paw prints on the cobblestone next to a small puddle. "Well, I can't deny that. Let's go find that cat!"

"Wait, hold on, Wryonin." Lemilay put her hand out to grab Wryonin by the shoulder, but she grabbed the air next to him instead. "Have you ever heard of a single cat invasion? If there's one cat here, there's likely to be more."

"Have you seen any more cats?"

Lemilay looked around with her glowing bald spot. "Nothing here, no."

"So let's go chase down the one cat we do know is here." Wryonin readied his slingshot. "Which way did it go?"

While Wryonin and Lemilay discussed what to do, Ersatzica got Mudrich's attention. She threw a rock at her. It landed in her fur and gently fell to the ground.

"What...?" Mudrich turned around, trying to see into the dark.

Ersatzica unlatched the boots. "Mudrich!" She loud whispered. "Mudrich!"

"Ersie?" Mudrich approached a dark corner of the outside of the building, where a tree and a bush met. "Is that you?"

"Mudrich I need your help."

"Why are you hiding behind a tree? And why is your voice weird?"

"Mudrich I need you to not go berserk, ok?"

"Ok..." Mudrich held up a hand over her eyes, trying to see into the dark better.

"Remember how I was fixing those boots, and how they were made for cats?"

"Yeah..."

"And we talked about... um... about..."

"Go on..."

"About wearing them and about... turning into a... cat, to do so?"

"And I talked about how I would never do that because cats are evil and I like killing them and—"

Ersie reached out and put a paw on Mudrich's mouth. "Yes yes yes, but Muddy,"

"Hmmm?" Mudrich stared daftly at the cat paw on her mouth.

"I need your help. You see, I... I put on the boots..."

"Your hand looks weird..." Mudrich squinted in the dark, grabbing Ersie's paw.

"What did you do to it?"

"I turned into a cat."

"That's not possible. Let me see you."

"Ok, but don't go berserk. Promise."

"Ok I promise I won't go berserk."

Ersatzica stepped out from behind the tree.

Mudrich opened her mouth for a battle cry, and readied a fist for a punch.

Ersatzica lept over the bush and covered her mouth. "Mudrich!"

"Oh, sorry. Why are you a cat?"

Ersatzica gestured to the boots she had on.

"Oh you made the boots fit!"

Ersatzica gave her a look.

"Oh, so *that's* how you got the boots to fit. So now that you got them to fit, can you turn back into a wolf now? You're making me uncomfortable."

"That's the problem, Muddy, I can't!"

"Well if the boots turned you into a cat when you put them on, surely they'll turn you back into a wolf when you take them off." Mudrich pulled the boots off Ersie one at a time. "Any second now."

Ersatzica stood on the cobblestone pathway on her digitigrade paws balancing perfectly in front of Mudrich's face. Her orange, white-bottomed cat paws did not become wolf-shaped.

Mudrich frowned. "I guess you tried this already?"

"Yeah and I'm still a cat."

"Ok, well let's go back to your workshop to figure this out. I'm sure there's something there we could use."

"Ok." Ersie hugged Muddy. "Thanks, Muddy."

Before she could respond, Lemilay and Wryonin approached.

"Why would a cat be circling our barracks?" Wryonin's ears twitched. "It doesn't make any sense."

"It doesn't matter." Lemilay's glowing bald spot gave away her position in the night. "It's got to be up to no good."

Mudrich pushed Ersatzica. "Get out of here, I'll meet you at the workshop."

Ersatzica latched the boots and took off.

"Hey Lemilay!" Mudrich called out.

Lemilay turned. "Yes, Mudrich?" She didn't turn off her bald spot though.

"Lemilay! Look at me!"

Lemilay sighed. Her eyes rolled out of her skull and pointed at Mudrich. "What?"

"I'm going to go check on Ersie, I'll be right back."

"Ok, but have you seen the cat?"

"Um... what cat?"

"The cat that we've been tracking. Have you not been paying attention?"

"Um..." Mudrich looked around. "I found this stick."

"Very helpful." Lemilay frowned, and rolled her eyes back into her skull.

"Um... I saw the cat!" Mudrich pointed. "It went that way."

"Well why didn't you stop it?"

"I was... um... tired." Mudrich panted. "I didn't feel like chasing it down."

"Ok thanks, we got it from here." Lemilay went back to tracking the cat, skipping looking at the tree.

Mudrich panted. "Ersie!" She looked around, and then sprinted to the workshop.

Ersatzica hid in the shadows as she watched. A crowd had formed at the workshop. Guards and other civilians looked on in horror at the scene there. The door was knocked down, broken clean off its hinges. Cat paw prints littered the floor. And in the dim glow of the lantern light, in the center of the floor, lied a fur pelt of a black and white wolf.

A guard picked up the pelt. He gasped. The fur pattern of the head matched that of Ersatzica's wolf face. "Call Chieftess Awoomoon!" He ordered to one of the other guards.

That guard took a deep breath and let out a howl. *AWOOOO!* "Awoomoon! Here! Urgent!"

AWOOOO! "Coming."

Before Awoomoon arrived, a guard got too close to Ersie, so she ran and tried to find Mudrich.

Not long after, Awoomoon arrived.

