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Opening extract from

The Rising

Written by

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THE RISING

Tom Moorhouse



Illustrated by Simon Mendez

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We are River Singers, Water Folk, children of Sinethis. We live by her ways. She takes our old and gives us young. She stirs our hunger, feeds us with grasses. She shelters us in her waters and burrows. She rises and dashes us. She sings with us a song as soft as thistles, hard as roots, deep as shadows, old as stones. We sing with her a song as quick as thinking, sweet as apples, brief as day. We are River Singers, and we are hers.



PROLOGUE

Rain lashed the Wetted Land. It bent the reeds and flattened the sweet-grass. It poured into the dykes until the water seethed with it. The onslaught was ceaseless: no sound but rain, no colour but grey, and no scent but wetness. The world was rinsed clean of everything else.

It began as a chilly spatter, blown in on a freshening breeze. Youngsters played among the first drops, before heading home. And then it came in earnest. Adults fled for cover, keeping to runs beneath a thick thatch of plants. They shook the water from their fur and sheltered in their burrows. They cast wry looks at the clouds and waited for the rain to pass. But it did not.

After the first days the ground was soaked. Water trickled from every surface. It cascaded from leaves, dripped through cracks, and spread wetly across burrow walls. Floors turned to mud. Bedding grew damp and chilly. Summer chatter dissolved away and squabbles erupted across the marsh. The mood in the Wetted Land soured.

Then the enemies, initially den-bound, came out in numbers to hunt the dyke edges. In the rain they were impossible to hear. Folk were snatched with grasses still in their paws, or dragged from their burrows. The pups grew fearful in their nests. *Don't worry,* their mothers told them, *it'll soon be over. Sinethis is drinking from the sky and then the sun will return. It always does.* But when the young were asleep the mothers pulled the remaining dry bedding from the high chambers, and barricaded the entrances. They watched the dyke-water claim the lower levels, and they hoped for the deluge to end.

Whispers sprang up across the marsh. Sinethis, the Great River, was coming, they said. The Folk would bear the price of her thirst. The old stories—children's tales to teach respect for the Great River—passed from mouth to mouth. They told of the Rising, when Sinethis had come to the marsh, driving enemies before her. She had surged in burrows and over-topped banks. She had sung a terrible song of flooding, and of drowning. She had given the Wetted Land its name. And as the River Singers eyed the brimming dykes they felt the truth of the tales. They left their feeding sign as they should, and muttered their prayers. *I offer myself as sacrifice. May your waters be kind.*

They watched. The waters rose. And still the rains came.



PART 1
THE WETTED LAND

'This,' said Strife loudly, as she followed her sister through the tunnels, 'is just typical, isn't it? Just as we're old enough to be out on our own, Mother limits us to mornings and evenings. Don't you think it's typical? I do.'

Ivy ignored her. Kale, walking behind, also said nothing. But in his case that was not unusual.

'I mean,' Strife continued, 'I know Mother doesn't want us out in the middle of the day, what with the rain and everything, but it's not like we're pups any more, is it? I'm sure I could cope with a bit of drizzle now and again.'

Lost in the unfairness of it all, Strife walked heavily into Ivy, who had stopped outside of Uncle Fodur's chambers.



'Ooh, sorry.' Strife backed quickly away, managing to tread on her sister's tail in the process.

'Ouch.' Ivy cradled her tail to her chest, inspecting it for damage. Then she turned to face Strife with an irritated expression.

'Really, Strife. Why can't you stop talking and look where you're going for a change?'



Ivy turned away. Strife pulled a face behind her back.

'And don't pull faces at me,' said Ivy, without looking around.

Strife stuck her tongue out. If her sister was going to be a pain then Strife wasn't going to be grown up about it.

'Uncle Fodur,' called Ivy. 'Are you there?'



'Of course he's there,' said Strife. 'Where else would he be? You know he doesn't like going out.'

'I'm just being polite,' returned

Ivy. ‘Something that you seem to find extremely difficult.’

