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Opening extract from

The River Singers

Written by

Tom Moorhouse

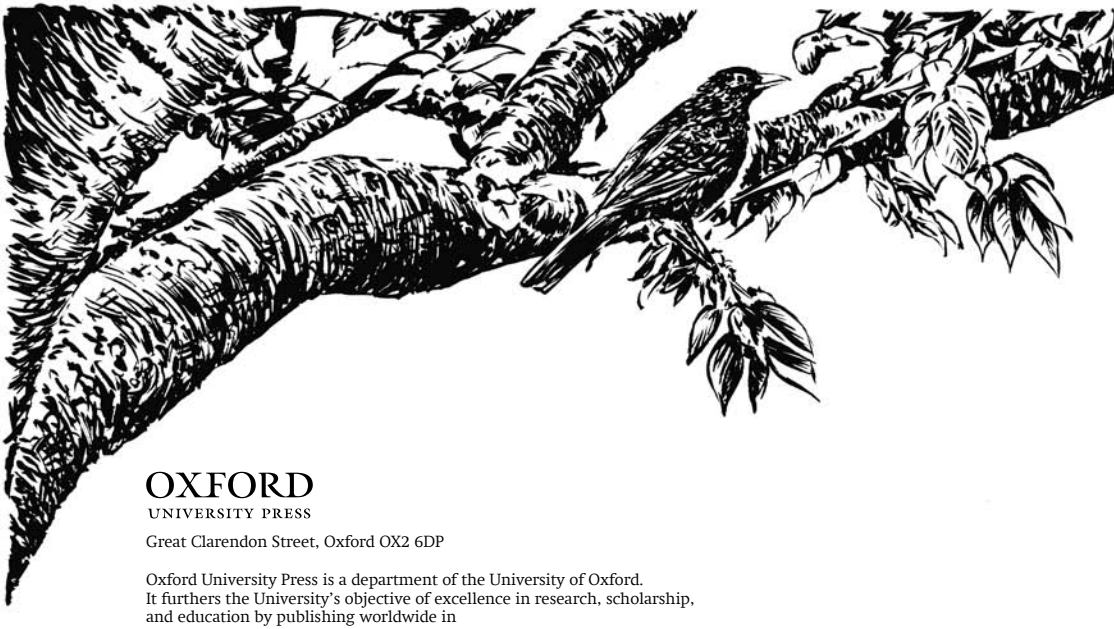
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PART 1
THE GREAT RIVER

The dawn was grey and the waters quiet. Sylvan was the first awake, lying with his brother and sisters in a pile of cosily intertwined limbs. Their breathing lulled him even as lightness spread up the tunnel and into the chamber, bringing with it the scent of morning. He yawned. He opened his eyes. He grinned. Today was the day. At last.

Sylvan extracted himself, ignoring the others' sleepy protests, and sat with twitching whiskers at the entrance to the chamber. He should wait for them, he knew. They were supposed to go out all together. But the air stirred with a promise of new things and, with a final glance at his siblings, he stole away down the tunnel, paws padding on the soil. He had known the way for ages now. A left, a right, loop around a

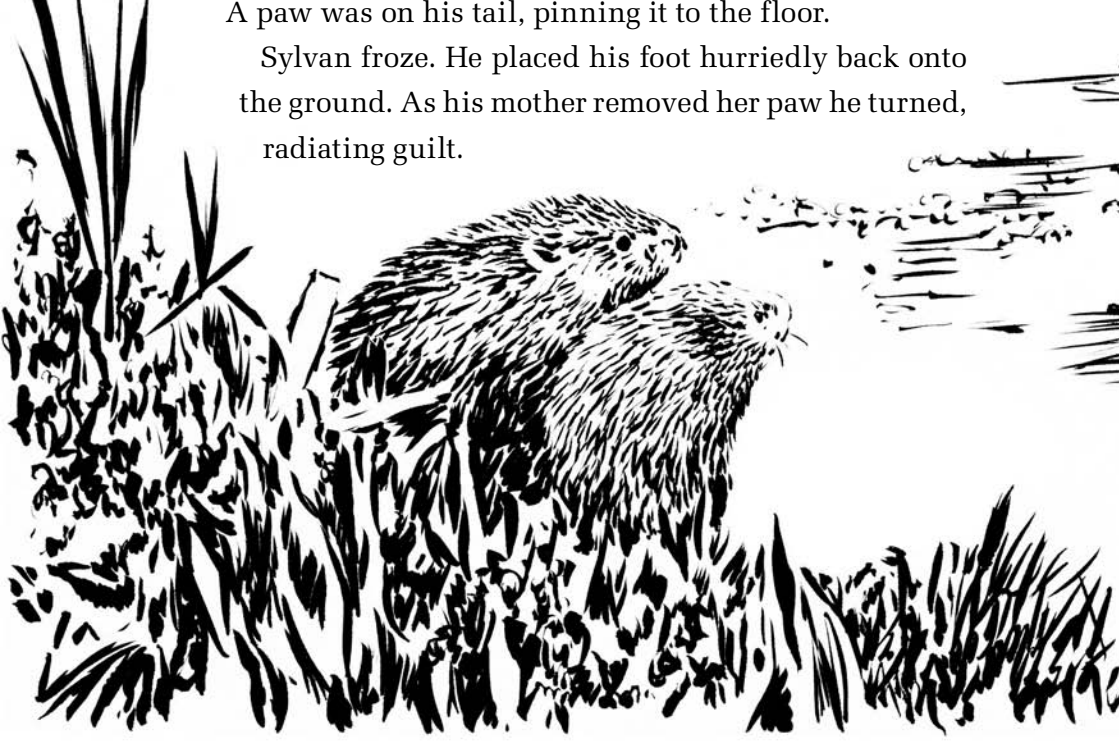
knot of roots, then pause at the place where the roof had fallen. One eye to the sky. Quiver. Listen. Check the scents. Then onwards and downwards to the lower places, the entrance to the Great River and the gateway to the world.

With each downward step the light grew brighter and the air fresher, more exhilarating. Another turn, a slight rise. And there she was: the Great River. Her waters, lapping against the family's trampled little platform, were bright through the shade of the tall grasses. She filled him with her vastness, her movement, her song. He felt the stirrings of hunger, the desire to dive, to twist, to flow with her. He hesitated, one forefoot raised, everything urging him out and into the world.

'And what exactly do you think you're doing, young vole?'

A paw was on his tail, pinning it to the floor.

Sylvan froze. He placed his foot hurriedly back onto the ground. As his mother removed her paw he turned, radiating guilt.



'Nothing.'

Her whiskers were stiff with disapproval. 'What have I told you about coming here?'