The guards showed her the wolf skin. "We think a cat broke in here, skinned Ersatzica, and fled the scene." He handed it to her.

Awoomoon's eyes went wide and her ears folded back, but only for an instant.

"There's no blood on this skin." She observed. "Is there blood in the workshop?"

"No, there is none. I don't know how they did this, but it must be one powerful heirloom."

"Indeed," Awoomoon folded the wolfskin. "Get a search party, search the entire town. We're looking for an orange cat. When you find her, bring her back here to me."

The wolf guard bowed. "It will be my honor to bring you her head."

"Alive," Awoomoon clarified. "Bring her to me *alive*."

"Oh. Of course, Chieftess."

The wolf guards dispersed, looking for Ersatzica.

She herself was hiding in a corner with Mudrich. "They've got the place surrounded by guards, we'll never get in undetected."

"Maybe we don't need to." Mudrich got up. "I'll just walk in, get a good look at things, and then come back and tell you what I saw."

"But we both know you don't have the best memory."

"Well *you* can't go in."

"Hmmm, good point. Ok, you go. I'll wait here."

Mudrich went to the workshop, and saw her mother. "Mother, what a surprise."

"Mudrich, have you seen Ersatzica?"

"N-no. Not recently."

"When was the last time you saw her?"

"Just after dusk."

"Where?"

"Here?"

"Well if you see her, can you give her this?" Awoomoon held out the wolf skin. "I think this belongs to her."

"Sure." Mudrich ran back to Ersie.

But before she got there, Lemilay and Wryonin found her.

"There it is!" Lemilay pointed.

"It's too dark. I don't see it." Wryonin squinted.

Ersatzica hid deeper into the corner.

"Then use your ears."

"There's no sound coming from there. Are you sure it's there?"

"Yes, I'm sure. Just shoot the barrel, you'll hit it."

"Ok, here goes." Wryonin shot his slingshot where Lemilay said. It headed straight for Ersatzica.

Mudrich saw this and was close. She dove in front of the shot and took it full force in her front. She fell onto her back right next to Ersie.

"Mudrich! What are you doing?" Lemilay yelled.

"Are you ok?"

Mudrich handed the wolf skin to Ersie. "Mother says this is for you," she whispered. Mudrich got up. "Yeah, I'm fine. Did you go easy on that shot?"

"Get away from there!" Wryonin motioned for her to get back. "There's a cat! Right behind you!"

"Is there?" Mudrich didn't turn around.

A black shadow arose from the corner behind Mudrich. It towered over her. "Muddy!" Wryonin shot right above Mudrich's head dead on to shoot the figure standing behind her.

Mudrich reached up and caught the rock in her hand.

"Muddy, what are you doing? Move!" Wryonin yelled.

The shadow behind Mudrich reached with its arms and pulled her in close.

"Muddy, thank you so much!" A face revealed itself. It was Ersatzica. It was her wolf face. She squeezed Mudrich from behind.

"No problem, Ersie."

"Wait, what?" Lemilay's jaw dropped. "Where'd the cat go?"

Mudrich looked at Ersie.

Ersie shook her head. "I've been here the whole time, and there was no cat here."

Wryonin threw a rock at a wall. "I told you there was no cat out here!"

Lemilay's ears folded back. "I saw it! You saw it too, didn't you?"

"No, I was just following you around! In the dark!"

"You saw the footprints!"

"Oh yeah, I was testing out these boots." Ersie held up the boots. "They're from the cats."

"So that was *you* running around the barracks?"

"Yes."

"How'd you make yourself look like a cat?" Lemilay stared, bewildered.

Ersie sighed. "Ok, I was the cat. I used these boots, and I panicked."

"Boots that turn you into a cat, huh?" Wryonin grinned. "That could be very useful."

"Show me," Lemilay ordered.

Ersie set the boots down, put her wolf feet into them, and waited.

"That's it?" Lemilay scoffed.

"Oh, right." Ersatzica extended her arms. "I wish I was a cat."

Ersie's wolf skin immediately ejected off her back and she became a cat again. She lost her balance and fell over backward, but Mudrich caught her fall.

"Interesting." Wryonin put away his slingshot. "Let me try."

"Ok." Ersie took off the boots and put her wolf skin back on. She handed him the boots.

He put them on. "I wish I was a cat." Nothing happened. "I wish I was a cat." Still nothing happened.

"Um... it takes a little while the first time." Ersie mentioned.

"Why do you want to be a cat so bad?" Mudrich scowled.

"It would be great for espionage missions." Wryonin held onto Lemilay to stabilize himself in the boots.

"It sure will." An older wolf approached them.

"Mother!"

"I see you have fixed up the boots." Awoomoon looked at Ersatzica.

"Yes, Mother." Ersatzica bowed.

"Very good. We will need them when the cat invasion starts." She frowned at Wryonin trying to fit into the boots. "Have the boots been fitted for wolves?"

"No, Mother."

Mother laid a hand on Ersatzica. "See to it that they do. This is your top priority."

"Yes, Mother."

"And Ersatzica?"

"Yes, Mother?"

"Do not, under any circumstances, wear the boots again until you have fitted them for wolf feet." Mother stared straight into Ersie's eyes with a commanding gaze.

