

PROLOGUE

The rumour spread from burrow to burrow down the length of the Great River. The females, eyeing each other over their boundaries, commented on it in hushed tones. The males spoke of it with raised chins and defiant looks, before moving on and away to their own business. The rumour told of a new danger to the Folk. It told of a horror which came in the night. It told of the Great River stripped bare of her people, of entire colonies gone. It told of the end of their world.

But perhaps, they thought, a rumour is all it was. The ancient enemies—the fox, heron, weasel—had always been there, awaiting the unwary or unlucky. And still the Folk prospered. The Great River sang, her grasses were plentiful, and her waters were warm and bustling with life. No, perhaps rumours were only rumours and the lives of the Folk would continue as before. But even so the mothers turned an eye to their young, and slept more lightly than they had. And the males scented the breeze more carefully before straying into the open, ran more quickly, fed more watchfully.

Sylvan and the others, nestling in their chamber, knew nothing of the rumours. They knew nothing of the outside. They knew their mother, the scents of their home, and the rhythms of the Great River. They knew hunger which could be quenched with milk. But one day they would learn that sometimes a rumour is more than a rumour. Sometimes a rumour is a life which has yet to come.





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

THE RIVER SINGERS

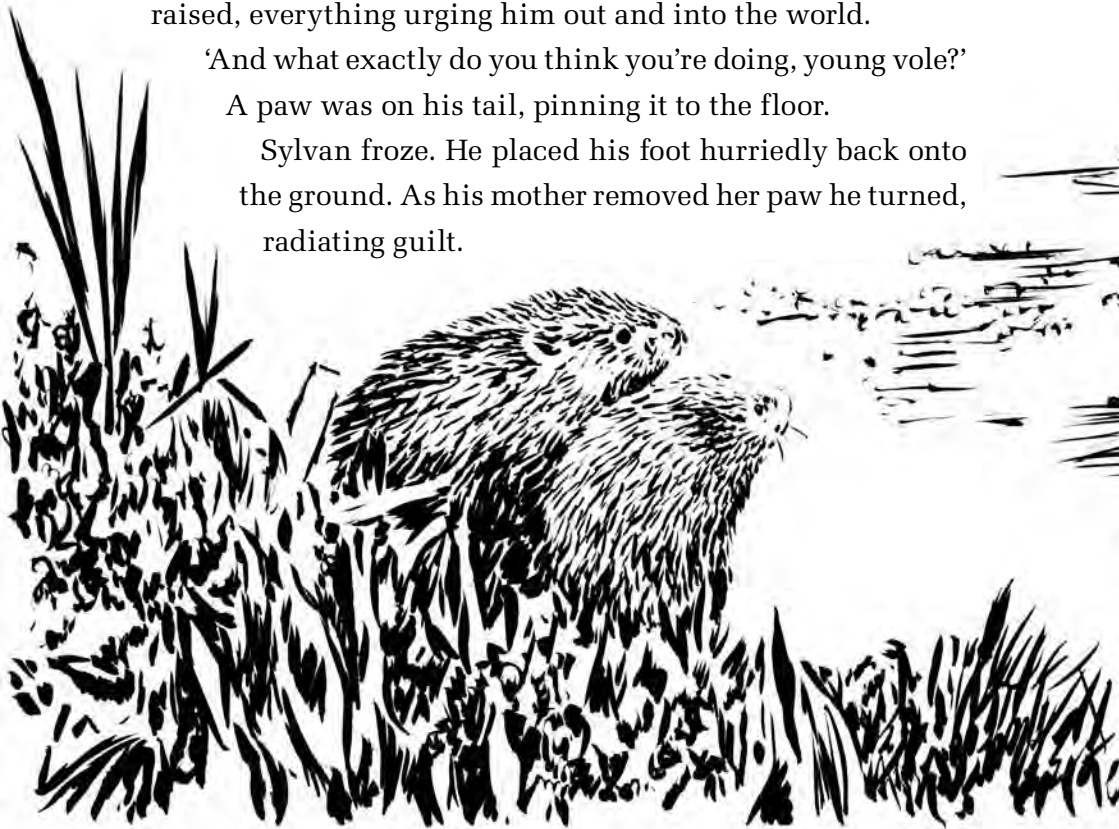
knot of roots, then pause at the place where the roof had fallen. One eye to the sky. Quiver. Listen. Check the scents. Then onwards and downwards to the lower places, the entrance to the Great River and the gateway to the world.

