

## The Hidden Kingdom part 4: Citadel of snow

by

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After a while, Strider went and hunted a Moose. He took down two before getting a drink and bringing down one more. He headed off on his usual expeditions when it began to rain again.

- "Well, this is just perfect." Strider huffed as he climbed up the cliffs nearby. Jumping down he got a quick drink at a lake before hurrying over to a carcass near the cliff to fill his hunger. Afterward, he journeyed up to a den like cave and marked it as his before heading up the mountain to find some more food. Strider ran all the way to the far side of the island, down by the shore where there was a large rock formation. After climbing it, he found another carcass to eat from. Then, hunger satisfied, he races down the shoreline to leave a scent marker that would act as a claiming mark and a signal to the others if they found it. He ran on a little further to place another, and then ran almost all the way to the other side of the island to land his next mark.

The cave had ice shards hanging from the ceiling. They seemed spooky in the dim night light. It was really freaking Balto out. For the life of him, he couldn't sleep. He stared into the darkness, worried. He had seen Kodi, and Strider but no one else. Where were they? But what confused him the most was why Strider had willingly wandered off. In his position, Balto would've stayed with any friend he found. Unless of course the wolf was dead, but Balto didn't like to think about that, so instead he wondered what Kodi could be doing. He said he'd gone to find the others. Where were they? Thinking about them made Balto uneasy. Then Balto realized the night was over... or was it? Everything seemed light, dreamy, and surreal. Then Balto seemed to wake up a little more. He realized he was next to Strider. He hadn't left at all. But then he seemed to wake up even more, he felt like he'd been lucid dreaming, and as he thought about this, he was unsure about being beside Strider. Was he still dreaming? His mind seemed a little numb. Then, Strider woke up and yawned, showing a set of super sharp teeth Balto had never really noticed before. Then he looked up at Balto.

- "Hi Balto." He said before settling back down to sleep, a contented grin on his face. Balto realized he'd actually been sleeping on him, with his head and paws over his back. He tried to get up but for some reason his body wouldn't let him. Eventually he struggled to his feet but then everything seemed blurry. Was it just the light? His grey field of view darkened and after a second, he flopped on the ground. Balto felt like it stayed that way for two weeks. When he finally woke up, he was very confused about what had happened. Then he saw Strider and felt somewhat safe again. Looking past him he saw he'd hunted two whole ibexes and by the grin on his face, he seemed proud of it.

- "Oh Balto, you're finally awake." Balto managed a smile and even though his body seemed off, he knew it was going to be ok. Even if he thought he was lying to himself, he always managed to convince himself it would be ok. And somehow, he always believed that it would all be ok.

- "Oh Strider... I don't know how to thank you for this... you'll be my pal forever." Balto told the black wolf, stretching. Strider just stared at him like he was a brother. And by this time, Balto had all but forgotten to worry about what had happened to everyone else.

Strider seemed very happy. But Balto couldn't shake the feeling something was off with him. Was he dead? Something didn't feel right. Jenna and the others was the only thing on his mind. His ties to them were so strong he just couldn't be completely happy. He wished they were here. Balto went outside and howled for them so loud that Nome probably heard. But nobody came.

- "Strider...?"

- "What Balto? You worried about the others?"

- "Yeah... I'm a dad."

- "What's up dad?" asked Kodi appearing from nowhere.

- "Oh uh, hi Kodi." Said Strider, a little startled by his sudden appearance.

- "Dad, come with me! Quick!" Kodi started to run into the forest with Balto, panicking, close behind.

- "Wait!" Strider called after them. Kodi managed to stop. But Balto skidded and tripped on a rock.

- "Balto get up! And keep up Strider, we need to hurry!" yelled Kodi, turning and running away from the cave.

The three ran through the forest but soon ran into a wolf with big white claws and sharp teeth. He had a big, fluffy, white tail and mane like white neck fur. His face was white but his body bore a fur pattern similar to that of Aleu and he had amber red eyes. His fur blew in the wind and he looked like the biggest or at least second biggest wolf in the forest. There was no doubting that he was the strongest. Upon Kodi banging into one of his legs, he leapt over them, pinning Strider with one paw.

- "Why hello Kodi." He said, turning around, Strider still pinned underneath him.

- "Oh..." Kodi laughed nervously.

- "Hi."

- "I see the famous wolfdog is back too. How nice. Now Kodi, how about a little game? Why not try and rescue your friend here?" he said, flexing his muscles.

- "Yeah... why not just get off me?" Strider growled.

- "Oh. Where's the fun?" the wolf asked.

- "There is no fun. Then again, someone might die during your little 'game'... you seem like the kind of wolf who would classify that as part of a game." Strider growled.

- "Oh... I see." The wolf gave an evil smirk, effortlessly flipping Strider onto his front to hold him down by his back and stood on one of his paws. Balto, horrified, ran over in a brown blur and shredded his teeth into the brown of the wolf's pelt. Blood dripped from two wounds he'd caused as the wolfdog stumbled back.

- "Balto... when did you get that strong?" the wolf asked, looking at his wounds surprised.

- "What...? What did I...?" Balto looked at the wounds on the wolf's pelt, before tasting the blood in his mouth.

- "Leave my friend alone." He growled, his claws raking through the wolf's fur, causing another wound. The wolf screamed in pain and ran, knocking Kodi into the snow as he left. Kodi got up and padded after him, following the blood trail he left behind. Balto and Strider walked after him.