"Understand?"

"Yes, Mother."

Mother nodded. "Very good." Then she turned to Mudrich and caressed her muzzle.

"Well done, my dear. That was some top notch protecting you did."

Mudrich beamed with pride, chin held high and tail wagging.

"Be sure to get a bath tomorrow."

Mudrich's ears drooped. "Do I have to?"

"Hmm. Yes." Awoomoon walked away. "See you tomorrow, my pups."

"I think these need to be tested a bit more." Wryonin handed the boots back to Ersie. "I don't know what I'm doing wrong, but they're not working."

"Sometimes heirlooms have rules, and maybe you don't fit them?" Lemilay shrugged. She sniffed the night air. "Alright, let's get to bed."

Lemilay led the group back to the barracks. Once inside, Wryonin held up the lantern as the others got into bed.

"Speaking of fit, you're coming to training tomorrow, young sis." Wryonin held the lantern up for Ersatzica.

"No, I don't think I'll be able to make it." Ersatzica climbed into her top bunk.

"That wasn't a question. You're coming to training tomorrow."

"Um... no, like Mother said, I'm to prioritize the boots. I'll be too busy." Ersie looked down from her bunk.

"Nonsense. Training isn't going to take that long. Besides, it'll do you some good. Help get your brain engaged." Wryonin held the lantern down to illuminate the bed under Ersatzica's.

"Come on, Ersie, it'll be fun!" Mudrich jumped into bed, landing on her blanket and rolling into a burrito.

"But I can't. My scar keeps me from doing intense exercise. You know this." Ersatzica fluffed her pillow.

"We'll go easy on you, for your first day." Wryonin swung the lantern to the other side of the room.

Lemilay gently flapped open her blanket, laid down, and flapped her blanket closed on top of her.

"I don't know. I don't think I'll like it." Ersatzica rolled over, turning her back to the light.

"C'mon, Ersie! It'll be fun to go running with you!"

"Yeah, running!" Wryonin stood at the table in the center of the room, hovering the lantern over it.

"Wryonin, just get into bed." Lemilay commanded.

"Not until Ersatzica agrees to come to training."

"Ersatzica, please." Lemilay groaned.

"C'mon, Ersie!"

"Ersatzica?" Wryonin held the lantern up to her level.

Ersatzica sighed. "Ok, I guess."

"Ok! It's settled!" Lemilay groaned. "Ersatzica is going to training tomorrow. Get into bed already, Wryonin!"

"Ok." Wryonin whistled happily as he turned off the lantern and climbed into the top bunk. It squeaked and shifted as he climbed up.

"Careful, Wryonin. Ersatzica, you got to fix these bunk beds."

"I'll get to it... eventually."

"Tomorrow?"

"We'll see."

"Goodnight!" Mudrich howled quietly.

"Goodnight!" They howled back.

The wolf siblings went to sleep, but something was keeping Ersatzica awake. She tossed and turned as she lay in bed. Something felt off. Was it her tail? No, her wolf tail was full and fluffy like usual. She brought it up between her legs and hugged it. Was it her face? She rubbed a paw around her face. No, wasn't that. After laying still for a second, her stomach skin seemed to peel up, like a huge blister. That was it. Something didn't feel right about her skin. It was like she was wearing a sweaty shirt, tightly wrapped around her skin, clinging to it. Must be a lingering effect of the transformation. She'd have to catalogue it as a side effect tomorrow. Now that she knew what it was, she breathed a sigh of relief. She tried to ignore it and go to sleep.

Chapter 4

"Ok, thanks for escorting me to my workshop, guys. I feel safe now." Ersatzica walked up to her workshop, Wryonin and Mudrich besides her. The sun shone through the doorless doorway, glistening through the morning dew on the tiles.

"Not this time, Ersatzica." Wryonin barged into the workshop ahead of Ersatzica, blocking her path. "You're not dodging training this time."

"Dodge... training?" Ersie sheepishly smiled. "No, no... I was just..." Ersie ducked under Wryonin's arm and slipped in past him.

"Yeah, Ersie! Dodge training!" Mudrich brushed past Wryonin to riffle through the cart in the corner. "We're going to practice dodging projectiles today! You know, arrows and rocks and stuff." Mudrich batted around the items in the cart. "Where'd you put the shovel?"

"Guys, we got to get to training!" Wryonin turned around.

"It should still be in the cart." Ersie looked in. "Wait... Arrows?!"

"Don't be so dramatic Ersie." Wryonin looked around. The shelves were still packed with miscellaneous parts. "We only shoot sandbags during training. Non-lethal."

"Guys, let's go."

Ersie panted.

"Hey Ersie, help me find that shovel." Mudrich lifted the cart effortlessly. The cuffs hung around her wrists.

"We don't have time for this. Training is about to start." Wryonin glanced at the counter below the window. The sun crept along the various parts and pieces scattered on it.

Mudrich whimpered. "I wanted the shovel."

"Nope, not now. We'll find it later." Wryonin got behind Mudrich and pushed her out the door. "Let's go, Ersatzica." He pushed her out too.

"Ok, I'm going." Ersatzica joined Mudrich outside the workshop, grabbing the stick on the way out.