Sometimes the urge to bite her—just once—was overwhelming. Especially now. None of them was in a good mood. Everything in the burrow was damp, including their nest chamber. Even if they could go out, which they couldn’t, they would just come back wetter. But at least, thought Strife, they’d be wet and free. Oh, she knew the reasons. It wasn’t safe for young voles in the daytime, and enemies were everywhere. Their mother said that she had enough trouble trying to keep up the boundary markers without worrying about whether her children would return alive. And so Strife was stuck with Ivy and Kale. She sighed and put aside the urge to bite her sister. She concentrated instead on waiting for Uncle Fodur. This close to his chambers the smell of rat was strong. Not horrible, but odd, even to Strife who had known him her whole life. It was close to a Singer’s smell, but with that sharp note that was never quite right.

‘What is it that disturbs me?’ came a gruff voice. ‘I’s a busy rat. Many things to do. No time for puplings. Best you be gone. Not wanted here.’

Strife smiled. This was Fodur’s favourite game.

‘Oh, come off it,’ called Strife. ‘You knew we were coming. Mother told us to come and see you. But we’re not to be too long this time.’

‘Did she, heh? Certain, is you, she not say to keep away

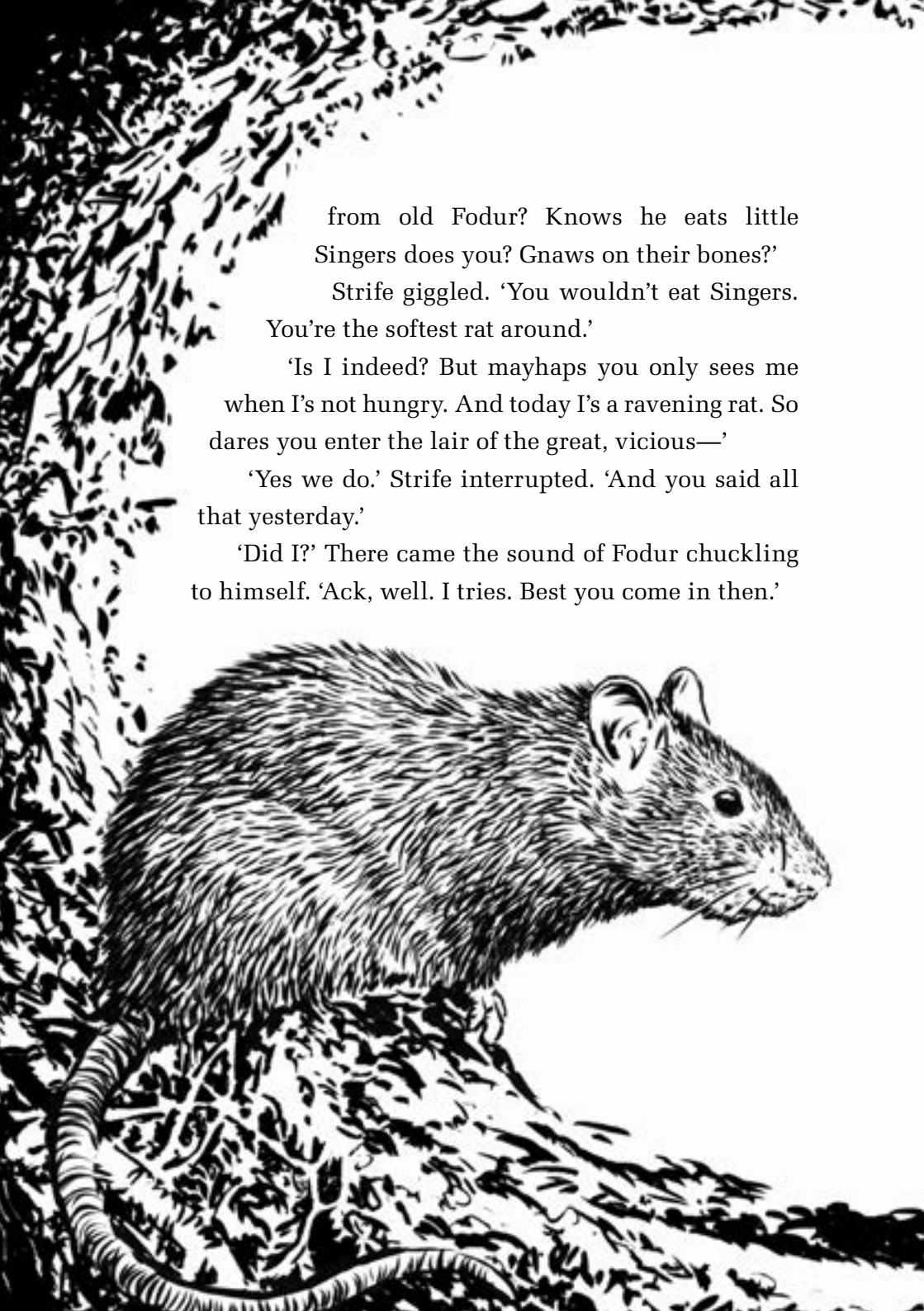
from old Fodur? Knows he eats little Singers does you? Gnaws on their bones?'

