First published in 2019 by
Andersen Press Limited
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road
London SW1V 2SA
www.andersenpress.co.uk

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data available.

ISBN 978 1 78344 790 9

Printed and bound in Belgium by Graphius.

A Wolf Called Wander

ROSANNE PARRY

ILLUSTRATED BY
MÓNICA ARMIÑO



ANDERSEN PRESS

PACK

I begin in darkness and my nose tells me everything I know.

I have a brother. Sharp. Bigger than me, and all growl. I have sisters. Pounce, who loves to wrestle, and Wag, who talks with her tail. And best of all my brother Warm, who likes to curl up under my chin, the only pup smaller than me.

I nose each one of them and the damp dirt above and the dry grass below. I circle the den while the others drowse. I take test runs up the tunnel. They call me Swift because I was the first to stand up and walk. Wherever my legs take me, I always circle back to the empty hollow spot in the centre of the den that smells like home, like the thing I can never smell enough. And then she comes in out of the wind, the best of all smells: Mother.

She turns around once, nose-touching each of us in turn, and then lies down in her hollow. Sharp, Pounce and Wag dive for her belly to drink. I could have been first, but Mother's fur is full of smells. From her hip to her shoulder to her warm growly breath, she holds smells with no name. Smells that make me want to push beyond the place at the mouth of the tunnel where Mother has said,

'Do not pass,' and put my nose where the light comes from.

I am late for lunch. Warm creeps towards the last drinking spot. I lunge for it. And then – ahhh – drinking fast and strong, drinking in gulps and dribbles and gasps. Mother sings to us as we drink, about the wide world beyond our den and the story of our life in the mountains. I take in her song like air, like milk – pack, mountains, elk, stars, wind, rain, howl, hunt, mountains, pack.

As always, Warm squirms under me in his low-to-the-ground way. He whimpers and pushes his head under my chin. Pop! My drinking spot is gone. Belly half full, I move on. I do not even try Sharp. He is big and there is a bite behind all that loudmouth yowling. I nudge Pounce, but she steps on my head. Wag gives up her drinking spot when I push her away. Wag pushes Pounce, who pushes Sharp, and then he turns to Warm, teeth bared, and growls the one word we all know.

'Mine!'

Warm creeps away and curls up in the middle of the den alone. One by one we slide full-bellied into dreams. Before I do there is just one more sweet smell that gives me no peace. I yawn, lift my nose and . . . yes. Yes, there is more milk. More, and I can claim it. More, and if I drink it, I will grow to be even bigger than Sharp. I find just one swallow more in every drinking spot. And now I know one thing my brothers and sisters do not: hind milk is the sweetest of all. I lick the last drops from my chin and curl my body around Warm so they will not step on him in the dark.

'Tell me again,' I say to Mother. I point my nose to the tunnel. 'When can I go outside?'

'It's wild and hungry out there on the home ground,' Mother says. 'And you are tender and tasty, my wolfling, my own. Wait until you are bigger.'

She sighs at the soft pool of light that has spilled through the Do Not Pass on to the den floor.

