He lost track of the time, seconds, minutes, hours? The whole day had gone by just like that. All his pups were gone and adopted by loving humans. All but one; one of his three daughters; Aleu. The only one who looked different from all the rest of the litter, the one that took after him the most, the one who…

“It’s been a long day Jenna. Let’s go home…” Balto said, interrupting his own thoughts. “But we can’t!” Jenna responded quickly “not until a human adopts Aleu!” Balto looked from his mate to their remaining pup, there she layed, fast asleep. Still waiting for a human to scoop her up in their arms, cuddle her, tell her they loved her and take her away from them.

Take her away. What if she’d be too much for a human? She loved to howl, she loved chewing more than any of the pups and Boris had the bites to prove it, if she’d chew up a human’s furniture that would be the end of it. What if she were to accidentally bite a human? He couldn’t bear to advance the thought.

“Face it Jenna. Aleu looks more like a wolf than me.” he finally said, knowing that was only partially true. Balto despite being more wolf than her had his wolfish looks as well such as his big paws, the extra mane on the back of his neck, but Aleu? So far she shared his colors. She had the most unique shape of eyes and her behavior was more adventurous than the rest. Sort of like he was a few years ago before the serum run.

“That’s not true.” Jenna confirmed to him. “we’ll have to keep trying…” Jenna said. Sighing, watching as all the doors locked and lights were turned off in the city. Balto looked down at his daughter then back to Jenna who gave a concerned look.

“Balto, what are you planning?” She knew that look in his eye, usually that meant he thought of something. “I’m going to take her home with me, Jenna. Just for the night. Then we’ll be together in the morning, I promise. I’ll bring her along tomorrow and then, I’ll go door to door. The kids here saw them as your pups but maybe some people out there won’t be able to resist her being MY pup.”

“But Balto, are you sure about that? Some of the humans don’t think you deserve all the credit.” Balto sighed. “Yeah, I know. I never asked for fame and glory in the first place but this may be the only time I’ll be able to use it to my advantage.” He gave a reassuring look. “I know where some of them are and which places to avoid. Don’t worry, I’m still street smart.” He smirked slyly, picking up his pup by the scruff gently so as to not wake her.

“And make sure it’s not someone who would sell her for money!” She finished. “I’ll make double sure of that.” he answered, giving her a comforting goodbye nuzzle. Afterwards Jenna whispered gently to the sleeping ball of fur “Sleep tight my sweetheart.”

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Balto had finally arrived to his boat, his home away from home. It had always been his home since as long as he could remember. Galloping up the ladder and onto the deck feeling the wooden planks under his paws made him feel at ease. No matter how many times he came here he always felt relaxed and safe here. Where no one would bully him or harass him.

“boychik what’s that in your mouth I’m seeing?“ a familiar voice chimed behind him. “You didn’t take Aleu here for yourself did you? I thought all pupwiks were supposed to have their own home by now.” Balto looked over his shoulder to give him a look. Padding over to his favorite blanket to lay her down so she could sleep peacefully. Giving her one more look before walking off outside on the deck to conversate with his father figure of a goose.

“No Boris we were there all day until nightfall…” he eyed the pup back in the other room. “It was a bust for the lack of a better term.” he quietly said.

“I told you! I knew it, this is exactly what happened when I-!” Boris tried to exclaim only to be caught in all of Balto’s mouth to silence him. “Boris, not so loud you’ll wake her.”

“Oh, right, sorry.” Boris grinned wide, making Balto release him. “But yes, I remember Boris Both what you said and how you found me. But this won’t be like last time.”

“Don’t count on it boychik. Humans can be quite fickle. You saw how some tried throwing you under the bus after getting the medicine back! That no good magey mutt Steel isn’t even the one who started it!” Balto grunted. “I know, but there are good humans out there as well. I just have to find them.”

Boris folded his wings, tapping his webbed foot glancing at him with one opened eye. “Balto, I can tell by the tone in your voice that you’d like to keep her for yourself.” Balto looked down, the look on his face expressing that he couldn’t deny. His ears folded, clearing his throat to think of a way to change the subject. “Look you may have a bit of a point on humans, I have a plan. and i think i’ll need your help on this one. I’m going to show her off door to door, maybe someone’s bound to want her. At least with seeing her with me. I just need to know which one’s to avoid, so I'm going to need your eyes and ears.”

Boris sighed, dangling his wings on the ground. “Oui, I hate going into town.” he groaned. “But i’ll do it for you and Aleu, Boychik. Just don’t expect this old goose to let you off the hook, you owe me big! Like helping me with those bears for once they stink!” Balto smiled happily. “I’ll repay you, I promise!” he wagged his tail.

“Balto, one more thing.” Boris stopped him, grabbing him by the tail. “What is it?” Balto turned his head towards his father figure of a goose.

“Don’t ever tell her that being different is painful. It’s simply not true.”

Balto lowered his brow “what do you mean?”