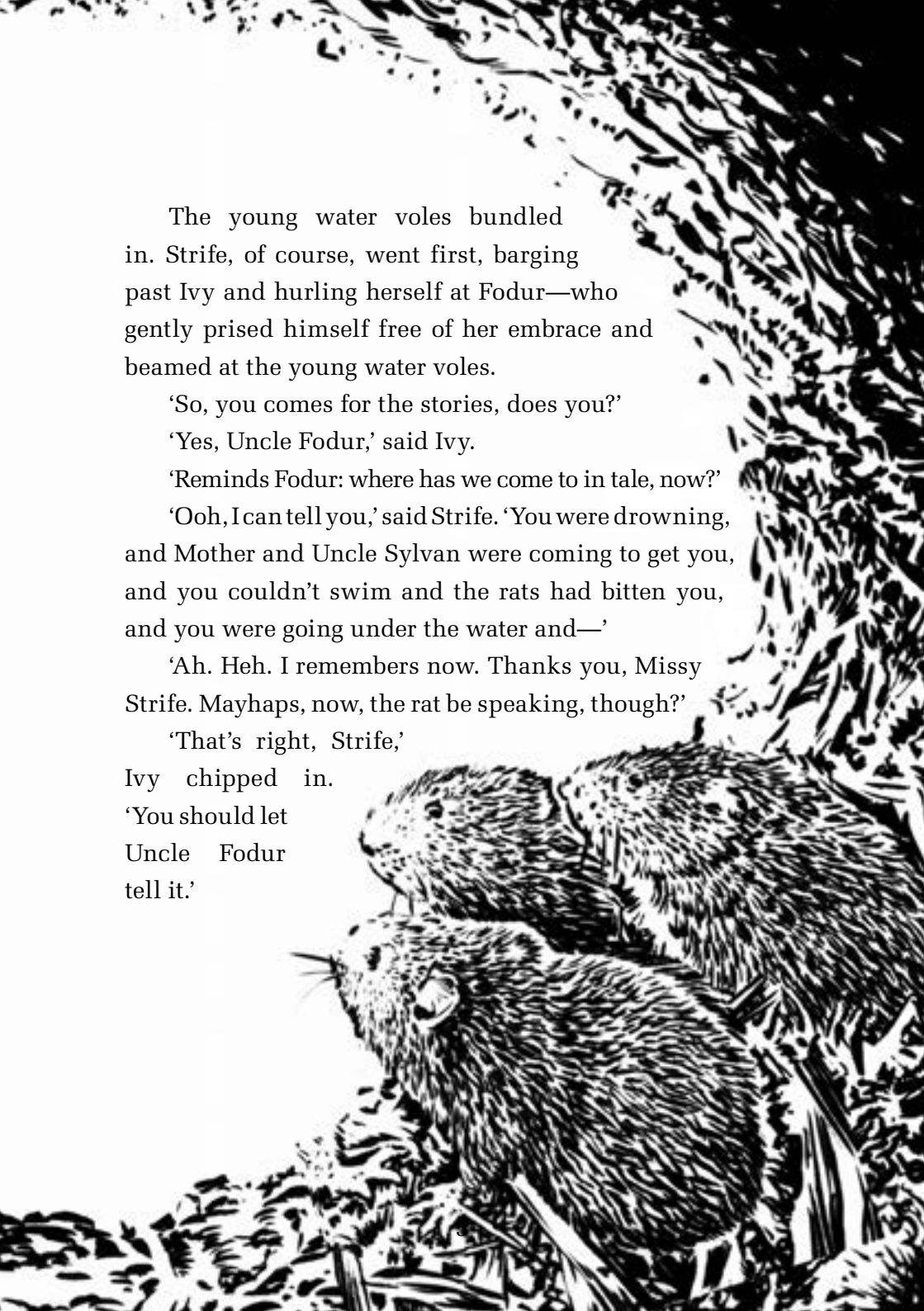
Strife giggled. 'You wouldn't eat Singers. You're the softest rat around.'