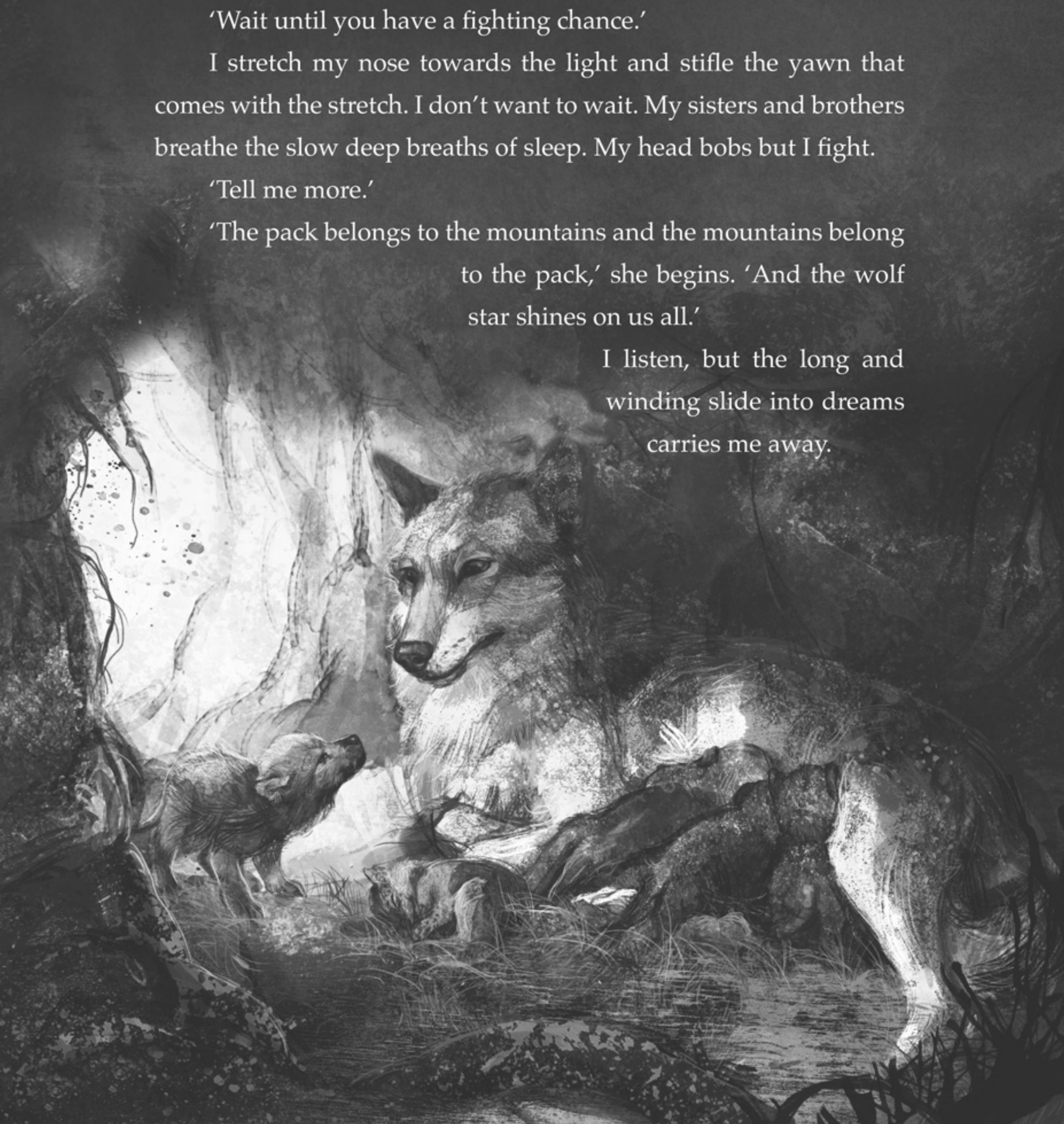
'Wait until you have a fighting chance.'