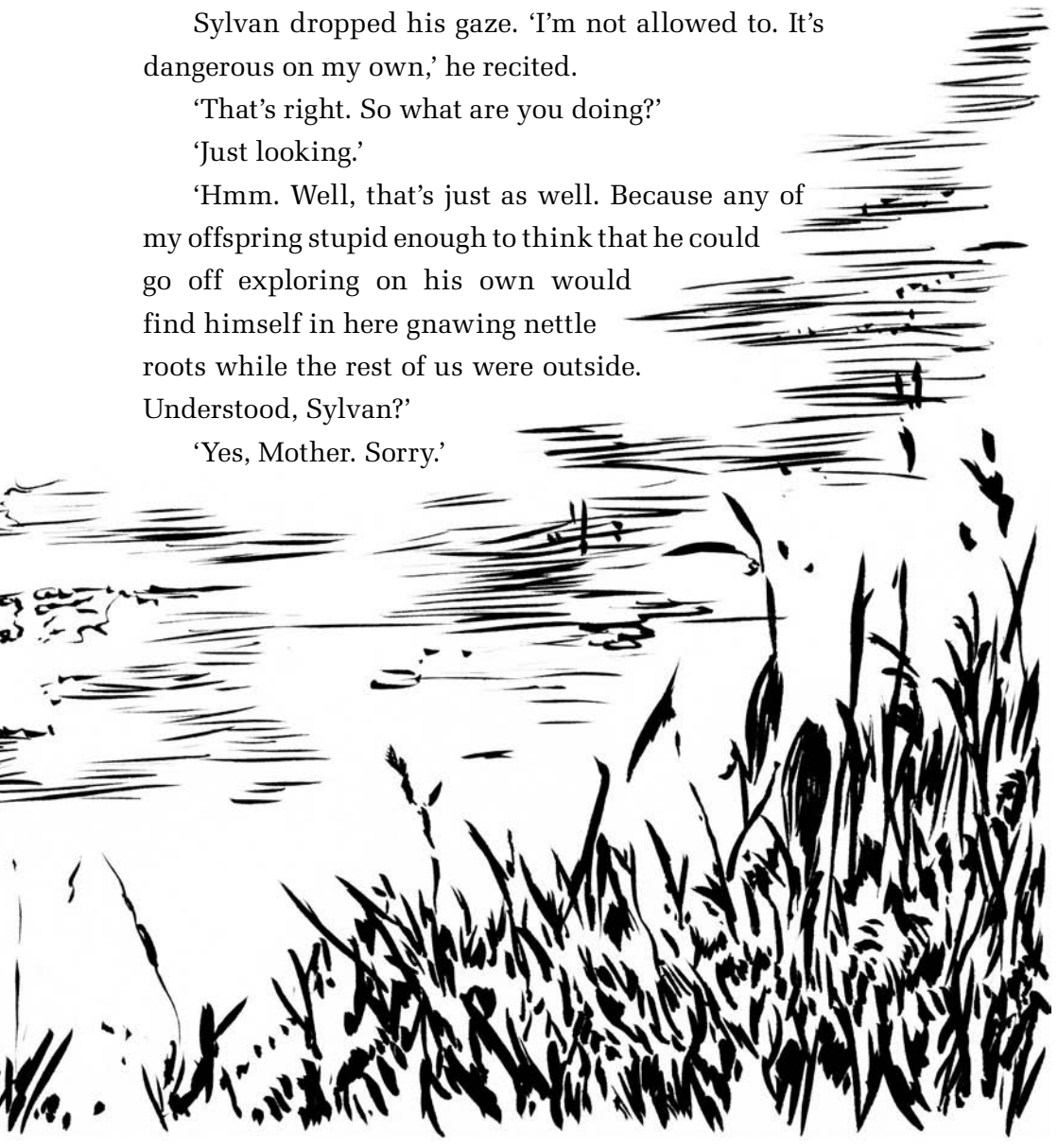
Sylvan dropped his gaze. 'I'm not allowed to. It's dangerous on my own,' he recited.

'That's right. So what are you doing?'

'Just looking.'

'Hmm. Well, that's just as well. Because any of my offspring stupid enough to think that he could go off exploring on his own would find himself in here gnawing nettle roots while the rest of us were outside. Understood, Sylvan?'

'Yes, Mother. Sorry.'



'I should think so.' She surveyed the dejected water vole in front of her. 'I tell you what: since it's a nice calm day, and seeing as I promised, I don't see why we can't still have that little trip out. Together.'

Sylvan's head came up. 'Really?'

'Really. Now why don't you go and wake the others?'

'Yes, Mother. It's—' He was almost dancing on the spot, torn between his desire to stay near the water and the rush to fetch his siblings.

She turned. 'What, dear?'

'It's wonderful,' he blurted.

She smiled, showing her strong, orange teeth. 'Yes, dear, it is. Now go.'

Sylvan scampered back to the nest where his brothers and sisters were still sleeping. He rushed into the chamber and pawed at the flank of the nearest.

'Come on, Fern. It's today.'

'G'way.' Her voice was muffled, cuddled up against her sister.

'But it's today.'

'Please go away.'

He clambered over the heap and shook at his brother's shoulder. 'Wake up. We're going out today.'

Orris opened his eyes. 'Out?'

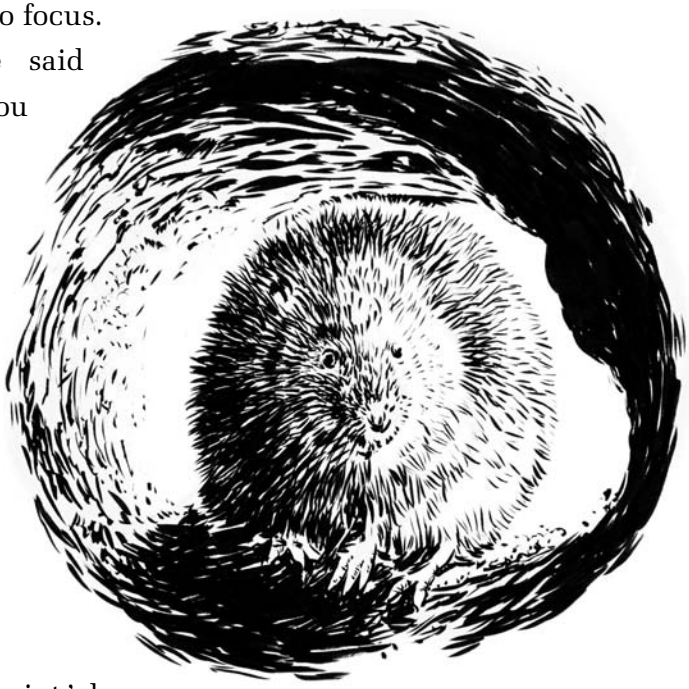
'Yes, out.'

'Don't want to. Leave me alone.' Orris huddled in on himself.

Sylvan gave him a disgusted look and turned his attention to Aven's diminutive frame, giving her a brotherly kick on the haunch.

'Come on, Tiny. Mother's promised we're going out today.'

Aven gasped and sat upright, pawing the sleep from her eyes. She groomed a little, setting her fur straight. She blinked her black eyes into focus.



'Sylvan,' she said sweetly, 'if you ever call me that again I'll gnaw your ears off.'

Sylvan grinned. 'You'll have to catch me first.'

'Or wait until you're asleep.'

He thought about it. 'Good point,' he conceded. 'Can we go out now?'

Orris uncurled a little. ‘What’s so good about going out, anyway?’

Sylvan sat back on his hind feet. ‘I don’t know. It’s just . . . better out there.’

‘Better?’ said Orris. ‘Only if “better” means “full of weasels and owls and things that want to eat us”. I think I’ll stay here.’

‘Mother said we’re going out,’ said Sylvan, stubbornly.

‘I hope you enjoy yourselves.’

‘Look,’ said Sylvan, ‘I’m the oldest and you need to do what I say.’

‘Says who?’ said Aven.

Fern raised her head. ‘Will you please all go away? I’m trying to sleep.’

‘Well you shouldn’t be. It’s daytime,’ said Sylvan.

‘I—’ began Fern, but the argument was cut short by the sound of their mother padding up the tunnel to the chamber. She bustled in and smiled at her family.

‘Good morning, my dears,’ she said. ‘Are you all awake?’

‘Yes. Unfortunately we are,’ said Fern, giving Sylvan a dirty look.

‘And are you ready to go out?’

‘Yes,’ said Sylvan before anyone else could respond.

Their mother surveyed them, approvingly. ‘Good. Then I’ll see you down at the entrance. Today’s a big day. Today you’re going to meet Sinethis.’

Sylvan scampered up and down between the nest and the entrance, herding and chivvying his siblings towards the water. Fern deliberately took her time just to annoy him. Orris was even more reluctant, complaining that he couldn't see the point in the outside and that the burrow was fine, wasn't it? Aven responded with unnecessary sarcasm, but looked almost as keen as Sylvan to get her first experience of the outside. She arrived at the entrance only a little after he did and they waited for the others with their noses poking out of the shade, revelling in the unfamiliar scents and sounds.