'Is I indeed? But mayhaps you only sees me when I's not hungry. And today I's a ravening rat. So dares you enter the lair of the great, vicious—'

'Yes we do.' Strife interrupted. 'And you said all that yesterday.'

'Did I?' There came the sound of Fodur chuckling to himself. 'Ack, well. I tries. Best you come in then.'





The young water voles bundled in. Strife, of course, went first, barging past Ivy and hurling herself at Fodur—who gently prised himself free of her embrace and beamed at the young water voles.

'So, you comes for the stories, does you?'

'Yes, Uncle Fodur,' said Ivy.

'Reminds Fodur: where has we come to in tale, now?'

'Ooh, I can tell you,' said Strife. 'You were drowning, and Mother and Uncle Sylvan were coming to get you, and you couldn't swim and the rats had bitten you, and you were going under the water and—'

'Ah. Heh. I remembers now. Thanks you, Missy Strife. Mayhaps, now, the rat be speaking, though?'

'That's right, Strife,' Ivy chipped in. 'You should let Uncle Fodur tell it.'

Strife favoured her sister with her most poisonous look.

'I'm sorry,' she said, making sure that Fodur knew that the apology was only for him.

'Not a worry. Now settle and we shall see what is coming.'

Strife plonked herself down next to Kale, against a gnarled iris root. She eyed the root hungrily. In a Singer's burrow it wouldn't have lasted a day. Fodur, though, didn't really eat roots and took a dim view of Folk chewing the walls of his chamber, so Strife forced herself to ignore it. Ivy sat gingerly on Kale's other side, trying to find a dry patch in the soft peat wall. When they were ready, Fodur gave them an approving nod.

'Right. Let's see where we is being. Ah . . . So, waters is lapping at Fodur's head. Your Sinethis, methinks, has her eye on Fodur's life . . . '

Uncle Fodur had a way of telling stories. They were so much better than the old Singer tales, which mainly seemed to be about the horrible things that happened if the Great River was angry or you went near somebody else's territory. Uncle Fodur's stories were different. His had actually happened, for a start: Mother, Uncle Sylvan, and he had come to the Wetted Land from the Great River, and fought the minks and won, and found a home here. Mother never really spoke about it, but Uncle Fodur said that proper stories were the rat way, and a rat who didn't know his history was no rat at all.

And Strife loved to hear them. Despite her hunger, she hardly noticed the afternoon sliding towards a greyish evening. She did not hear her mother's approach until she was outside Fodur's chambers.

'You know, I'm sure that I had some children around here,' their mother said. 'But if I did then surely I should be able to find at least one of them in my burrow when I get home.'

Fodur winked at the pups. 'Time to be going, methinks.'

He ushered them to their feet as their mother pattered in. She smiled at Fodur and ran an amused eye over her offspring.

'Oh, *there* they are. How silly of me. I should have thought to look here. Mainly because they always seem to be here when they're meant to be somewhere else. Like outside, feeding, for example.' She put her head on the side. 'It's evening, you know.'