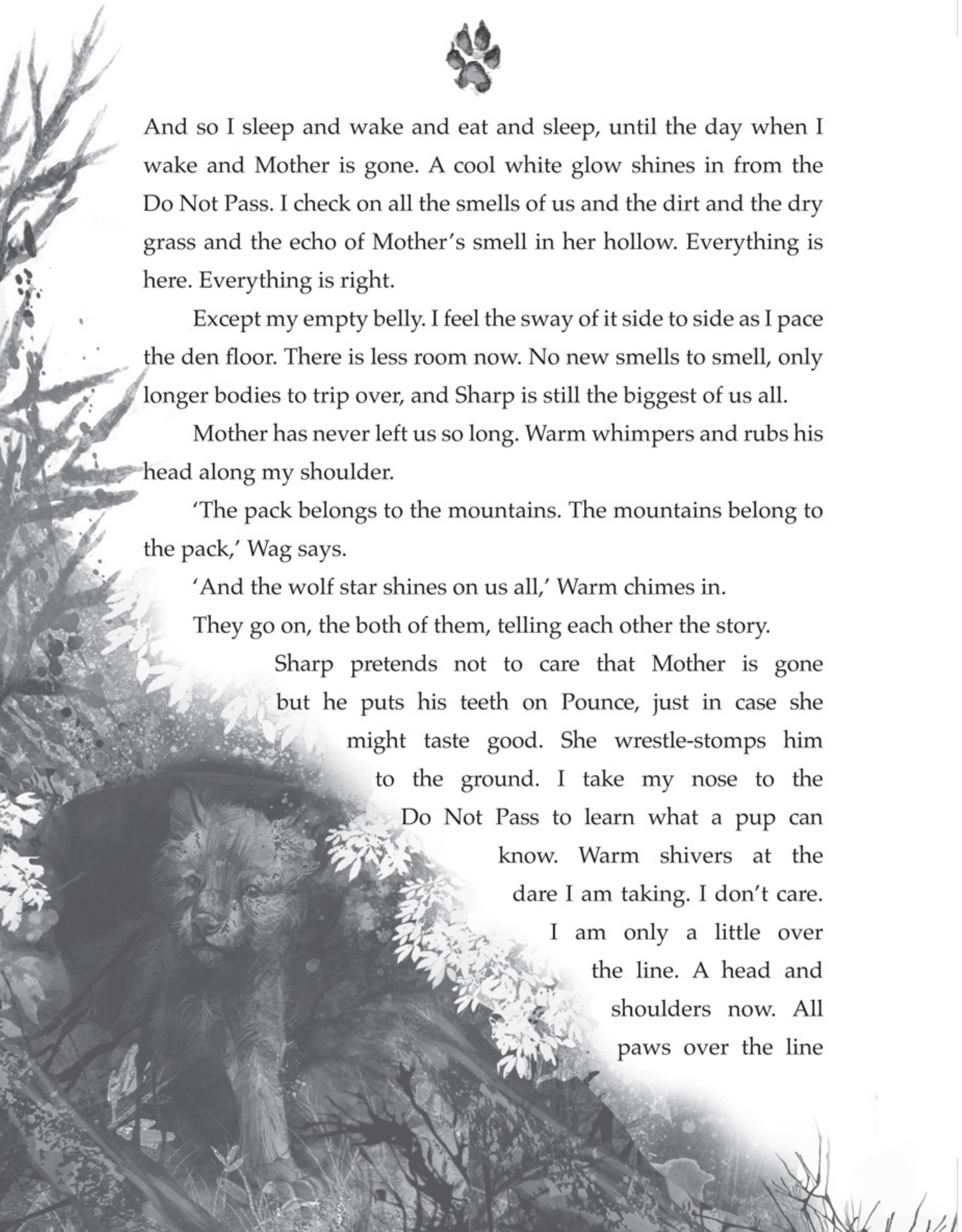
I stretch my nose towards the light and stifle the yawn that comes with the stretch. I don't want to wait. My sisters and brothers breathe the slow deep breaths of sleep. My head bobs but I fight.

'Tell me more.'

'The pack belongs to the mountains and the mountains belong to the pack,' she begins. 'And the wolf star shines on us all.'

I listen, but the long and winding slide into dreams carries me away.





And so I sleep and wake and eat and sleep, until the day when I wake and Mother is gone. A cool white glow shines in from the Do Not Pass. I check on all the smells of us and the dirt and the dry grass and the echo of Mother's smell in her hollow. Everything is here. Everything is right.

Except my empty belly. I feel the sway of it side to side as I pace the den floor. There is less room now. No new smells to smell, only longer bodies to trip over, and Sharp is still the biggest of us all.

Mother has never left us so long. Warm whimpers and rubs his head along my shoulder.

'The pack belongs to the mountains. The mountains belong to the pack,' Wag says.

'And the wolf star shines on us all,' Warm chimes in.