"Ok," Wryonin clapped. He reached behind him for the door knob. Then remembered the door was on the floor. "Right, this way to training."

"But I need to fix my door first." Ersatzica pointed.

"No, Lemilay is arranging for that to be fixed by the carpenter." Wryonin pulled Ersatzica along. "You're going to training."

The trio headed toward the cliff face, where a long zig-zag stone staircase greeted them. The town was built on top of a plateau, and the staircase was the only easy way to get up to the town or down to the river. Centuries old, the staircase had been carved out of the cliff face. It showed signs of smoothing from the rain and a lot of the steps were sloped and rounded. Every year, it became more and more like a slip and slide. Luckily, the pads at the bottom of the wolves' feet provided enough friction to gain traction on the dry stone.

Wryonin led Ersatzica and Mudrich down the stairs to the forested area below. The area was surrounded on the south side by the stone staircase, on the east side by the cliff of the plateau, on the west side by the river beach where Mudrich recently scored a hammer kill, and on the north side by the river where Ersatzica was saved by the cat with a fishing pole.

Ersatzica played with the stick she had had that day. What was that cat doing there? Is he still out there? Did he think Ersatzica was a cat? And if not, why would he rescue a wolf?

"We're here." Wryonin said.

Ersatzica looked up from the stick. They were in a familiar clearing, but not one that Ersatzica often saw with this many wolves. They were of all ages, and all sizes, but not all shapes. Most of them were buff male wolves that had seen some sort of combat. Many had scars in all sorts of places. The wolf at the head of the formation led them in stretches. He was missing an arm. Nevertheless, his tall stature and muscular frame combined with his scowling face made him rather intimidating.

"Wryonin, nice of you to finally join us." He said mockingly.

Wryonin bowed. "Sorry, sir." He fell in line behind the other wolves in formation. He motioned for his sisters to do the same.

"Not so fast, pup. Drop and give me 20."

"Yes, sir." Wryonin got on his belly and did 20 pushups.

Mudrich joined Wryonin on the ground, knocking out the pushups quickly.

Ersatzica cautiously stepped up next to them and began stretching.

"No, you made us late, Ersatzica." Wryonin pulled her tail down. "You don't get to just not do pushups."

"How do you do them?"

"Like this!" Mudrich laid on her belly, put her palms on the ground, and lifted up with her elbows, pivoting at the tips of her toes. "It's easy."

"Ok." Ersie followed the steps, but was barely able to get her torso off the ground.

"Am I doing it right?"

"You have to lift all the way." Wryonin huffed.

"Oh." Ersatzica collapsed onto the ground. She tried again and did some full-hearted but ultimately pathetic pushups. When Mudrich and Wryonin finished theirs, she joined them in the stretching. Hopefully, being in the back, the coach wolf wouldn't notice.

"Stretching done! Do 5 laps around the trail, meet me back here." He howled to signal the wolves to start.

The trio turned to follow the pack, but the coach wolf stopped them. "Not you three."

Wryonin stopped in his tracks, pulling Ersatzica by the tail to get her to stop.

"You were late. Explain yourselves."

Wryonin stood at attention. "I got distracted, sir, I take full responsibility. It won't happen again."

"And you?" He turned to Mudrich.

"I got distracted, sir, I take full responsibility. It... It won't happen again." Mudrich repeated.

"Hmm." The coach wolf's mouth moved slightly in amusement. Then he turned to Ersatzica. "Ersatzica, Daughter of the Chieftess. I'm surprised to actually see you here."

"Um, hi Uncle Callustar." She smiled sheepishly.

"That's 'sir' to you. We're in training." Uncle Callustar demanded.

"Hi, sir."

"And what brings you here on this fine lovely day?"

"Wryonin convinced me to come." She fidgeted with the stick.

"Ah!" He smiled wryly. "So that's why you were late, Wryonin? Ersatzica, you caused your siblings to be late, is that correct?"

Ersatzica's ears folded back. "Well, no... they could have come without me. I would've caught up."

"Oh." The Uncle Callustar raised an eyebrow. "So you were *planning* on arriving late?"

"No-no..."

"Or planning on not arriving at all?" He got right up in her face.

"No, I was planning on coming." Ersatzica took a step back.

"Hmm." He glared into her eyes. "Ok, well it's a good thing. You could definitely use the training. As of right now," he said as he swiped the stick from Ersatzica's hand, "you lack discipline. By the end of your training, how ever long it takes," he used the stick to guide Ersatzica's posture into the pristine stance that Mudrich and Wryonin were using, "you will know how to be on time, how to run fast, and how to be a proper wolf of loyalty."

"Ok."

"That's 'yes, sir' to you."

"Y... yes... sir." Ersatzica put on a brave face, and stood up straight.

"That's more like it. Now go run 5 laps! And make them quick!" The Uncle Callustar howled, "Run!"

Wryonin and Mudrich took off jogging, but Ersatzica stayed behind.

"What are you waiting for? Run!"

"But I can't! You see, I have this scar—"

"Did you hear me? I said run!" He slapped her on the back with the stick and prodded her to start going.

She walked in the direction Wryonin and Mudrich went.

"Are you deaf? I said run!"

"Yes, sir." Ersatzica picked up the pace.