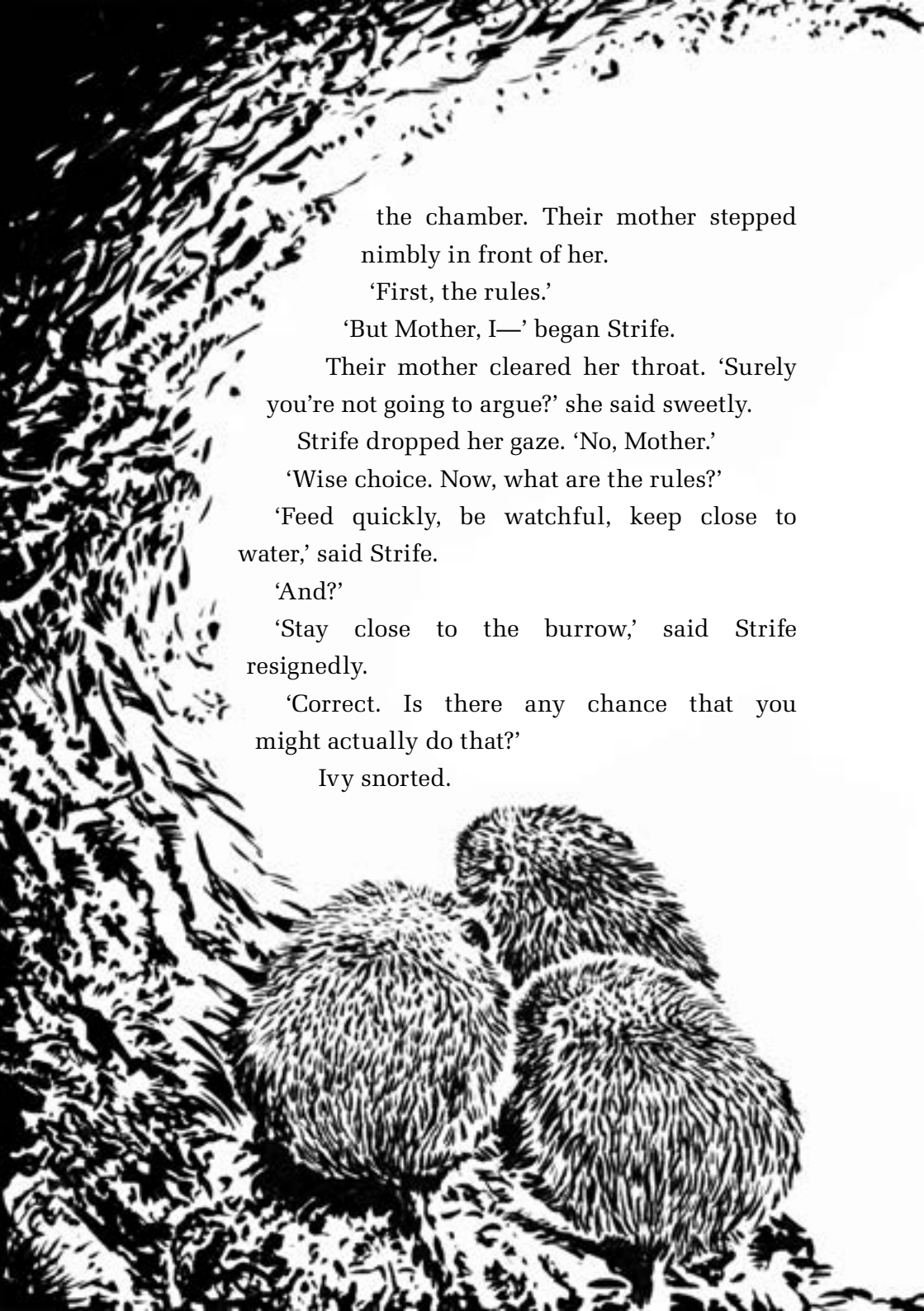
'Uncle Fodur was telling us about Uncle Sylvan and the fox and Auntie Fern and . . . '

'Yes. Thank you, Strife,' said their mother quickly. 'I thought I told you lot not to be too long? I hope you haven't been taking up too much of Fodur's time?'

'They's always welcome, Miss Aven,' said Fodur.

Their mother smiled. 'Yes, of course. But it's time for their final feed before bed.'

Strife got excitedly to her feet, eyes fixed on the exit from



the chamber. Their mother stepped nimbly in front of her.

'First, the rules.'

'But Mother, I—' began Strife.

Their mother cleared her throat. 'Surely you're not going to argue?' she said sweetly.

Strife dropped her gaze. 'No, Mother.'

'Wise choice. Now, what are the rules?'

'Feed quickly, be watchful, keep close to water,' said Strife.

'And?'

'Stay close to the burrow,' said Strife resignedly.

'Correct. Is there any chance that you might actually do that?'

Ivy snorted.

'I will too,' said Strife. 'I'll be just outside. Like Mother says.'

Their mother turned a sceptical eye to her daughter. 'Of course you will. Just as a precaution, though, Kale, if you do see her wandering off could you do me a favour and try to stop her being eaten by a heron or something?'

Kale nodded curtly. 'OK.'

'I don't need him to look after me,' said Strife.

'It's the heron I was worried about,' said their mother with a smile. 'But please remember that there are enemies out there. Be careful.'

'Yes, Mother.'

Their mother surveyed her offspring approvingly. 'What good voles you all are. Off you go, then.'