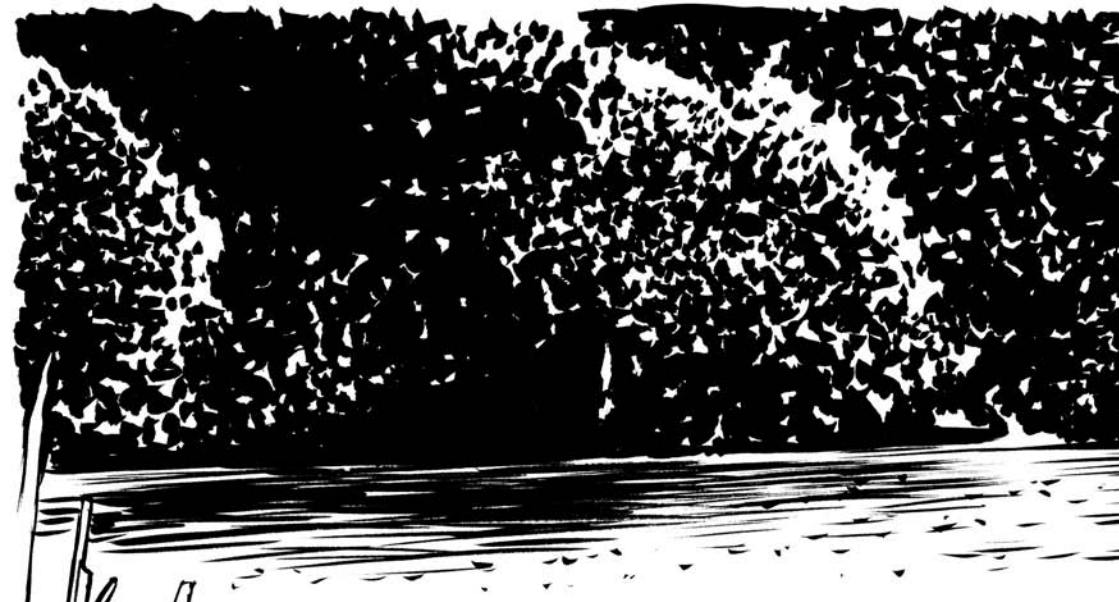
Sylvan glanced back up the tunnel. 'Come on, come on,' he muttered. His stomach rumbled.

'Hungry?' asked Aven.

'Yes, starving,' he said, surprised. In his excitement he almost hadn't noticed.

'Thought you might be. We haven't had any milk today.'

'That's true. I wonder why not?'



'I suppose Mother wanted us to go out first.'

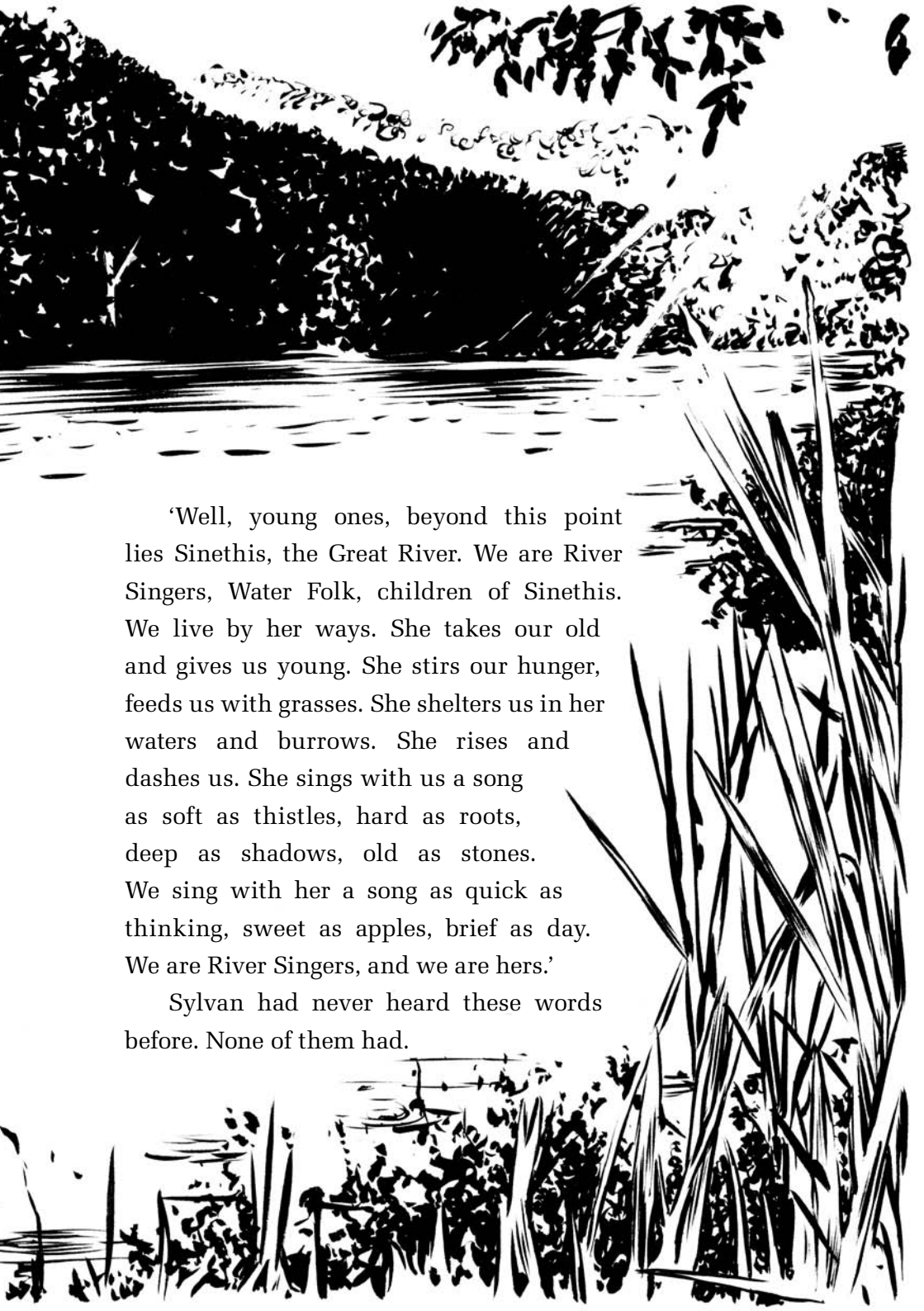
Sylvan glared back up the tunnel. 'Right. That's it,' he said. 'They're between me and my food. I'm going to get them.'

He was about to set off when muffled scrabbling noises announced their arrival.

'Finally!' said Sylvan. 'Now all we need is Mother.'

Their mother had been out, scouting her territory, surveying for danger. She returned after a little while, ducking into the burrow. She stood in the entrance, placing herself between them and the outside. She looked down at her children: Sylvan and Aven expectant, Fern grumpy, and Orris nervous.

'So soon,' she said, almost to herself. She turned and stared out at the water and then back, with an odd expression.



‘Well, young ones, beyond this point lies Sinethis, the Great River. 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.’

Sylvan had never heard these words before. None of them had.

When their mother finished, she nodded, once.

'These words I give you, which my mother gave to me. Learn them and live by them and perhaps you too will pass them to young of your own.'

Standing on the threshold, Sylvan felt oddly uneasy. Until now he had envisaged a joyful escape from the confines of the burrow into the glorious world beyond. But something in their mother's face, and the solemnity of her words, made him feel exposed and small.

'What if we don't go?' said Orris. They turned to him. 'I mean, who says that we have to? It's safe here. We could stay.'

'I know, dear.' Their mother's voice was soft. 'But you have no choice.'

'I do.' He looked abashed but defiant.

'Do you? Really? Remember what I said? "She stirs our hunger". Are you hungry, Orris?'

He nodded.

'And what would you like to eat?'

No reply.

'Milk?' she pressed.

Orris shook his head, reluctantly. Sylvan thought about it. He had never been so hungry, but milk, somehow, wouldn't do. Not any more.