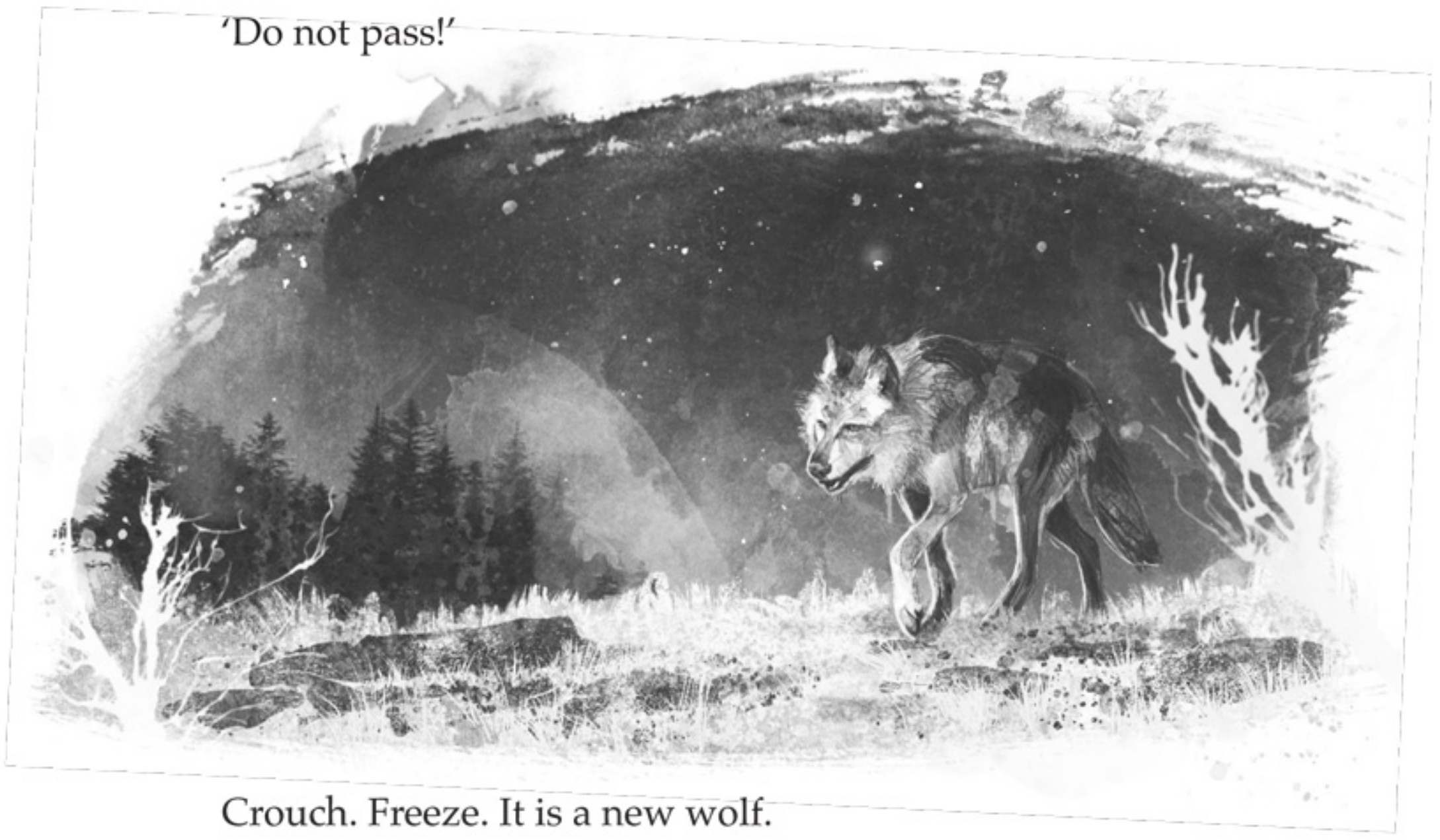
They go on, the both of them, telling each other the story.

Sharp pretends not to care that Mother is gone but he puts his teeth on Pounce, just in case she might taste good. She wrestle-stomps him to the ground. I take my nose to the Do Not Pass to learn what a pup can know. Warm shivers at the dare I am taking. I don't care. I am only a little over the line. A head and shoulders now. All paws over the line

and I can smell new things. The dark den of the sky has a soft white circle that glows. Smaller white sparks flicker all around it. So many of them. More than tails, more than paws, more even than claws, paws and tails together. I cannot stop watching them.

The cool air carries news of far-away things I have only heard about in stories: pine, mouse, owl, fir, huckleberry, water. There is more in the air than I can name. I scoot forward against Warm's nudge of warning.

'Do not pass!'