“Steele is different from you, Jenna is different from Steele, those dogs who were on the sled team were all different from each other. You’ve seen Muk and Luk, even they are different! One doesn’t try to be different, nor is different painful because one just is. This is something you can’t change, but embrace. Remember that boychik. Never be ashamed of who or what you are.”

Balto stared at him taking the information in, hearing the goose go in his more serious tone meant he really wanted him to listen to his words of advice, just like before he went solo to find the sled team in the storm way back .“A dog can’t make this journey alone, but maybe a wolf can.” The very wolf inside him was what got him the extra ‘umph’ to climb back up and back on the route to Nome in the first place. He was right, he had to stop living in self pity and doubt and continue to embrace who he was, both dog AND wolf. He nodded once more to then turn to go back to his sleeping daughter who was grunting and stirring in her sleep. “Uh-oh…”

Aleu blinked her eyes open. One of her ears flickered. Taking one of her paws to rub her eye. “Did I get adopted?” She said sleepily. “Hey baby girl.” Balto cooed; nuzzling her gently on the cheek. “P-papa? Did you get adopted too?” she asked, still half asleep. Looking around to scan the area excitedly only to find it to be a familiar setting; the boat. The same boat she’d been on the day prior. Or was it all a dream? “Papa?” she looked up to her father all confused. “Was I not adopted?”

Balto could only look at her with a saddened expression, unable to hide the hard truth from her. “I’m sorry honey, but we’ll try again tomorrow, I promise. Papa’s going to take you around town and we’ll get you a home.” Aleu’s eyes started to swell with a bit of tears. “Why would no one adopt me?” She asked again. “Is there something wrong with me?'' Those words hit Balto’s heart hard and immediately triggered his paternal instincts. “No. Absolutely not, there is NOTHING wrong with you Aleu.” Balto said in a reassuring and stern voice. Aleu stopped crying, looking up with mouth a little agape. A little surprised at how loud and serious he was, usually not being like that at all around her. Balto hovered above her to then lay beside her, making sure she was as close to him as possible.

“We’ll find you a home too Aleu, don’t you worry. But until then, you can stay with me. Does that sound fun?” He finished laying his head down next to her. Aleu sniffled a bit, with questions still running through her head. She started to ask one of them only to have her fathers paw wrap around her in an affectionate and protective manner. “My baby.” he whispered. “Papa…” she grunted a little, almost a giggle escaped her maw. “Stop you’re squeezing too hard~”

Balto opened one eye halfway. “What’s that? Squeezing you? You haven’t felt anything yet.” In a quick fashion he flipped the little pup on her back and kissed her all over her belly, tickling her and giving as much love as he could, the kind of love he never got from his own wolf mother, that he wished he had gotten. All this though made him whole. Hearing his daughters crying turn to laughter, filling her with love and affection, making her feel safe, it was all truly what he had ever wanted. This moment was secretly what he was hoping for. If not keep all of his pups, at least keep his favorite. He couldn’t deny it, she looked like him, she may suffer the same bullying as he did in his youth but he will not let that happen. He wouldn’t allow it. No one would come near or hurt his baby verbally or physically. Anyone who dares would have to go through him. Not caring who it is, he would fight for his pup. He would care for his pup, he would bathe her, walk her, feed her, do all the things he’d love to do as a father.

“Papa hahahah!” she continued to have a giggle fit, unable to catch her breath. Noticing this he stopped for a brief moment. “I love you Aleu. I always will.” He cooed down on her, touching his nose to hers. Aleu could only blush and look away. “What’s the matter?” He brought his head back. “Oh um…” she began, unable to actually admit it.

Balto raised an eyebrow. Seeing Aleu gritting her teeth as she crossed her legs. “Oh!” The answer finally came to him. Grabbing her by the scruff and swooping down to the ground below the deck and towards the nearest bush.

A few moments later, Balto was sitting patiently waiting for her to return. “Poor thing must have been holding it in for so long, she hadn’t gone all day.” he pondered to himself.
“Are you almost done over there?” he called out. “Yes papa!” Aleu called back, gingerly walking back from the bushes. “That’s my girl.” he said proudly, smiling down at her and the fact she was growing up so fast.

“See papa, I’m not a baby anymore! I can go wherever I want now!” Balto chuckled at what Aleu just said. “That’s right, you can. But you’ll always be my baby.” he responded, giving her one more nose rub which shocked her just like it did last time on the beach the day prior. Aleu growled, not liking to be so embarrassed and would rather want to wrestle with him again to the ground. “C’mon papa, I bet I could take you on!”

“You’ll have to catch me first!” Balto taunted turning tail and running. Looking back to see Aleu was already chasing after him as fast as her little legs could carry her. She was laughing as she panted, loving the thrill and fun they were having. They ran circles all around the boat, sometimes switching directions, sometimes switching sides where he’d be chasing her. “I got you now!” she slid underneath him to poke his belly which gave a bit of a twitch and laugh in response. Putting her paws up to try and tickle him to have him yield. Balto being the fun father he was, let her have it and toppled over, letting out a laughing fit.