Wryonin and Mudrich were quite a bit, jogging along the trail at a pace they considered a jog, but for Ersatzica, it was a sprint.

"Wait up!" Ersatzica yelled.

Mudrich stopped and ran to her. "There you are!" Mudrich ran beside Ersie, while Wryonin kept at his pace ahead of them. "Wow, Ersie! You're actually keeping up! See? I knew you could do it!"

Ersatzica breathed heavily. "I... need... to... take... a breather." She slowed down to her jog pace, then to a walk, then she stopped and rested her hands on her knees.

"Wryonin!" Mudrich yelled out to him as she stopped running. "Wait for us?"

Wryonin stopped to turn around and shout back, "You heard Uncle Callustar. Run."

"Wryonin!" Mudrich yelled.

"It's ok, Mudrich." Ersatzica panted. "I'll catch up with you guys."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah go on ahead."

"Ok, I'll keep an eye on you, make sure you're still there."

"Thanks."

Mudrich took off, catching up with Wryonin easily.

Walking along the path, Ersie breathed rapidly, trying to catch her breath. She ran a hand through her belly fur. The scar tissue still had the same bumpy texture. She looked at her hand. It was clean, save for the bit of dust. There was no blood on it. Ersie breathed a sigh of relief.

Ersatzica panted and leaned on a tree. Why was it so hot out? It was still morning, wasn't it? Wasn't it supposed to be cool in the morning? The sun is out. She leaned into the tree's shade and looked around. Oh the river! It would be cool, for sure! It'd also help satisfy her thirst.

Ersatzica walked to the river and splashed her face with water. Ah, yes! That feels so good! She looked across it. There's that rock. The fisher cat was sitting on it the other day. If he hadn't been there... Ersatzica looked down river. She couldn't see from where she was at, but the water fall roared from just beyond the next tree line. She turned again to the rock. But he *was* there. And he saved her. But why?

She rolled around in the shallow part of the river. That hit the spot! But she was all wet. She shook it off, but was still a little wet. She climbed up onto a boulder near her. That's nice.

A small rock flew out from nowhere and landed right next to her. She jumped. The rock was the size of her hand. It slid down the side of the boulder and landed in the sand. The string tied around it pulled it slightly toward the river. That string stretched all the way across the river and disappeared into thin air at about the point it would go over the fisher cat's rock.

Ersatzica scrambled for the tree line. She hid behind a tree and observed the rock. The string pulled it across the river and up to the rock, where it too disappeared.

Ersatzica stared at the river for a moment. What was that? Why did it disappear like that? Where did it go?

"Ersatzica!" Mudrich yelled. *AWOOOOOO!* "Where?"

AWOOOO! "Here!" Ersatzica howled back. She returned to the running path.

"Ersie! There you are! What's taking so long?"

"You know, the usual." She held her scar.

"You doing ok?"

"Same as usual."

"Uncle Callustar said we should travel together." Wryonin ran up to her side and jogged next to her, almost in place, as slow as she was walking. "Can you go faster?"

"I've reached my limit, Wryonin. I can't run anymore right now."

"How about a jog? It's like running, but you go slow."

"What? But running is for going fast."

"I know, I know. But you can run at different speeds, and one of those speeds is going to be the slowest. So run at that speed."

"I don't think so, Wryonin."

"Ok, can you jump?"

"Yes... why?"

"Jump." Wryonin stopped and jumped up a few times. "Jump."

"Ok." Ersatzica followed his lead and jumped a few times.

"How does that feel?"

"Ok, so far."

"Ok, now jump with one leg at a time." Wryonin jumped with his left leg, and while it was still in the air, he jumped with his right leg. He never let either leg be on the ground at the same time.

Ersatzica followed along.

"Ok, great! Now when you jump, go forward a bit." Wryonin high jumped slowly down the trail.

Ersatzica panted, but followed him.

"You're doing great, Ersatzica." Wryonin looked over his shoulder. "Now just jump a little less high, and jump a little further, and now you're jogging!"

"Ok, I got it. So this is running, but slow?"

"Yes!"

Ersatzica jogged with Wryonin and Mudrich, who were going extra slow for her, down the trail. But eventually, even that was too much for her.

"Ah, ah, ah!" Ersatzica stopped and took deep breaths. "I gotta rest. You go on without me."

"We're not leaving you, Ersie!" Mudrich bent down to pick her up. "Come on, you're coming with us."

"Thanks Muddy."

When they got back to the training area, Uncle Callustar slapped Mudrich with the stick. "No! She has to do it herself! Or she'll never learn."

"She's got to rest! She's got a scar that could—"

He slapped her again. "Mudrich! Daughter of the Chieftess! I'm shocked you would take that tone with me!" He threw the stick into the woods. "Go fetch that stick. If you bring back the wrong one, you've got more coming."

Mudrich whimpered and went off into the woods to find the stick.

Uncle Callustar ordered Ersatzica to do a lot more exercises and pushed her to the point of exhaustion. At the end of the hour, Ersatzica checked her scar again. It felt like someone ripping open a plush animal. But so far, there was no blood.

"Morning training complete!" Uncle Callustar howled. "Done!"

All the wolves were dismissed. They ran over to the stairs and up to the village on the plateau.