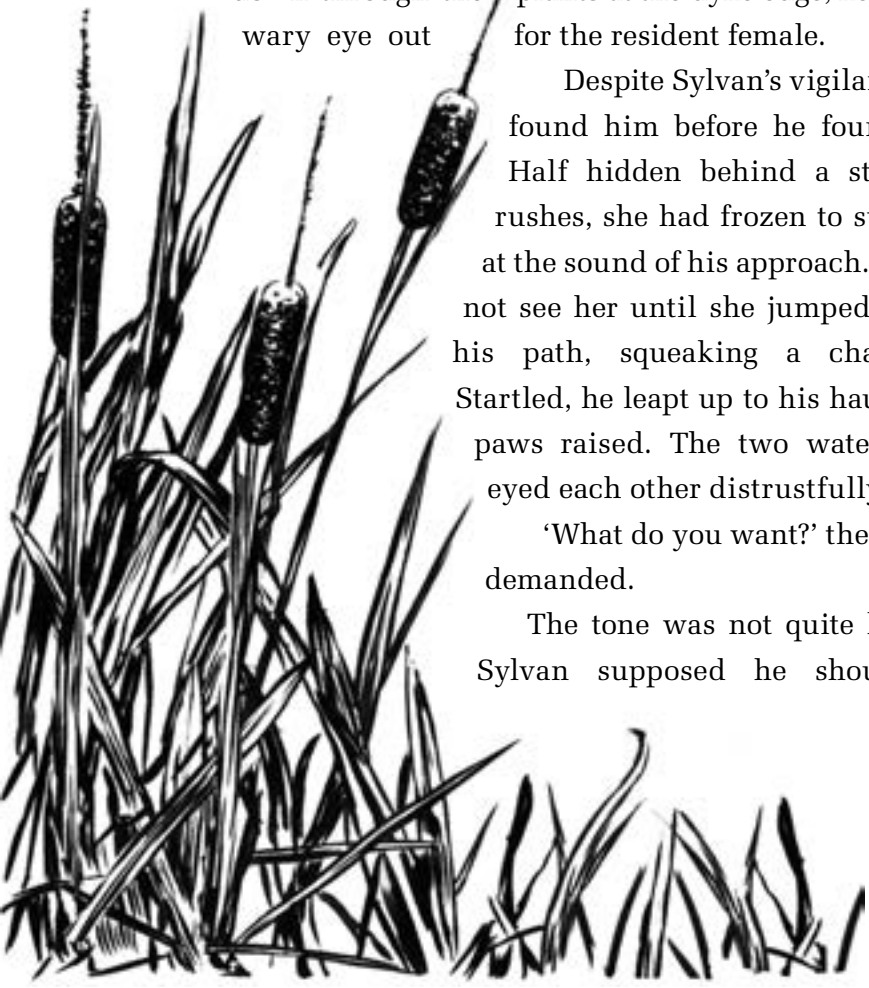
And Strife, all thought of stories forgotten, scampered joyfully for the burrow entrance. Their mother's final word, shouted after her, went completely unheard in the excitement.

'Carefully!'



As twilight approached the rain eased to a light drizzle. For an instant the clouds broke apart, revealing a bashful sun. Light shone green-gold through a leaf and brought a momentary warmth. But then it faded, leaving only the drizzle. Sylvan smiled ruefully. Oh well. The sun had been nice while it

lasted. He eased his way through an overhanging fringe of canary grass, causing water to run from the leaves. It splashed down onto his head and he shook it away, irritably. Frankly, he would be grateful for some dry weather. Then he pulled his attention back to where he was going. He needed to be careful. He was deep inside an unfamiliar territory, and he didn't want to startle the owner. He followed a run down through the plants at the dyke edge, keeping a wary eye out for the resident female.



Despite Sylvan's vigilance she found him before he found her. Half hidden behind a stand of rushes, she had frozen to stillness at the sound of his approach. He did not see her until she jumped across his path, squeaking a challenge. Startled, he leapt up to his haunches, paws raised. The two water voles eyed each other distrustfully.

'What do you want?' the female demanded.

The tone was not quite hostile. Sylvan supposed he should be

grateful for that. Females defended their property with sharp words and sharper teeth. The words he could deal with, but he didn't want to be on the receiving end of the rest. During his travels he had met countless Singers. The males were generally all right. They could be avoided or made to leave you alone. The females, though, were another matter, especially if they had young to protect. He hoped fervently that this one didn't. Nesting females were never reasonable. About anything.