'Come on. I'll show you the way,' said their mother.

She sniffed the air and with a patter of feet was gone. The

youngsters exchanged glances. Sylvan looked at his siblings and then back at the river. Despite his misgivings a fierce joy welled up in him. He grinned.

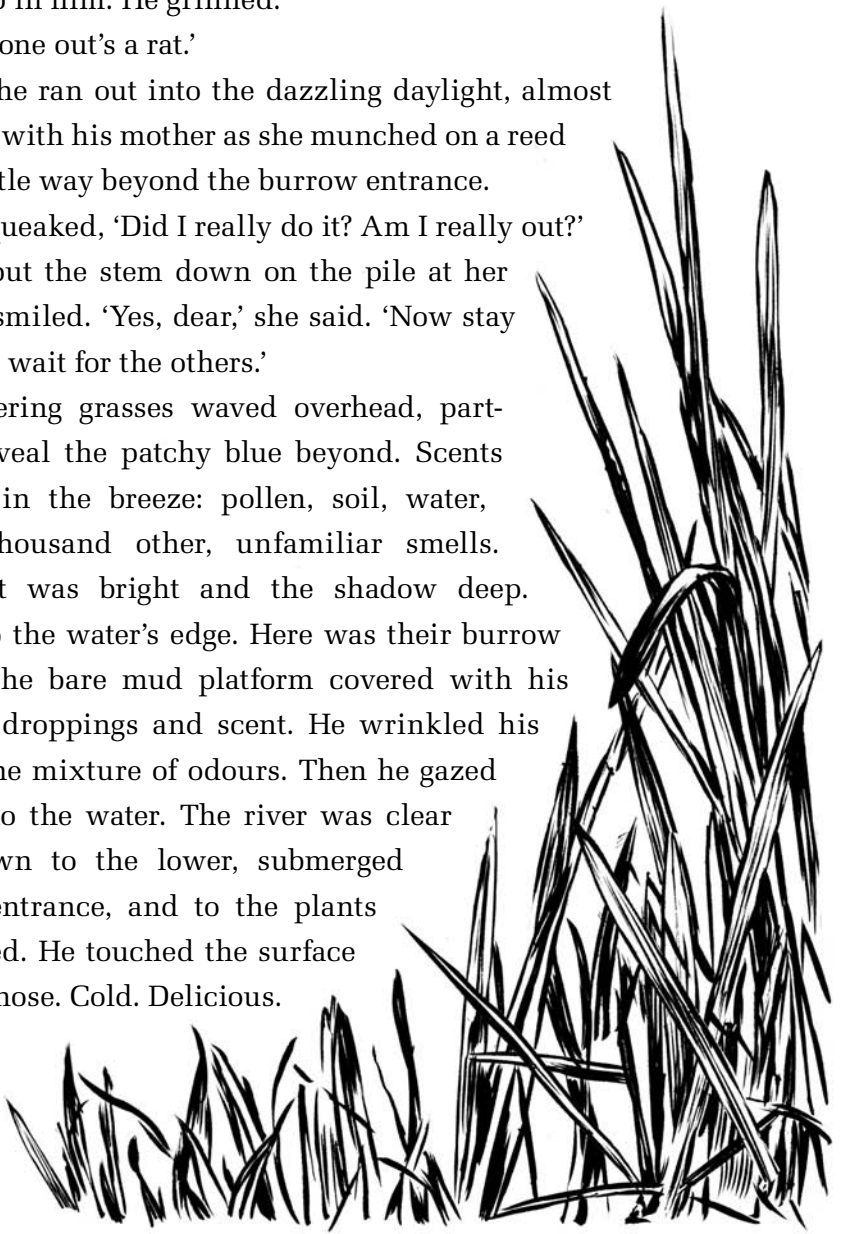
'Last one out's a rat.'

And he ran out into the dazzling daylight, almost colliding with his mother as she munched on a reed stem a little way beyond the burrow entrance.

He squeaked, 'Did I really do it? Am I really out?'

She put the stem down on the pile at her feet and smiled. 'Yes, dear,' she said. 'Now stay close and wait for the others.'

Sheltering grasses waved overhead, parting to reveal the patchy blue beyond. Scents mingled in the breeze: pollen, soil, water, and a thousand other, unfamiliar smells. The light was bright and the shadow deep. He ran to the water's edge. Here was their burrow marker, the bare mud platform covered with his mother's droppings and scent. He wrinkled his nose at the mixture of odours. Then he gazed down into the water. The river was clear right down to the lower, submerged burrow entrance, and to the plants on the bed. He touched the surface with his nose. Cold. Delicious.



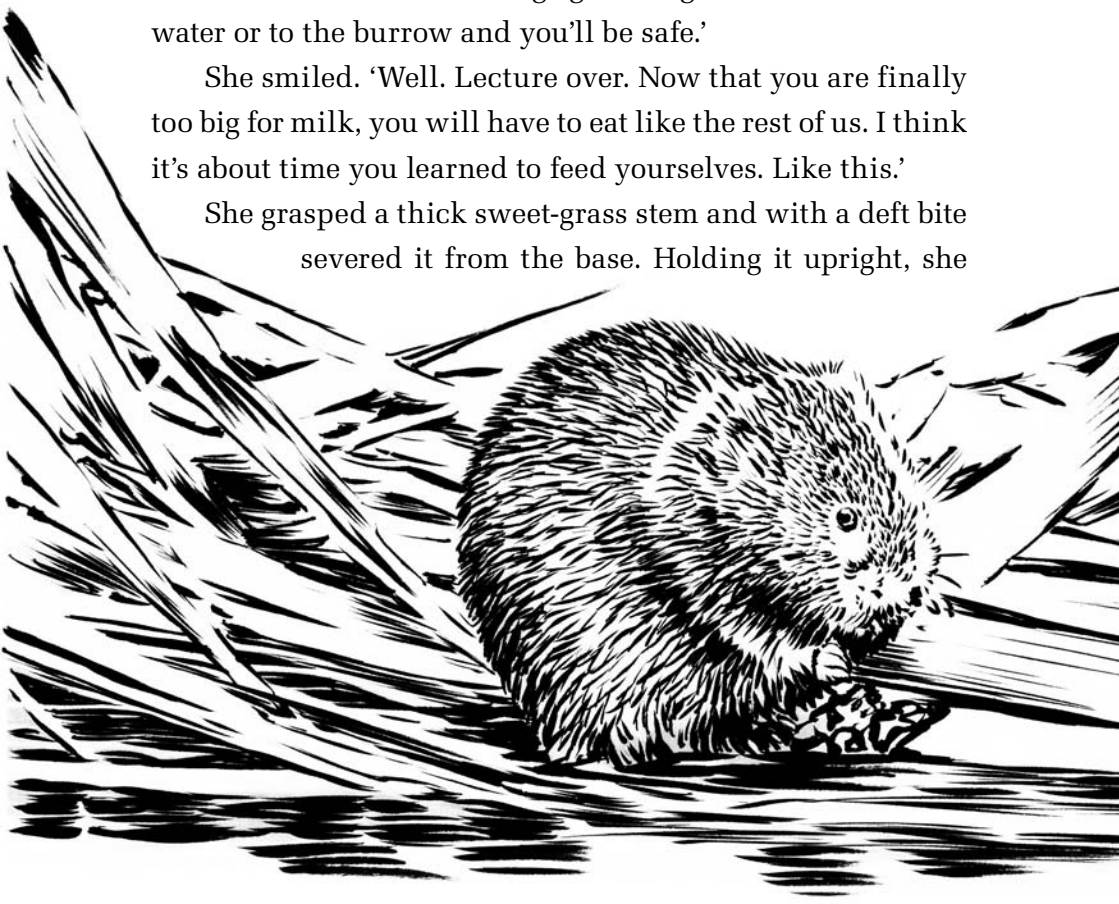
'Sylvan.'