Crouch. Freeze. It is a new wolf.

Sniff. Freeze. It is a not-Mother smell.

Sniff. Wag. Freeze.

I've smelled him on Mother's fur. He is kin. I creep forward.

'Do not pass!'

Warm is long gone to the back of the den, but I cannot keep the wag out of my tail. It thwaps on the den roof and rains down dirt.

'Hush!'

Nose to ground. I do not mean to bow down. His voice pulls me down.

'Listen,' he says, not so harsh this time.

My ears turn. The wind brings sound along with smell.

Whoosh, creak, pop from the wind in the trees nearby. Hoot and scurry from farther off. And then howl.

Hooooooowl. My fur goes up all over. It is a sound from my dreams. I feel an answering howl deep inside, but not so deep that the pup-watcher can't see it about to come out.

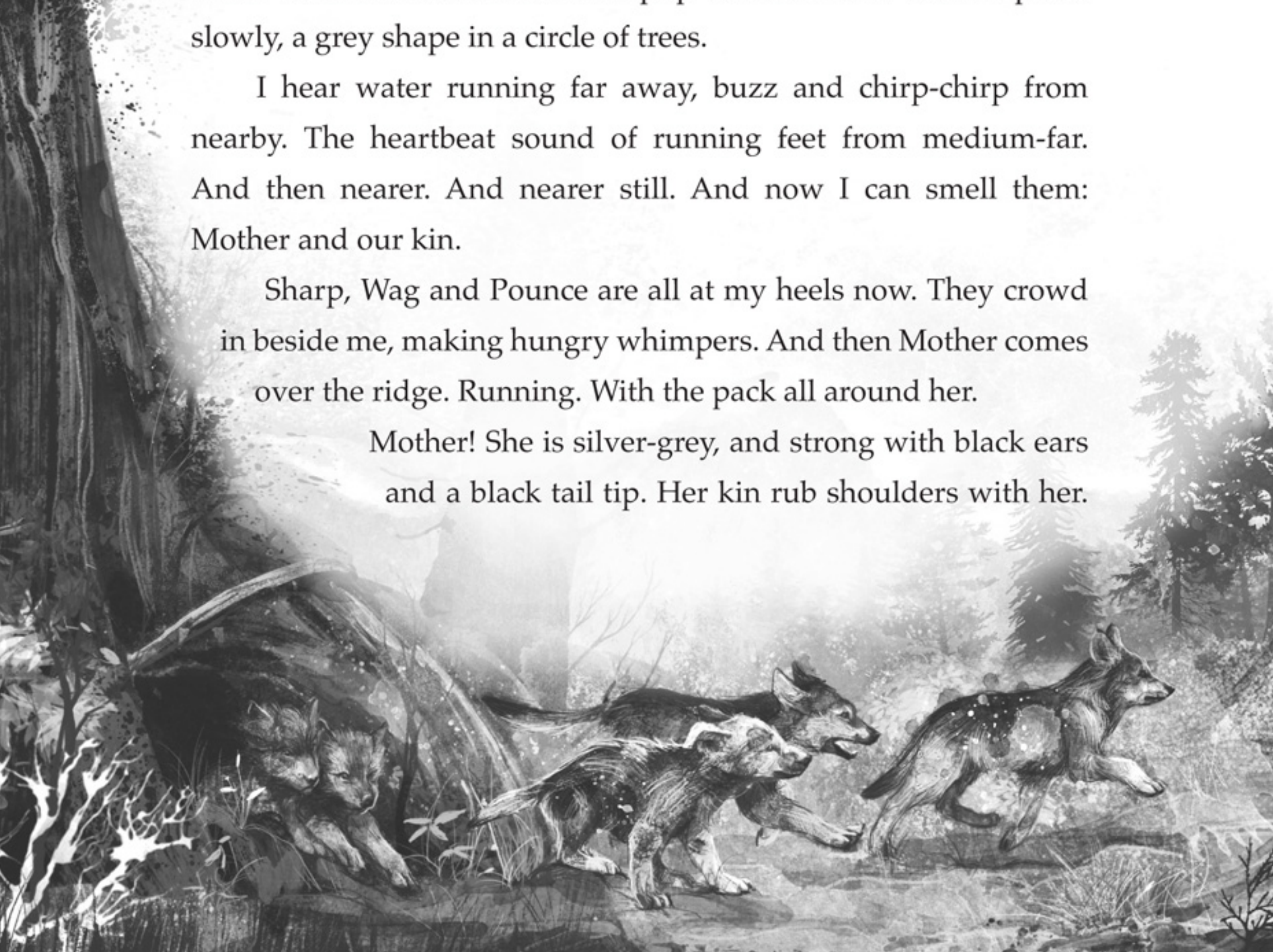
'Hush,' he says. 'Hush!'