“Haha ok tiger you got me! Hahaha!” Aleu ignored his pleas to stop, climbing on top of his chest, giving off a big howl of victory.

Balto’s laughing then suddenly stopped. He watched as his own daughter held her head up straight while lifting one of her paws. “Aleu, NO.” Balto ordered in a panic, shutting his maw as soon as he said it.

Aleu gasped, looking down at her father in shock and guilt. “I…I’m sorry papa, it just came out I didn’t mean to-,” she tried to explain, flattening her ears, almost sounding like she was about to cry again.

Balto, having realized what he had just done, immediately regretted what he just said. Quickly thinking of a way to turn this around. There was no way around it, it was time to take Boris’s advice. “Aleu,” he started getting up on his feet standing up straight. “watch me.”

Aleu’s scared, saddened look soon changed from confusion to wonder, to awe as she saw her father position himself. “This is how we howl.” he looked down one more time before giving off his own prideful high pitched howl, the same declarative, proud and energetic howl he let out back under the mountain with the white wolf about a year ago during the serum run.

Aleu’s ears were perked up, she could only gaze up in wonder at how beautiful it was, she had to join in, her instincts couldn’t avoid it, and so she did. Howling to the starry sky in the night with her father, away from the city where no one would bother them. They had each other and that’s all Balto could ask for right now.

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“Papa, how come mama has a problem with me howling but not you?” Aleu said playing with the old cat toy that Balto used to play with since he was a pup. The grizzly father wolfdog sighed. “Your mother just wanted you to behave well for the humans, that’s all.”

“Why?” aleu simply asked

“Because howling can be a bit too loud for them,” he answered.

“Well that sounds more like their problem than mine.” Aleu smartly said

“Aleu, mind your man-,” he stopped with a sigh forgetting it was just the two of them now. “Look honey, just because your mother requested you not to howl doesn’t mean she has a problem with you or thinks there’s anything wrong with you. She loves you with all her heart and wouldn’t trade you for the world.”

Aleu continued to play with the cat toy as they talked “and my brothers and sisters?” Balto gulped “That’s just how siblings are, I had siblings too before I was separated from them and even we got on each other's nerves from time to time.”

“Oh.” she said, continuing to be distracted by the cat toy, batting it with her paw to watch it bounce its head up and down making funny noises. Balto could only be thankful of that thing at this very moment.

“Papa, what's a wolf?”

His ears perked at the last word. “Excuse me?”

“A wolf? I heard one of the human’s say that word back in town, what is it?”

This was going to be a tough one to get out of. Or should he at all? Why shouldn’t she know? It can’t hurt her. He’d make sure to let her know it’s nothing to be ashamed of. Afterall he knew the truth when he was her age. It was only when others bullied him that made him feel down, and since both her and Jenna were there to protect her maybe she would have a chance? But what if she blamed him for it? He’d gladly take that over her blaming herself. “Aleu,” he began. “A wolf is like a dog but out in the wild.”

“Where's the wild?” she asked. “The wild is completely away from humans. They rely on their own wits and instincts to survive out there. They hunt and kill other animals to eat. No roof to live under or humans to interact with to help them.”

Aleu stopped playing with her cat toy to listen, taking in what she had just learned. “What’s so bad about that?” she asked. “Who said it was bad?” Balto answered her question with another question.

“Well, no one but, I wondered how come I was the only one who howled and my brothers and sisters didn’t.”

Balto smiled warmly, petting her on the head. “Because, that’s just you Aleu. You love to howl? Go out and do it. Unless your mother or I ask you not to of course, then you can whenever you want to when we say it’s alright. Everyone’s got something unique about them, because everyone’s different. There’s nothing painful about being different, you just are different.”

Aleu looked up with a glimmer in her eyes, he could tell he had gotten to her now. Never had he thought he’d say that after the experience he’d been through in the past but if he could just get her on that track then he definitely could save her from that pain. He’d hate himself forever if she went through what he did. He wouldn’t allow it though, he’d make sure of that. “Aleu, promise me something okay?”

“Uhuh?” the little tanned pup leaned in closer to listen. “Don’t ever blame or hate yourself. Alright?” aleu could only nod in response. “O-okay papa. I won’t.” Balto sighed in relief. “That’s my girl. Now it’s getting late, try to go to sleep ok? You’ve got a big day tomorrow.”. Aleu agreed, yawning and waddling up to her fathers chest and laying on top of his front leg.

Balto’s thoughts continued to run as he tried to sleep with his little one resting close to him. How long would he be able to keep her? How long until she eventually discovers the truth? It was only a matter of time. But he’ll continue to love his baby all the same, all the more reason to keep fighting for her, to make her happy, to live the life that he never got.