Reluctantly he obeyed the warning tone in her voice and joined her, now with the others a little way up the bank. They were arranged in a circle around a towering patch of sweet-grass stems, squinting in the brightness, sniffing at the air.

'So, here you are. Welcome, my loves, to the Great River. But be careful out here. Every moment you spend in the open you need to be alert. If you hear anything odd—anything at all—freeze, be silent. If things go wrong, run, make it to the water or to the burrow and you'll be safe.'

She smiled. 'Well. Lecture over. Now that you are finally too big for milk, you will have to eat like the rest of us. I think it's about time you learned to feed yourselves. Like this.'

She grasped a thick sweet-grass stem and with a deft bite severed it from the base. Holding it upright, she



ran it through her paws, expertly chopping it into lengths with her teeth, gnawing at the soft flesh and leaving aside the coarse outer parts. When she had finished there was a pile of discarded pieces at her feet.

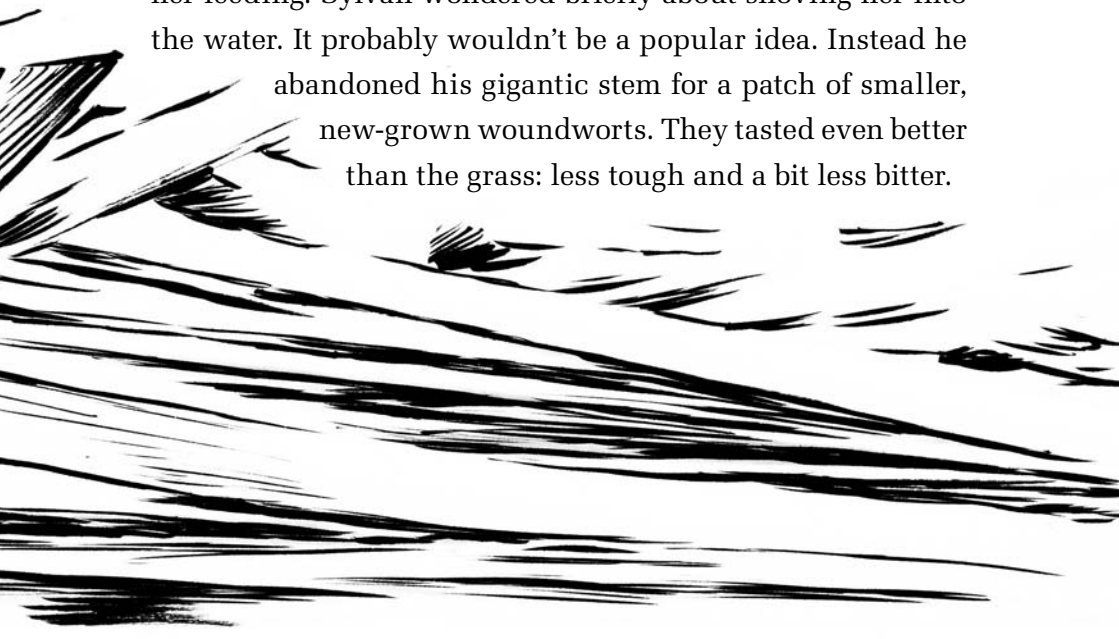
'Go on,' she said. 'Try it.'

Sylvan grabbed for the largest stem he could find, making it shake far above him. Then he began chewing through the base. It was not easy. The outside was thick and dry, but the sweet juices from the middle flooded his mouth. He gnawed until his jaw ached, until only a few fibres held the giant plant upright, until . . . He realized his mistake only when the stem toppled sideways from his grasp and onto Fern's head.

'Ouch. Sylvan, will you please watch what you're doing?'

'Sorry.'

'You,' she said primly, 'are an idiot.' She turned back to her feeding. Sylvan wondered briefly about shoving her into the water. It probably wouldn't be a popular idea. Instead he abandoned his gigantic stem for a patch of smaller, new-grown woundworts. They tasted even better than the grass: less tough and a bit less bitter.



After a while they got the hang of things and grazed with peaceful industry. Even Orris relaxed, munching on greenery at the water's edge. The sun came out, making the deep shade of the bank more cool and welcoming. The only noises were the burble of the water, the calls of the moorhens, and the crunch of fresh stems, until their mother called a halt.

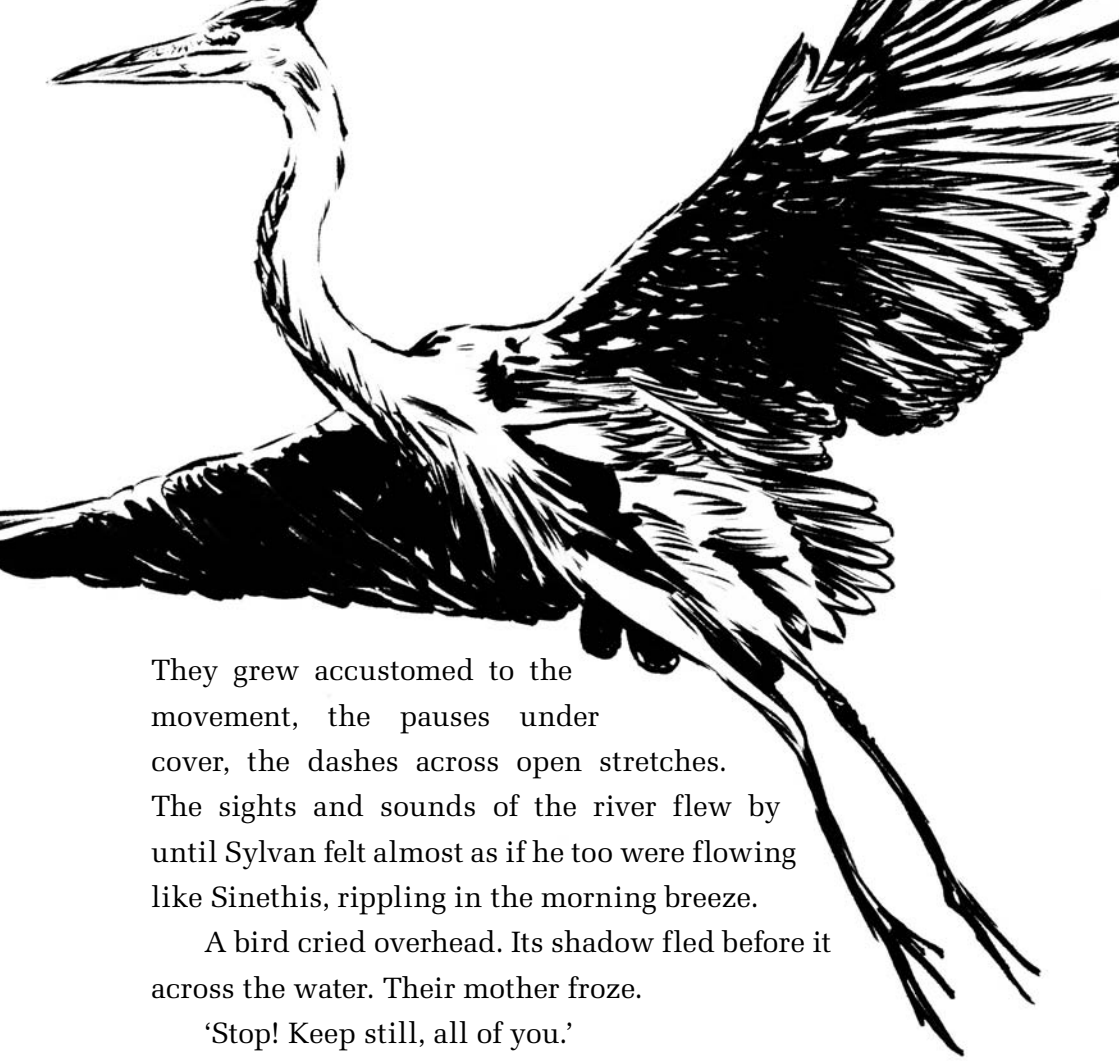


'I think that's probably enough for the time being. You don't want to overdo it.' Orris began to complain, but she pre-empted him. 'The food will still be here when we come back. For now we have something else to do.' She looked from one to the other. 'It's time for me to show you the rest of the territory. Over the next few days you will want to explore, but under no circumstances must you leave my territory. Understood?'