I swallow my howl and sit on my wag. I wait, hunger forgotten, in the wash of new sounds. The pup-watcher waits too. He paces slowly, a grey shape in a circle of trees.

I hear water running far away, buzz and chirp-chirp from nearby. The heartbeat sound of running feet from medium-far. And then nearer. And nearer still. And now I can smell them: Mother and our kin.

Sharp, Wag and Pounce are all at my heels now. They crowd in beside me, making hungry whimpers. And then Mother comes over the ridge. Running. With the pack all around her.

Mother! She is silver-grey, and strong with black ears and a black tail tip. Her kin rub shoulders with her.



They bow their heads and sing her name. I can smell her sweet-wild, milk-wind smell.

'Come,' she says.

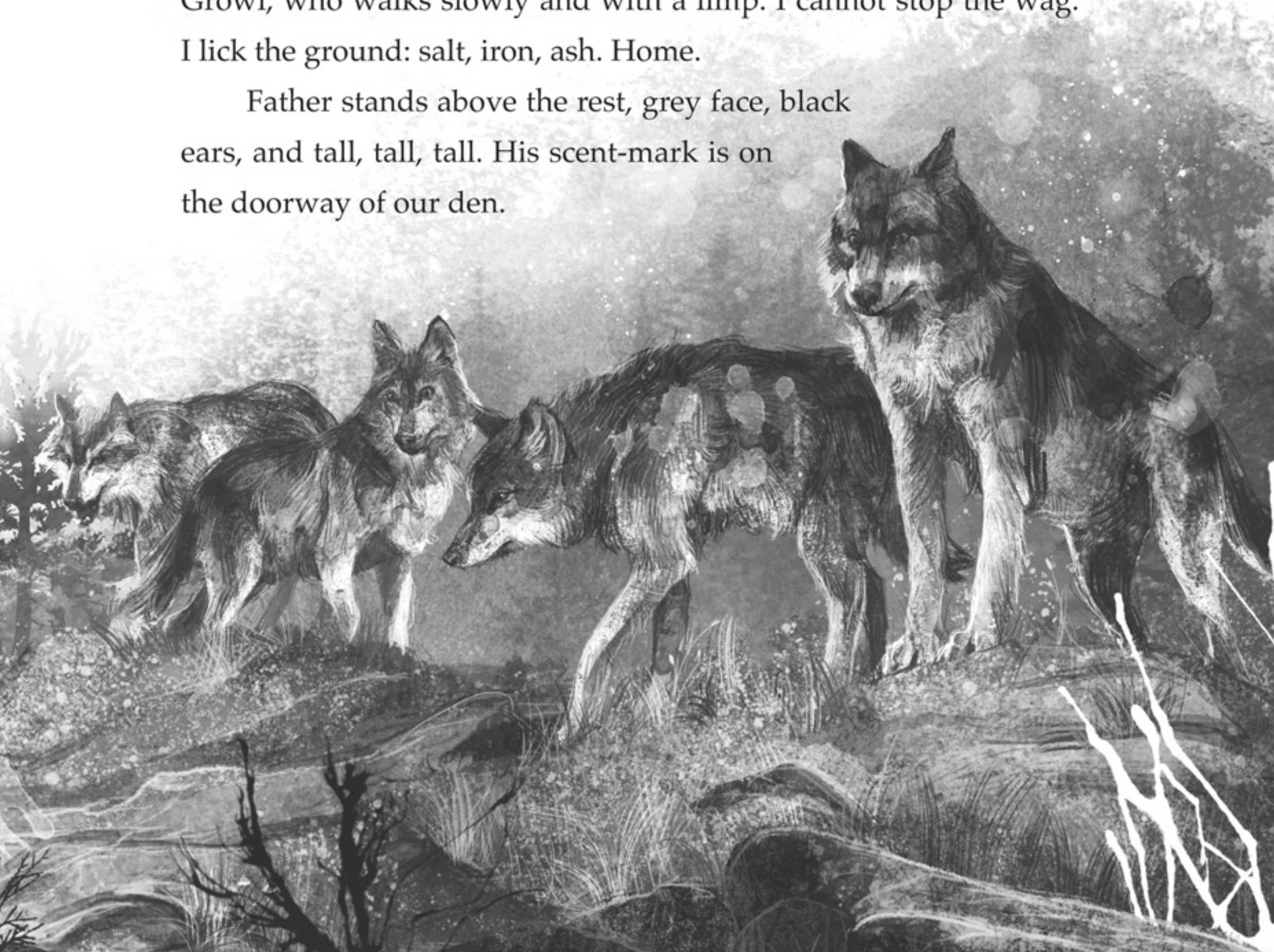
I am all wag. 'Outside?' I want to be sure.