Ersatzica had gotten the stick back from Uncle Callustar and held it on the way back to her workshop. Once there, she examined the boots. They were clean and shiny, save for some minor dust, just the way she left them. The stick... the boots... the rock... She had to find out. There was a good chance that it was the fisher cat, and that he was friendly. She had to know.

The next day, she brought the boots with her.

"What are bringing those for?" Wryonin asked.

Ersatzica shrugged. "Training."

"They're very shiny." Mudrich played with the mechanisms. Her face reflected in the red metal. The morning light made them sparkle.

"Well, at least we're on time today."

The trio did training together. Ersatzica managed to get in two ill-fated pushups this time. She still had to take a break on the trail, but this time Wryonin and Mudrich both waited for her.

After training, Ersatzica ditched the group to go off into the forest alone.

"Ersie?"

Ersie stopped in her tracks. "Oh, hi, Muddy."

"Whatcha doin'?"

"Just going to test something. Go on, I'll catch up."

"Ok. See you later!"

"Later, Muddy!" She waved goodbye.

Ersatzica walked briskly to the site of the rock. She pulled the boots out their hiding spot and slipped into them. "I wish to be a cat!" She said to herself. Her wolfskin peeled off and she let it fall to the ground. Her paws slid the rest of the way into the boots, and she latched them. She tried talking, and found no sound came out. The boots were still working.

She took a moment to bury her wolf skin under some foliage. Then she went to the rock.

It was afternoon, and the sun was just overhead. She looked across the river. There was the outcropping. No fisher cat sat there, just like yesterday. And also just like yesterday, the boulder on this side of the river was completely unshaded, and quite warm to the touch. She approached it, putting out a hand to touch it, then pulled it back.

How do I know for sure that this cat is friendly? What if it's a trap? Cats are evil creatures, after all. It'd be totally like them to do something like this. Lead you astray and then take advantage of you. Ersie would be completely vulnerable, and have no way to escape. But if that was the case, why did he rescue her in the first place? Wouldn't it have been easier to let her drown? She had to find out.

She took a deep breath, and climbed up onto the boulder. It didn't take long before a rock came sailing over the river. This time she grabbed it before it slid off the boulder. She held it in her hand. It had a smooth grainy texture. On one side, a cat's face had been etched into it. This is definitely some kind of cat thing.

The string jerked forward, nearly pulling Ersatzica off the boulder. She yelled to stop, but no sound came out. She held on, even as it pulled her off the boulder and into the water. Luckily, the water was shallow at this end. But she was on her knees, and didn't have time to get up before the rock dragged her into the river. It dragged her into the deep part, and she sank below the surface. Her lungs filled with water as gurgled and clawed to stay afloat. The air inside her deflated and she began feeling faint. Then sand brushed up against her face, filtering in between her fur. The rock pulled her all the way across the river and onto the sand bank. The sand itched into her chest fur as she washed ashore. She let go of the rock.

She spit out a ton of water, and took several frantic breathes. Her breathes were as sporadic as they were rapid. But she didn't have time to catch her breath before something grabbed her hand and dragged her further up shore. She screamed, but silently. Finally, she was let go.

She sat up and looked around. Right in front of her stood a cat. He stood on white toes and black legs. He wore a leather belt around his white belly. His white chin comfortably sat on his black face. His black ears stuck out from under his green, feathered hat. He extended an arm to her.

"Welcome." He purred.

Chapter 5

Ersatzica stared up at the black-furred hand reaching out to her. Was this a trick? Could he be trusted? Well, he did pull her all the way across the river. If he wanted to kill her, surely he would have just let her drown in the river just now. Or a week ago, when she foolishly tried to swim across on her own.

“That’s ok.” He shrugged, pulling his hand back. “I’ll be up on the rock if you need me.” He climbed up onto the outcropping, sat down on the edge, and let his fishing line hang down into the water.

Ersatzica crawled further up onto the beach. With a big motion she shook, but the water weighing down her fur didn’t fling off. The water dampened her fur. It was the most uncomfortable feeling, aside from drowning, of course. It was like a hot sweltering heat on a summers day, but hugging her all around. Her fur stuck together as she moved. She tried a wolf water shake one last time, to no avail. Finally she gave up and tried to sun dry. The sand wasn’t comfortable, but maybe a solid rock would be?

Up on the rock outcropping, the fisher cat whistled. It was a happy little tune, perfect for passing the time while fishing. A medium basket sat next to him, waiting patiently to be filled with fish.

Ersatzica cautiously crawled up next to him on all fours. His ears pricked in her direction, but he otherwise kept his attention on his fishing line. As she got closer, she could see more details. The basket wasn’t completely empty. Inside, the lower jaw bone of a wolf sparkled with a blue hue in the sunlight. It was missing several lower teeth, notably the canines. Ersatzica put her face in and sniffed it. Its owner had been dead a long time, and smelled only of fish. If this fisher cat had killed him, it wasn’t recently. Still, it’s a bad omen. Ersatzica’s heart beat faster. She inched away from him. I knew this was a trick. How could I have been so stupid?