'My name's Sylvan,' he said. 'I don't want to cause a problem. I'm just passing through. It's a lovely territory you have here.'

'I'm Mistress Mallow. I know it's lovely. It's mine.' She glared at him. 'Where are you going?'

'Just through, with your permission, Mistress.'

Sylvan risked sinking back to all fours. Mistress Mallow did the same, slowly. A good sign. She pattered a little way forwards and looked him up and down. Then she pulled a face. She didn't seem particularly impressed, and Sylvan couldn't blame her. He had been travelling for a long time and was probably a bit of a state. Nevertheless he felt a flash of irritation. It wasn't as though wanted to be here. He had left behind a comfortable burrow for this, and given the choice he wouldn't have come. But he hadn't had a choice. *She* hadn't given him one.



Sinethis, the Great River, had returned to him with the rain. As the first drops fell into the dyke outside his burrow, her once-familiar song had risen in his mind. It was troubled, fragmented, and discordant, but unmistakably hers. She had pulled him from his home and driven him out into the Wetted Land. And ever since then he had travelled. He had passed alder woods, and fields of reeds; places where the ground was a woven mat of earth and roots, floating above black water, and others where the peat was solid and topped with high tussocks. He had seen the dry edge of the marsh where the dykes ended and grasses rose up to a distant hilltop. The Wetted Land was wide and varied, and only the dykes were constant; running through the heart of the marsh, connecting one to the next to the next, carrying sluggish water to the Great River. And at the dyke edges lived the Singers. These long, thin strips of bank were their home, and their refuge from danger.

For Sylvan the balance was fine. The woods and fields were stuffed with enemies: weasels, stoats, herons. The dyke edges were full of Singers, none of whom were pleased to





see him. And so Sylvan threaded his way between them, running quickly, sleeping in bare grasses, avoiding trouble. Tonight, though, things would be different. He would have a warm nest in a proper burrow. Tonight, Sinethis willing, he would see his sister again. But between him and the promised burrow stood this female. And she was trying to decide whether or not to attack.

Sylvan tried a winning grin. He was probably too bedraggled for it to look convincing, but at least it might persuade her that he was harmless. The female put her head on the side and a half smile played across her lips.

'So. Apparently you're passing through.' Her voice had lost some of its shrillness, replaced by a faint amusement. 'But I want to know *why* you're passing through. Where are you going?'

'To the next territory, Mistress,' said Sylvan, choosing his words carefully. 'I know the female there.'

'Oh yes? What's her name?'

Sylvan battled the temptation to tell her to mind her own



business. *Always be polite to territory owners. Remember their teeth.*

'Mistress Aven, if she still lives there.'

'Ah.' She gave him a knowing look. 'So you're going to see *her* are you? Well good luck to you.'

Sylvan blinked. 'Sorry, what do you mean?'

Now she was definitely amused. 'Oh, nothing, really. I suppose you've met her children, though?'

Aven had children? He really had been away a long time.

'No, I haven't,' he said. 'But I'm looking forward to it.'

'Looking forward to it, you say?' Mistress Mallow chuckled. 'And you a male.'

'Erm, yes. Last time I checked. Why?'

'Never mind. I'm sure it will all be fine,' said Mistress Mallow, who seemed to be enjoying herself. 'They're only children, after all.'

Sylvan was bewildered. 'Just to be clear, these are pups you're talking about?'

Mistress Mallow nodded.

'And you think that they're going give me trouble?'

'Oh, yes.' She smiled. 'They're usually out feeding at about this time, so you'll probably meet them quite soon.'