'Why not?' asked Fern.

'Because it isn't safe. Now follow me.'

Their mother set off along the bank, keeping to well-trodden runs close to the water. She moved so quickly that it was difficult to keep up. Here and there she stopped, rising up on her haunches, listening, smelling. Then off again, following the track, hugging the bank, paddling in the shallows, bouncing across mats of plants, listening intently to every sound. Sylvan and the others scurried after her, pausing when she did, running as quickly as they could.



They grew accustomed to the movement, the pauses under cover, the dashes across open stretches. The sights and sounds of the river flew by until Sylvan felt almost as if he too were flowing like Sinethis, rippling in the morning breeze.

A bird cried overhead. Its shadow fled before it across the water. Their mother froze.

'Stop! Keep still, all of you.'

They halted right at the edge of the reeds. Overhead, half hidden, a huge grey shape wheeled. Sylvan craned for a clearer view, rising up on his hind legs. The bird cried once more. And then his mother was on top of him, knocking him to the ground. He was too startled even to squeak.

'I said to keep still,' she hissed. 'Now get under cover. Move!'



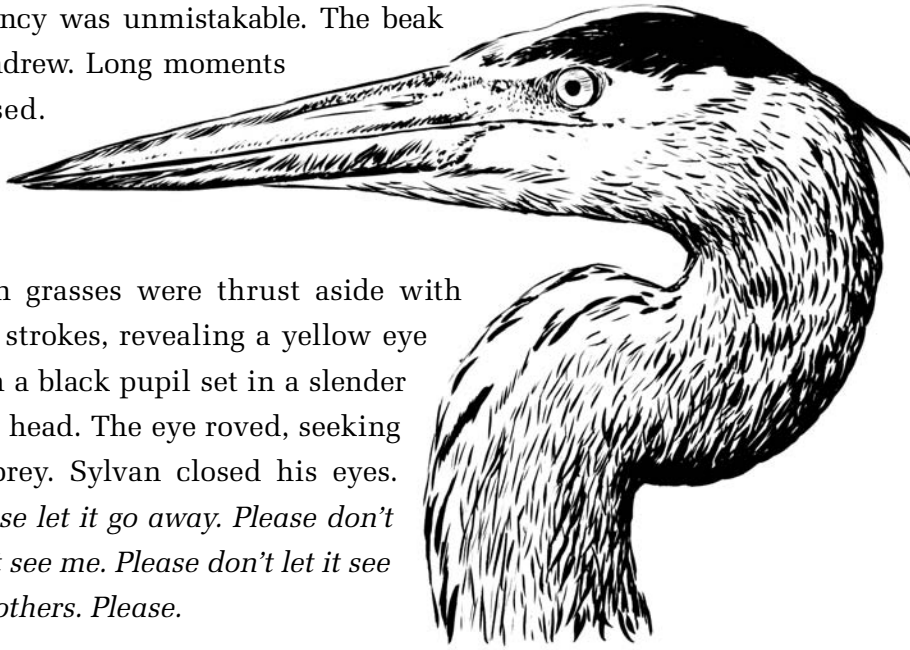
She shoved them back, and they fled deeper into the reeds. The bird screeched again, closer this time. Through a gap in the dense grasses Sylvan could see a tiny patch of sky. For a split second it was eclipsed by an enormous shadow, then air beat down from above them, flattening the grass. The sunlight returned, filtered green down to the cowering water voles. A moment later there was nothing, only the sound of running waters. Somewhere a moorhen called. A breeze ruffled through, carrying with it a muted hum of insects. Sylvan hardly dared breathe. He moved his head a fraction for a glimpse of the others, huddled together, motionless beneath the vegetation. Even at this close distance they were difficult to see, their brown fur lost in the mud and dappled sunlight. He could just make out Orris's terrified expression and the shallow, quick rising of Aven's flanks. All of them gazed up through the shallow

screen of reeds. The silence went on. Sylvan inched his head around, searching for any sign of the predator above them. Nothing but grey-blue sky, and swaying grass.

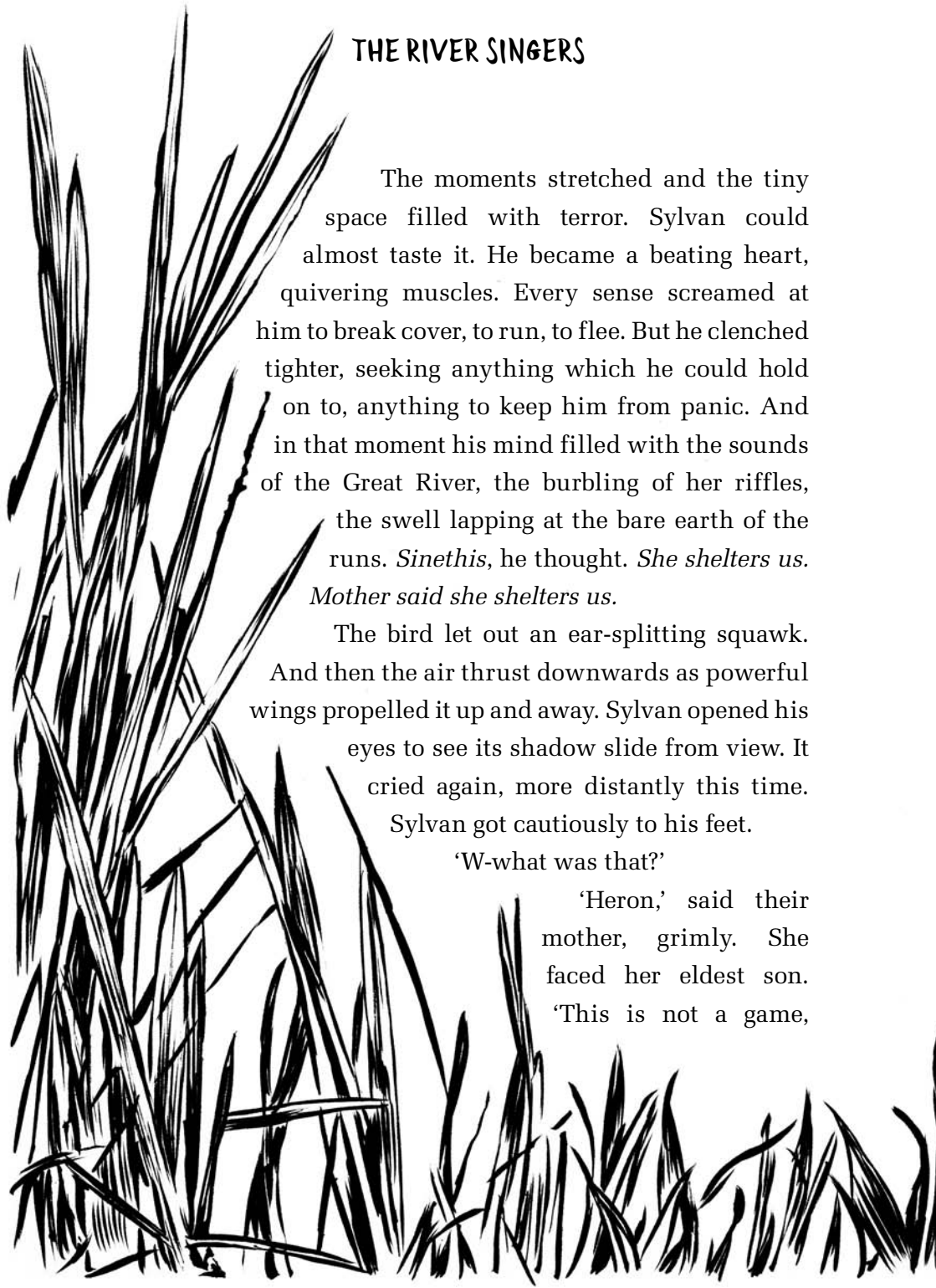
An orange flash stabbed down through the reeds. A beak: long, pointed, and vicious. It probed gently from side to side and withdrew. An instant later it stabbed again, closer to where Fern lay. It moved to the side, brushing Fern's fur. She uttered a tiny squeak. Her leg twitched.