Without turning around, the fisher cat addressed the jaw bone. “I see you found Yotleph’s Jawbone. Legend says he was a recluse, didn’t want to interact with anybody. He even refused medical aid when he got a splitting migraine that drove him half insane. One day he disappeared without a trace. When they finally found

him, his flesh had already mostly decayed. But his skull was an heirloom. I bet you were wondering why you couldn't see me from the other side of the river?"

Ersatzica paused. She'd heard of Yotleph before, although she remembers the tale differently. Could it be that Yotleph was found? She shrugged. Probably. It would explain both the jawbone and the fact that the fisher cat was invisible.

She approached the fisher cat again. His back was scarred across his shoulder blade from where it attaches to his arm to where it meets his spine. She stroked the scar across her belly. She put her face up to it and sniffed it. He smelled like a cat, and like fish. Half of that smell was acceptable.

He turned to peek at her. "So, do you like fish?"

"I like it ok," is what she would've said, if she could make sound. "I KINDA LIKE FISH!" She tried yelling, but it didn't work.

"So you do, nice!" he turned back to his fishing pole. It was bouncing up and down. "Because I just caught one!" He reeled it up and flung it into the basket. Sharp curved claws flipped out of his hand and pierced the fish, letting it no chance of escape. He pulled it up to his mouth and bit its head off. He spat the head into the basket and chucked the body in after.

The smell of fresh fish and fresh blood filled the air. Ersatzica licked her lips. She sat down next to him on the outcropping.

The fisher cat wiped his face with his tongue, then his hand. "You like that, huh?"

"Yeah," she mouthed.

"Well, hey, if you want, you can come back with me to my camp." He motioned to a faint path in the forest behind him.

Ersatzica squinted. The path wasn't all that visible or easy to follow. If she followed him there, she probably wouldn't be able to find her way back easily. She slowly shook her head.

The fisher cat shrugged. "Ok." He cast his fishing line back into the water. "I'm Fisher by the way. What name do you go by?"

Ersatzica's mouth opened. Should she tell him? He couldn't do anything with that information, could he? Even still, it'd better if he didn't know who she was. She could get in trouble.

"Ok, that's fine. I'll just make up a name for you then." He looked her up and down. "You've got orange fur, orange stripes, beautiful red hair, and a red tuft on the tail. I'd call you Tabby, but I know too many 'Tabby's already. You also like to wear boots. I don't know anyone who goes by the name of 'Boots'. Do you like that?"

Ersatzica gave a quick look of disgust, but then just shrugged.

"Ok, so not 'Boots'. What kinds of things do you like?"

Ersatzica put a finger to face. She pulled her feet close and mimed cleaning them. She held an imaginary wrench to the boots and adjusted some knobs.

"Polishing, wrenching, oh, fixing!" Fisher smiled. "You're a mechanic!"

Ersatzica smiled and clapped.

"So, 'Nic, did you make those boots?"

'Nic looked up, thought a second, and shrugged. "'Nic" was just about as good as any nickname out there. And it really was true to something she was truly passionate about.

"You don't know?"

'Nic shook her head, a definite no.

"Oh, you found the boots then?"

'Nic nodded.

"Well, they're mighty shiny."

'Nic beamed with pride.

"You did that?"

She nodded. It's good to be recognized for the work she does. Not everyone back home appreciates her craftsmanship.

“What do they do?”

‘Nic shrugged. She hastily put up a finger, then mimed a wolf howling. She pretended to put boots on, then ran her fingers through her fur from her knee to her neck. She mimed clawing at the air.

“I don’t quite understand. Something about wolves and cats?”

She mimed clawing in the air again, and this time, claws popped out of her hand. What’s this? So these are claws? ‘Nic stared wide-eyed at her claws. They were semi-translucent, curved, and very sharp. Her wolf claws were never this sharp, unless she spent a good amount of time every day sharpening them by hand. She sniffed them. Perhaps a bit too aggressively. Her sniffing nose collided with her claw and she cut herself. It wasn’t long before it started bleeding. Wow, her claws were sharp! No way she could cut herself that easily on her wolf claws!

“Here, let me see that.” Fisher reached out to her, but Ersatzica backed away. “Ok, be careful now.”

‘Nic held a hand over her nose, blocking the bleeding. She used the hand without claws sticking out, and used the exposed-claw hand to lean on.

“Our claws are sharp, yes, but...” Fisher grimaced. “They dull easily. You don’t want to leave them out like that.” He pointed to ‘Nic’s claws scraping on the rocks.

‘Nic nodded. She took her free hand and used it to push her claw digit into her hand. First she tried downwards, as if the claws worked on a sliding mechanism. Then she tried folding them in towards her palm. She winced in pain, and stopped.

Fisher watched with a sheepish grin. “No, you see, like this.” He held out his hand, and flexed his claws in and out. They flipped out of the back of his hand into position, then flipped backwards back into the back of his hand. The motion was very snappy and happened in the blink of an eye. He tried to slow it down. “Huh. I never realized that.” He flexed them in and out again. “I can’t do it slowly, only fast.”

‘Nic watched thoughtfully. She held a claw with her other hand and flipped it back into safety. One by one, she manually retracted each of her claws.

Fisher stifled a giggle. "Well done!" He flexed his claws. "Now try flexing them the natural way."