'Come,' she says. 'Come out.'

I spring up but Sharp shoulders past me, and Pounce steps on my hind end. I roll her off, and we burst out of the den together, raining dirt on Wag and Warm behind us.

I am out. Out! The bigness of it, this new den with the black roof no jump could reach. I jump anyway, just to try. Wind runs through my fur. My kin nose me from head to tail. I breathe in each one of them, golden-furred Song, the hunter, and the pup-watcher Growl, who walks slowly and with a limp. I cannot stop the wag. I lick the ground: salt, iron, ash. Home.

Father stands above the rest, grey face, black ears, and tall, tall, tall. His scent-mark is on the doorway of our den.



His is the howl the pack follows. I know I should go to him and share smells, but he is silent and tall.

Sharp beats me to it. He brushes past. He is a head taller than me and he looks down on me just to show that he can. His tail is up as always, but it goes down when he gets close to Father. He ducks his head and slows to a creep. Father gives him two sniffs and a growl and nudges him away. Sharp turns to the rest of us, teeth snapping, a growl in his throat, warning us that he is the one to smell-share with Father, not us. Warm cries a little. Wag says nothing, but the hopeful lift of her tail droops. Pounce takes the bait and wrestles Sharp to the ground, losing twice before she pins him.



I slip by them all and go to meet my father, tall-tailed and nose up. But as I get close my tail drops like a stone. I almost turn back

to bring Warm along, for courage, but some things a pup has to do on his own.

Up close, Father is not just grey and black but golden on the chest and silvered over the shoulders. Dark red runs around his mouth.

'Son,' he growls to me. 'Mine.'

I sit on my wag but it will not hold still. I breathe in the smell of him deeper and longer until his scent holds a spot in my memory right next to Mother. I will do anything for him! I jump-spin, hoping he will like it. I yip-wag.

'Father! Mine!'

I cannot stop smelling the red on him. It makes me hungry like the smell of Mother's milk, but this is a new smell. A richer smell. I can't resist it. I nose his chin. I lick his face. He leans towards me and opens his mouth wide.

A great red and runny lump comes out of his mouth. It steams. It is nothing I have ever smelled before. But Father gave it to me.

Sniff? Sniff!

The more I smell it the more I like it. I push my nose into the pile and rub it into my fur. Mother calls the other pups and lowers her mouth to their licking. She pushes another red lump of something out of her mouth. She nudges Wag and Pounce to try it. Aunt Song does the same for Sharp and Warm. I turn back to Father's gift.

Lick-lick-lick.

It tastes smooth and rich. Not so sweet as milk but tail-wagging good all the same.

Nibble? Nibble.

The lumps are thick and chewy.

Bite-bite-gobble-gobble-gobble-gulp. Ahhhhhhh!

The rest of the pups join in, hind ends all a-wag. I eat until I am dizzy-full and curl up in Father's shadow as sleep stalks me. Father noses me into place at his feet.

'Elk,' he says. 'Life of the pack.'