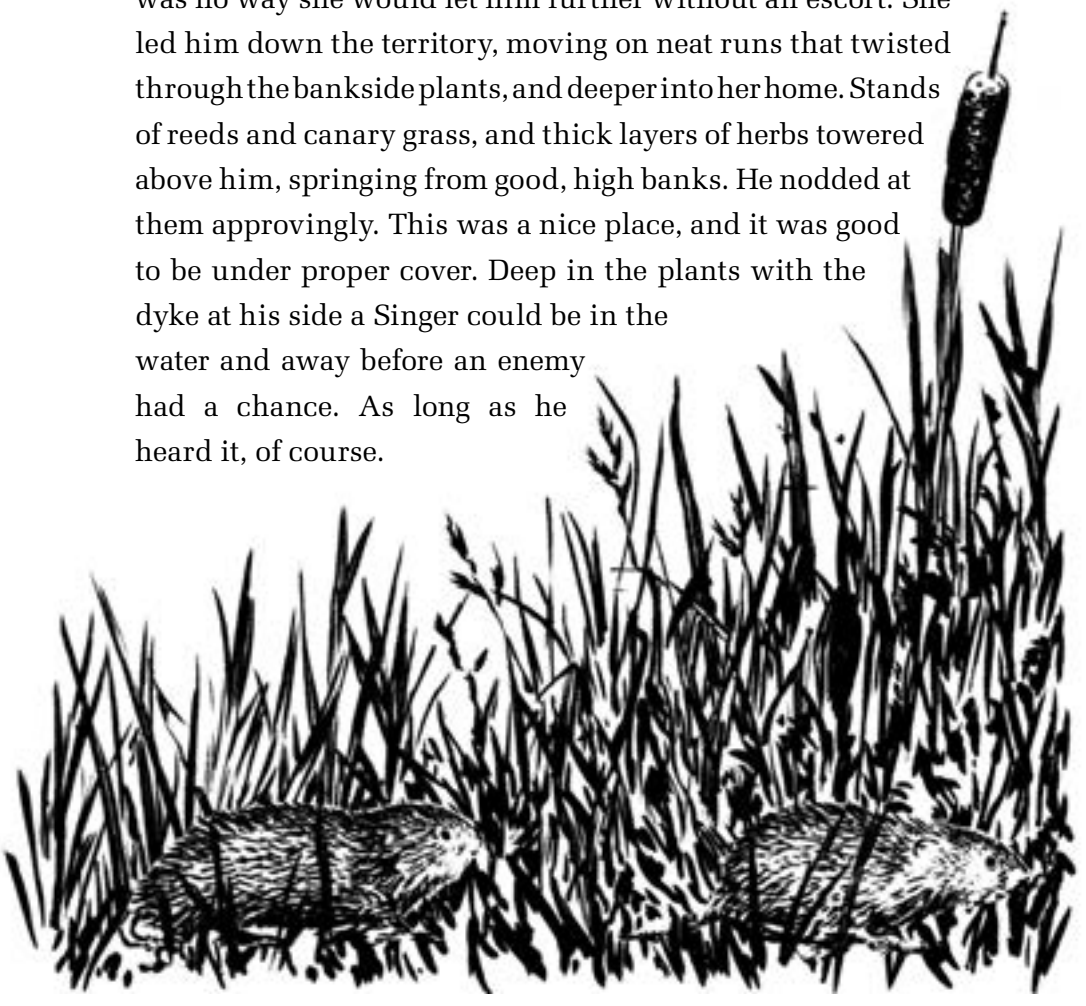
Sylvan shook his head. He would never understand females. How much bother could Aven's pups possibly be? He glanced up at the clouds. They had fused once more into

an ominous grey mass.

'Look, it's lovely to meet you,' said Sylvan, 'and I don't want to seem rude, but I think that I'd better be moving. It's going to be dark soon.'

Mistress Mallow nodded once. 'Of course. I'll show you the way.'

She set off along the bank and he followed obediently. There was no way she would let him further without an escort. She led him down the territory, moving on neat runs that twisted through the bankside plants, and deeper into her home. Stands of reeds and canary grass, and thick layers of herbs towered above him, springing from good, high banks. He nodded at them approvingly. This was a nice place, and it was good to be under proper cover. Deep in the plants with the dyke at his side a Singer could be in the water and away before an enemy had a chance. As long as he heard it, of course.





Eventually Mistress Mallow came to a stop in front of a gigantic boundary marker. The pile of feeding sign and droppings was three times the size of the usual, and perched high above the water level. It was obviously well maintained, and even Sylvan's nose could detect that it was heavily laden with Aven's scent. Sylvan suppressed a smile.

'Well, here you are,' said Mistress Mallow. 'This is the edge of my territory.'

'I don't think I could miss it.'

'Yes,' she said sourly. 'I'm sure that's the idea.'

Sylvan took in the expanse of grasses and iris before him. The dyke was wider here, and deep. The far side was a mix of reeds and great sedges, and the trees were further from the dyke edge. A Singer's paradise. Aven was doing well.

'Looks like she's been expanding.'

'She tries.'