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.



THE GREAT RIVER

‘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.

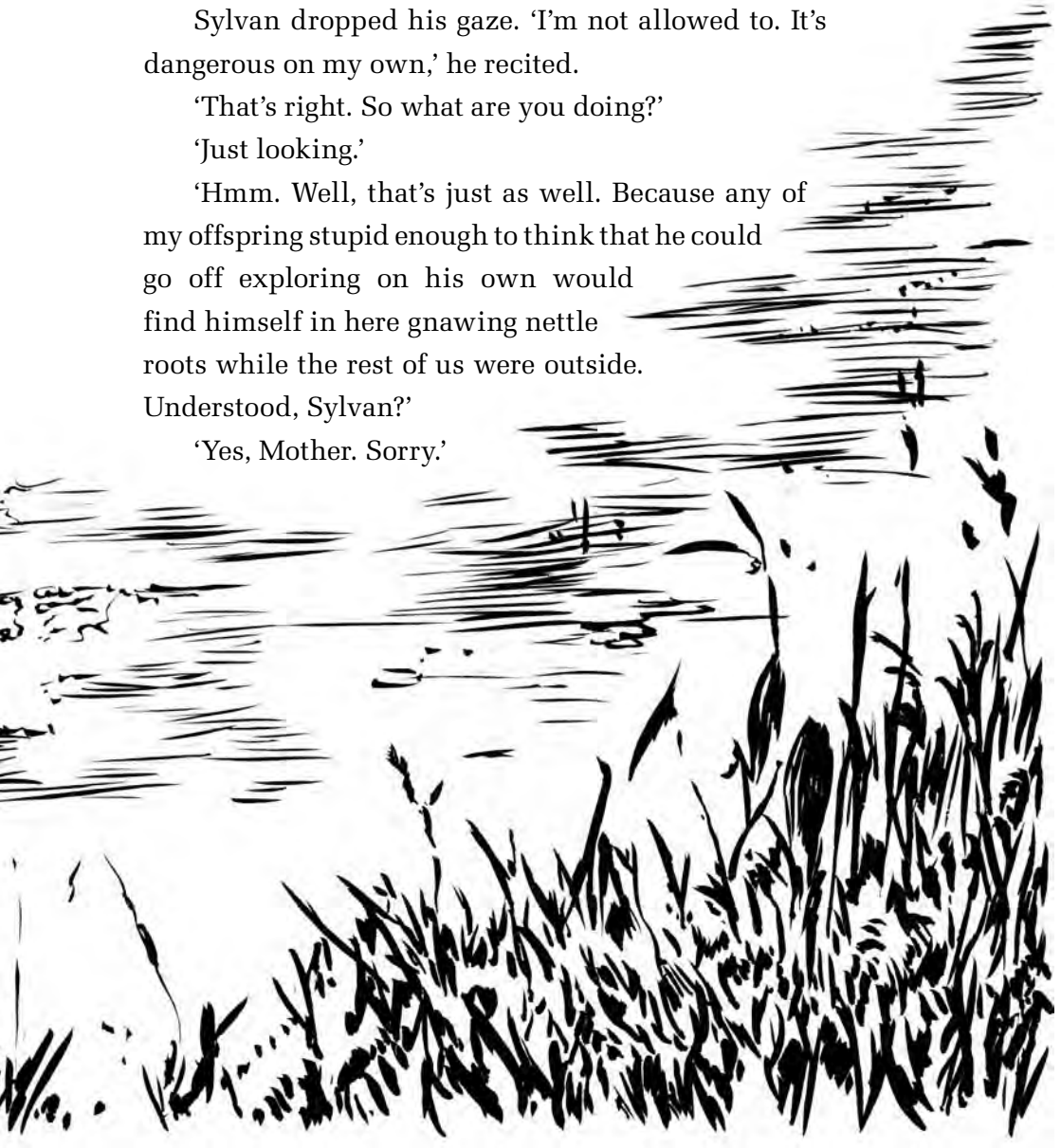
‘That’s right. So what are you doing?’