'Keep still. Keep quiet.'

Their mother whispered so softly that Sylvan was unsure that he had heard. But her urgency was unmistakable. The beak withdrew. Long moments passed.



Then grasses were thrust aside with deft strokes, revealing a yellow eye with a black pupil set in a slender grey head. The eye roved, seeking its prey. Sylvan closed his eyes. *Please let it go away. Please don't let it see me. Please don't let it see the others. Please.*



The moments stretched and the tiny space filled with terror. Sylvan could almost taste it. He became a beating heart, quivering muscles. Every sense screamed at him to break cover, to run, to flee. But he clenched tighter, seeking anything which he could hold on to, anything to keep him from panic. And in that moment his mind filled with the sounds of the Great River, the burbling of her riffles, the swell lapping at the bare earth of the runs. *Sinethis*, he thought. *She shelters us. Mother said she shelters us.*

The bird let out an ear-splitting squawk. And then the air thrust downwards as powerful wings propelled it up and away. Sylvan opened his eyes to see its shadow slide from view. It cried again, more distantly this time. Sylvan got cautiously to his feet.

'W-what was that?'

'Heron,' said their mother, grimly. She faced her eldest son. 'This is not a game,

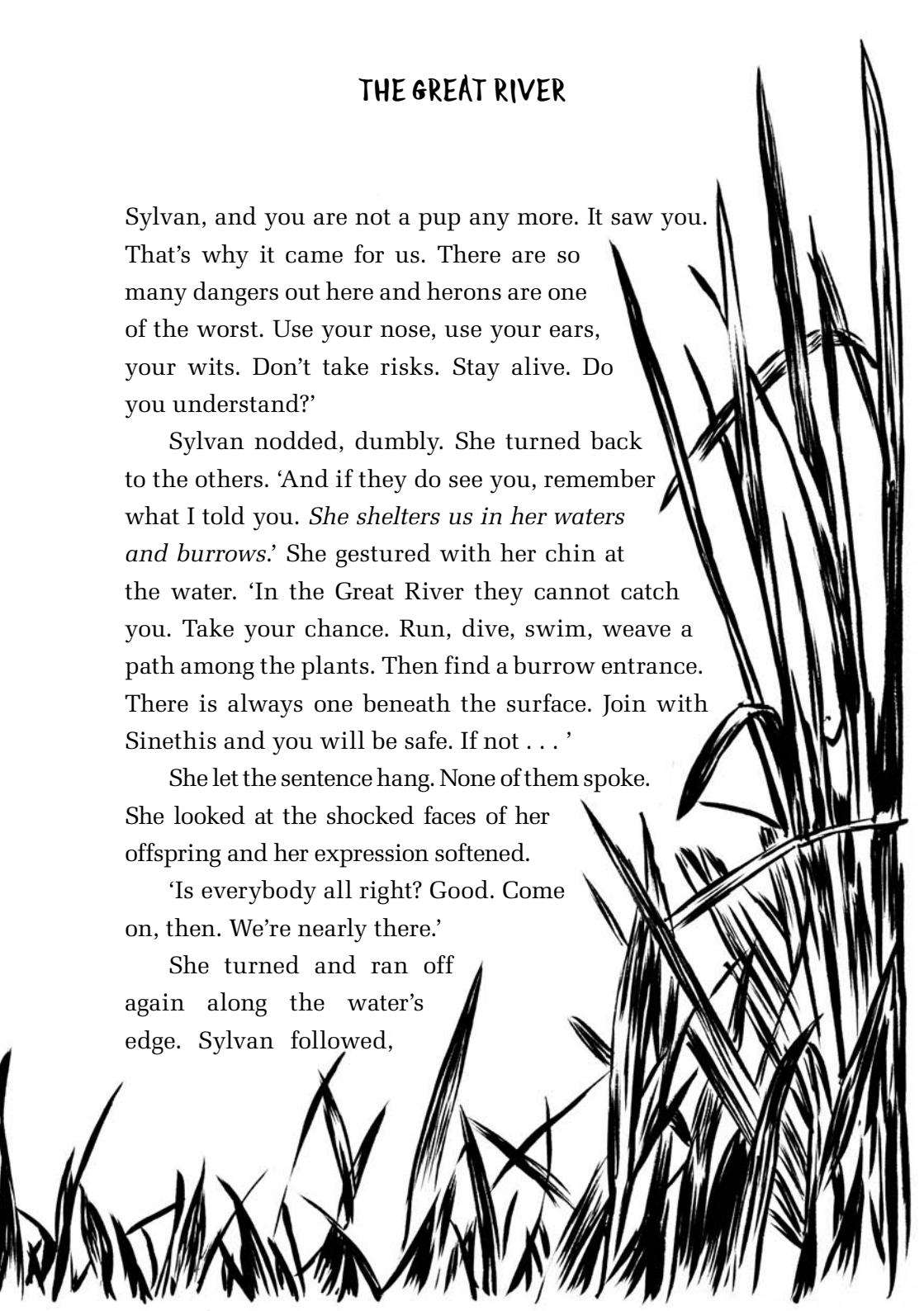
Sylvan, and you are not a pup any more. It saw you. That's why it came for us. There are so many dangers out here and herons are one of the worst. Use your nose, use your ears, your wits. Don't take risks. Stay alive. Do you understand?'

Sylvan nodded, dumbly. She turned back to the others. 'And if they do see you, remember what I told you. *She shelters us in her waters and burrows*.' She gestured with her chin at the water. 'In the Great River they cannot catch you. Take your chance. Run, dive, swim, weave a path among the plants. Then find a burrow entrance. There is always one beneath the surface. Join with Sinethis and you will be safe. If not . . . '

She let the sentence hang. None of them spoke. She looked at the shocked faces of her offspring and her expression softened.

'Is everybody all right? Good. Come on, then. We're nearly there.'

She turned and ran off again along the water's edge. Sylvan followed,



bewildered and scared. How could their mother have shaken off their near-death so quickly? He ran after her, alert to every sound and movement, a sense of threat urging him on, keeping him close. This time, though, they did not have far to go. She came to a halt, a little way from an old willow tree. The ground was bare beneath it, its roots spreading across the soil and down to the water. The thick branches cast a gloom over the water and stagnant specks swirled in the shade.

'Well,' said their mother, 'we're here. This is as far as my territory extends upflow. Remember this place, and be extra careful if you come here, especially if I'm not with you. Come on, have a look around.'

Their mother stepped out of the undergrowth. None of the rest of them moved. The dry soil looked terribly exposed. She put her head on one side and gave them a small smile.

'It's all right, dears,' she said, gently. 'Nothing bad happened. That heron got a bit closer than I'd normally like, but in the absence of anyone taking unnecessary risks'—here her gaze settled on Sylvan—'it's rare. You can't let these things trouble you. Come on out. It's fine.'