'Nic focused on them, but they didn't move. She shrugged.

"It's fine. You'll figure it out."

'Nic's ears pricked.

AWOOOO! "Where?"

Ersatzica's fur spiked. That was Mudrich's howl! She was late! Ersatzica stood up and ran to the river. She dipped a hand into it. Nope! There's no way she could cross it, especially not in cat form. As a wolf, she might be able to, but her cat body isn't well suited to it. But her wolf skin was on the other side of the river. And she just finally dried off. She looked up and down the river, but there was no way to get across easily. She really didn't think this through properly.

"Hey, what's wrong?" Fisher approached her.

'Nic stared at the rock across the river.

"Hmmm... I see." Fisher walked towards the waterfall. "Come on, I know a way."

'Nic followed him. She really should have thought of this. And now she has to trust that a stranger would actually help her get back. After everything she's seen? Yotleph's jawbone, how claws work, fishing practices? There's no way he would trust her with that info, right?

"You know the waterfall?" Fisher led her closer. The roaring got louder, to the point it was hard to hear him. Still he trekked on. The path was windy and not well marked. Nor was it well guarded for that matter. One false step and one would fall all the way down. "Careful here, the rocks are almost always slippery. Use your pads and keep your claws sheathed. Oh wait, you don't have to worry about that."

'Nic carefully made her way down the path behind Fisher. They made it to a tree right next to the waterfall.

"Ok here's the point of no return."

This is it. This is the part where he pushes her. It was so obvious that he wasn't going to let her escape. But what choice did she have? Once she crossed the river, she was at their mercy.

"If you go in there..." Fisher pointed to a cave that went right behind the waterfall. It was dark, save for the light refracting off the falling water. It was beautiful, actually. The waterfall created mesmerizing lines that danced on the walls. "You can't get back over to this side. You have to go out the other end. This is where we part ways, at least for now. Stay safe."

'Nic looked at him, then to the cave. She winced. She shivered.

"Hey, it's ok. If you want, I can hand you this rock." Fisher placed a rock in her hand. It had a string tied around it that led to his pole. "If you fall, I can pull you back up. Sound good?"

'Nic slightly nodded yes. She grabbed the rock and crawled across the cave floor inch by inch.

"You're doing good. Just a little ways before you get to the drop off."

'Nic's fur stood on end. The drop off? He *was* sending her to her doom!

"Don't worry. It's only as tall as you are, really. It's easy to go down, but too slippery and tall to get back up. I still got you." He raised his pole.

'Nic took a deep breath. The waterfall roared in her ears. She folded her ears back. She crawled forward to the edge. Peering down, it was dark, but a strange glow illuminated the area below. There was a solid surface within reasonable falling distance. It was probably slippery, but she had the fishing pole rock in her hand.

"You're doing great!"

She turned around and went feet-first down the ledge. She slid down it until she was hanging by her fingers. She let go and fell an inch or two, if that. She slipped on impact and landed on her bum.

"All good?"

'Nic tugged a little on the rock.

"I'll take that as a 'yes'."

'Nic crawled the rest of the way to the steep dirt hillside. She could see a clear path to the top, but it involved climbing a lot of tree branches and hoping they didn't collapse. Tugging on the rock for the last time, she threw it across the waterfall to Fisher.

"Salutations!" He waved. Whistling, he climbed back up the waterfall.

AWOOOO! "Where?"

Ersatzica wanted so badly to respond, but it just wasn't possible at the moment. Instead, she focused on climbing up. It was really difficult without her third finger joint. She paused on a sturdy branch. What if she could...?

She held out a paw. She concentrated really hard. No claws appeared. She shrugged, and resorted to pulling her claws out manually one by one, on both hands. She grabbed a tree branch. The claws stuck in and gave her really good grip, even on vertical surfaces. She clawed a thick branch and gripped tightly. She tried slipping it off, but it wouldn't budge. She smiled in satisfaction. But when she went to disengage her grip, she found her claws wouldn't come out of the tree branch. After several tries, she used her other hand to grab the claw and force it out.

Along the way, she figured out the right amount to grip without getting stuck, and climbed out of the waterfall area and onto the solid ground she was familiar with. She raced to her buried wolfskin. She hurried up and unburied it. Unlatched the boots, pulled them off, and put the wolfskin back on.

AWOOOO! "Here!"

AWOOO! "Here!" Mudrich replied. She was at the top of the stairs to the village.

Ersatzica put her training to good use and ran to the stairs. She still had to hold her scar though, as it still threatened to rip open. Finally she got to the top and met Mudrich.

"Where were you?"

"Just going for a stroll."

Mudrich side-eyed her. "In the river?" She took in a big whiff. "You smell like wet. And fish. Wet fish."

"Well of course. Fish are wet."

"Yeah, but you're not a fish. And what happened to your nose?"

Ersatzica wiped some blood of her nose. "Oh I just sniffed something sharp."

"Sis?"

"Fish?"

"Sharp wet fish. Sure."

"Ok ok, I'll tell you later, ok?"

"Promise?"

"Yeah."

"Ok."

"There you are!" Wryonin exclaimed. "We've been looking all over for you!"

"Well, here I am." Ersatzica followed.

"Mom has something important to tell us."