‘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.’



THE RIVER SINGERS

‘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.’

THE GREAT RIVER

‘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?’



THE RIVER SINGERS

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.'

THE GREAT RIVER



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.

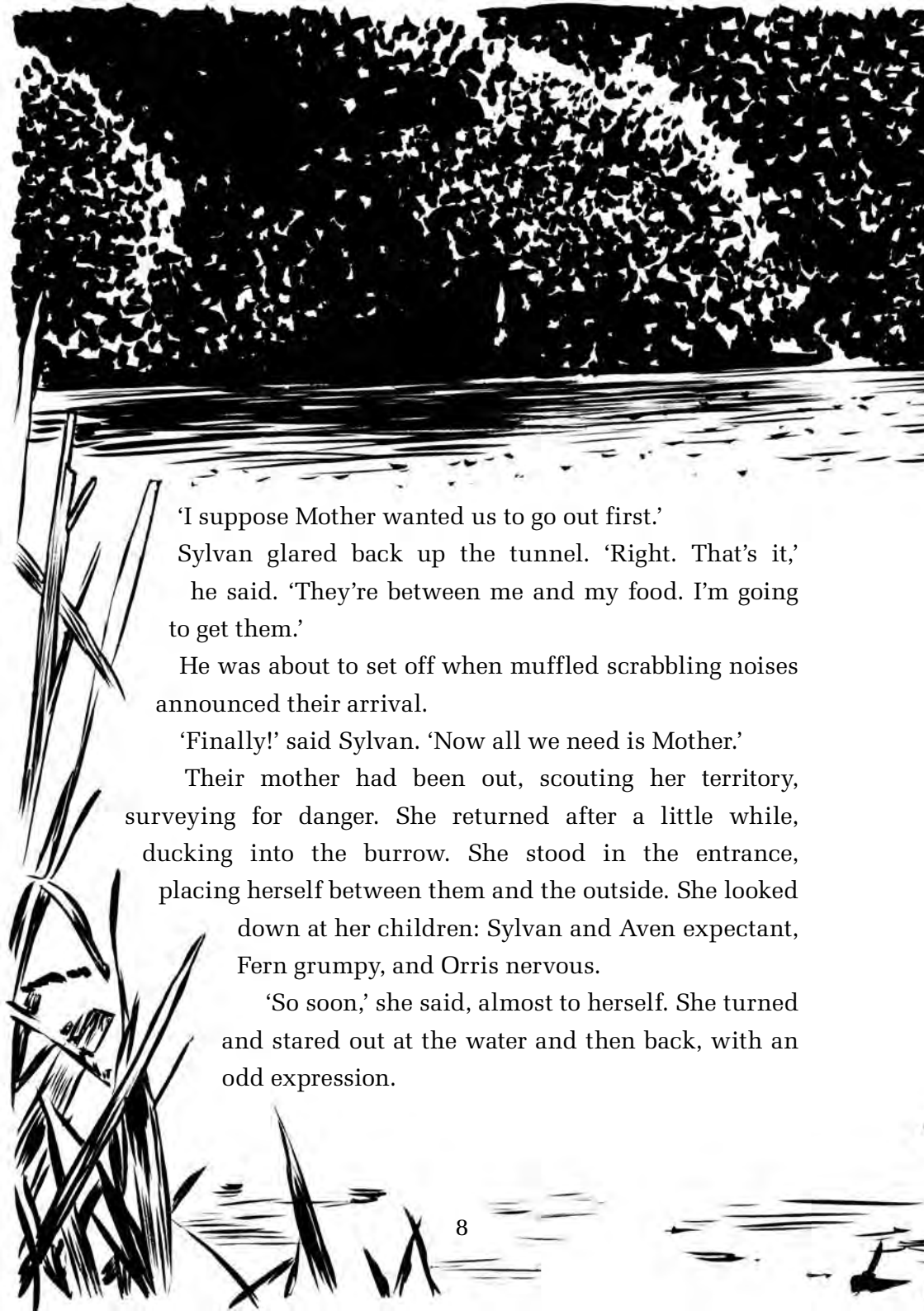
'Hungry?' asked Aven.

'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.