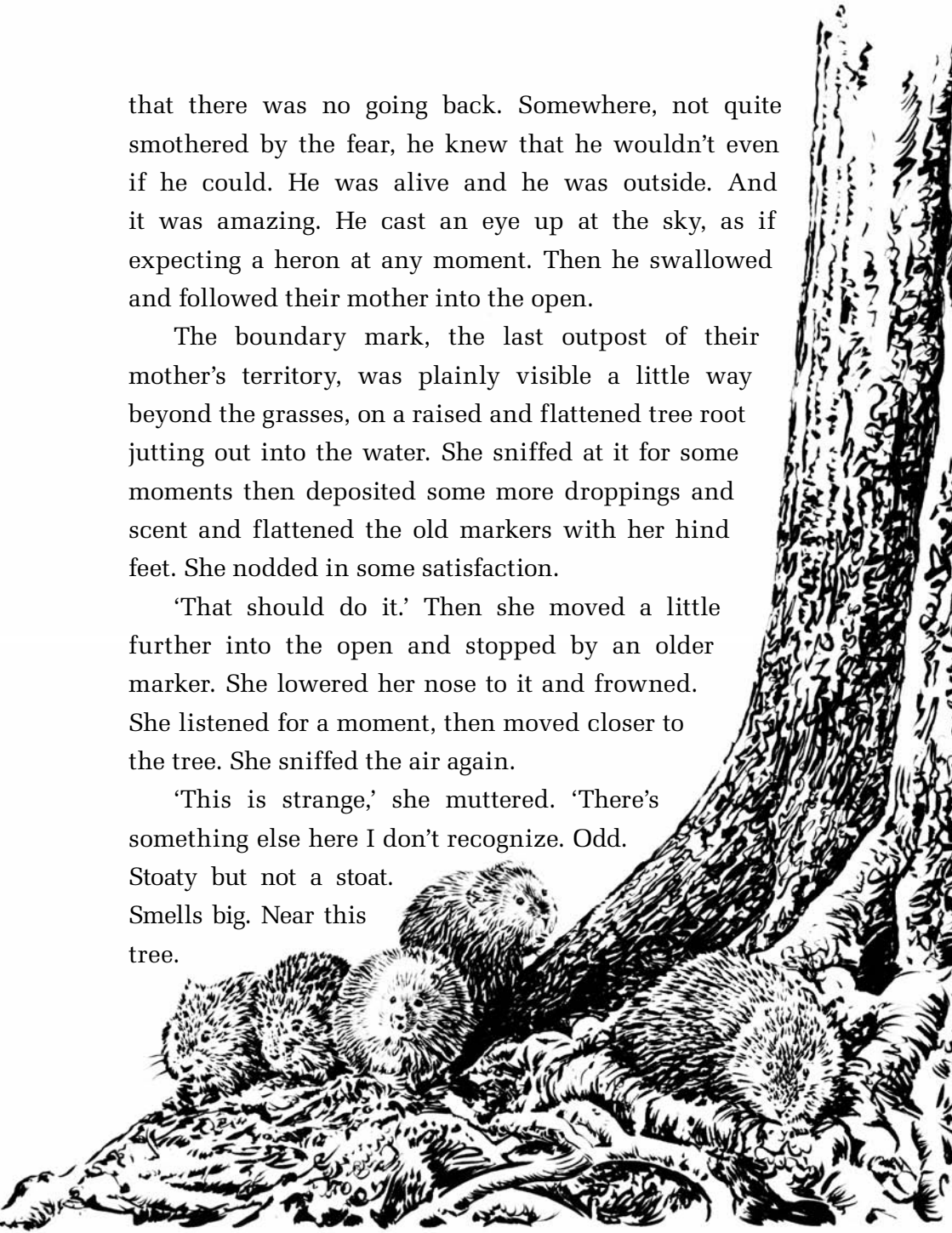
She walked to the tree and began checking the scents at the edge of her territory. Sylvan caught Aven's eye and saw in it a reflection of his own feelings. The experience had shaken him. Part of him longed to be safe in the nest and to forget about how, well, *big* everything was. But he knew

that there was no going back. Somewhere, not quite smothered by the fear, he knew that he wouldn't even if he could. He was alive and he was outside. And it was amazing. He cast an eye up at the sky, as if expecting a heron at any moment. Then he swallowed and followed their mother into the open.

The boundary mark, the last outpost of their mother's territory, was plainly visible a little way beyond the grasses, on a raised and flattened tree root jutting out into the water. She sniffed at it for some moments then deposited some more droppings and scent and flattened the old markers with her hind feet. She nodded in some satisfaction.

'That should do it.' Then she moved a little further into the open and stopped by an older marker. She lowered her nose to it and frowned. She listened for a moment, then moved closer to the tree. She sniffed the air again.

'This is strange,' she muttered. 'There's something else here I don't recognize. Odd. Stoaty but not a stoat. Smells big. Near this tree.



And this marker's still untended. There's been no sign of her for days now.'

'Of who?' asked Sylvan.

'What, dear?' She seemed distracted. 'Oh. Mistress Esther.'

'Who's Mistress Esther?' said Fern.

'The female from the next territory. A good sort as far as it goes. Anyway, come and have a smell of this marker.'

She stepped back, letting Sylvan and the others gather round. Here at the edge of their mother's territory her familiar smell mingled with the unfamiliar odours of other River Singers. The old scent of the other female, Mistress Esther, overlaid the damp earth smell beneath the tree. Intermittent wafts of something musky and bitter assailed Sylvan's nose; the *not-stoat* smell, coming from the branches of the willow. Orris stepped away, cleaning his muzzle with both paws. Sylvan went over and nudged him.

'Stinks, doesn't it?'

'It's horrible,' said Orris. He gazed around meaningfully. 'All of it is.'

Sometimes Sylvan couldn't understand his brother. 'If you say so.'

'I do. Don't you?'

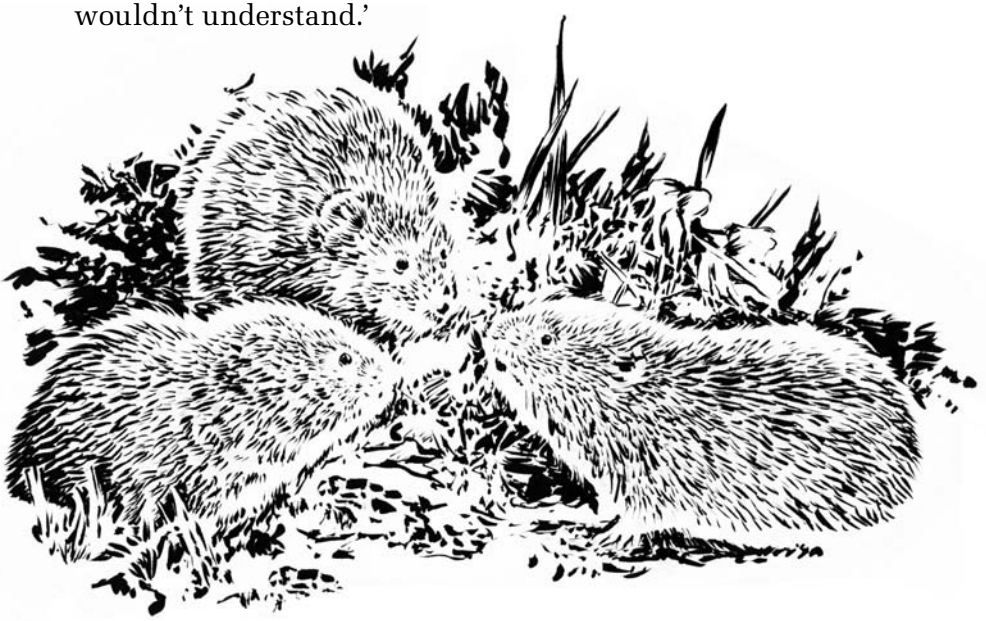
'No. It's a bit scary but . . . I don't know. It's great.'

Orris's look clearly said that he thought that Sylvan was a very special kind of halfwit. Sylvan gave up and joined Aven

and Fern who were still investigating the boundary marker, chattering in low voices.

'What're you talking about?'

'Nothing,' said Fern, turning away. 'Female stuff. You wouldn't understand.'



Sylvan bristled, but Aven stepped in before he could speak. 'All right, nosy. We were talking about the female's scent. That's all.'

'Oh. What's so interesting about that?'

Fern gave him a withering look and preened her whiskers. 'Everything,' she said. 'Soon we will have territories of our own and then we'll need to know these things.'