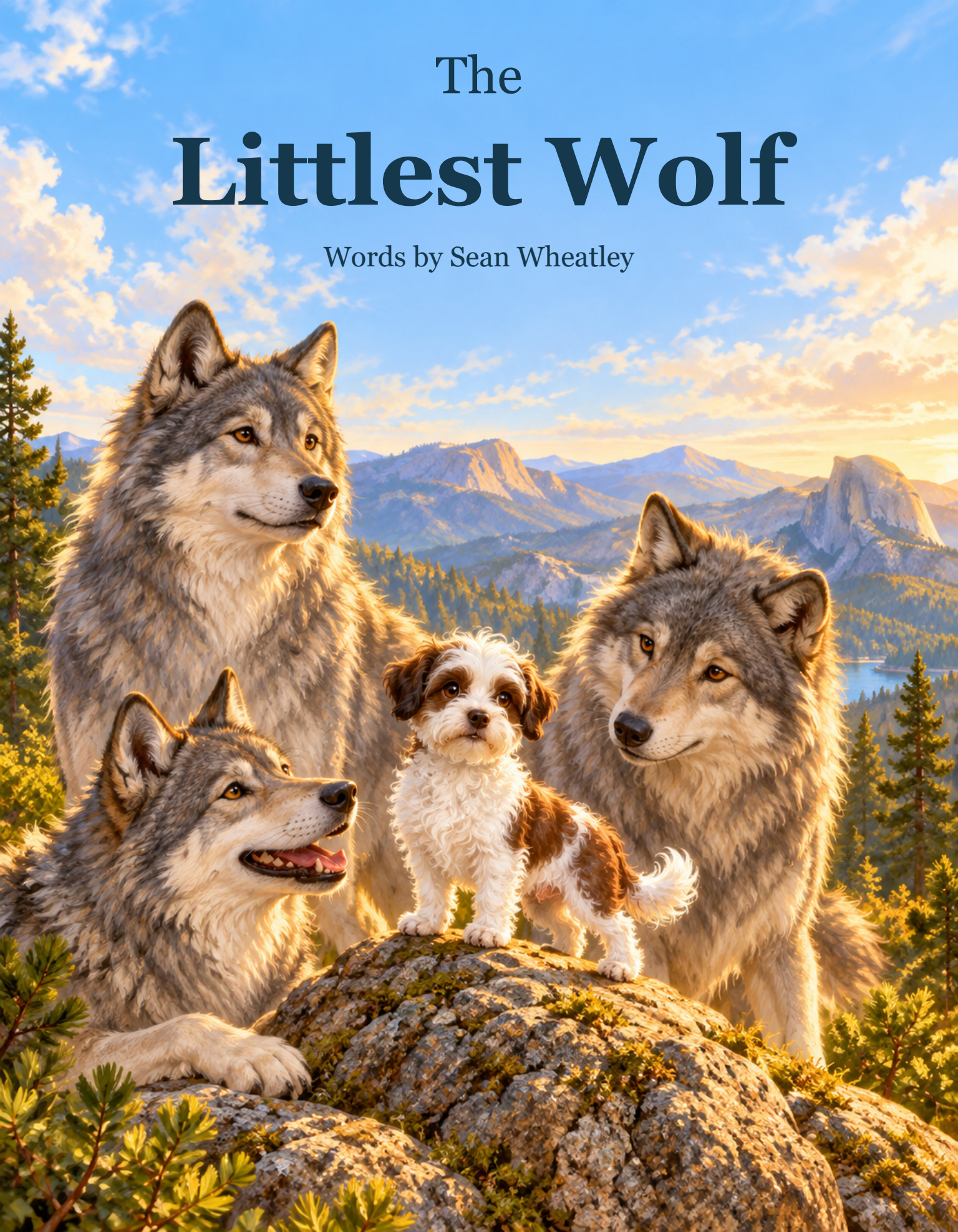
The Littlest Wolf

Words by Sean Wheatley




In the golden hills of California, where the trees reached high and the air smelled of pine and sunshine, there lived a little dog named Jackson.
He had curly fur, bright eyes, and a tail that wagged like a flag in the wind.
1
2


One summer day, everything changed.
The sky turned orange, the wind roared, and a wildfire swept through Jackson’s home. He ran and ran—away from the smoke, away from the flames—until he was lost in the mountains, all alone.



But Jackson wasn’t alone for long. A pack of wolves found him beneath a fern, whimpering and shivering.

Jackson looked up at the enormous animals surrounding him. The wolves looked down at the tiny, curly-haired stranger.



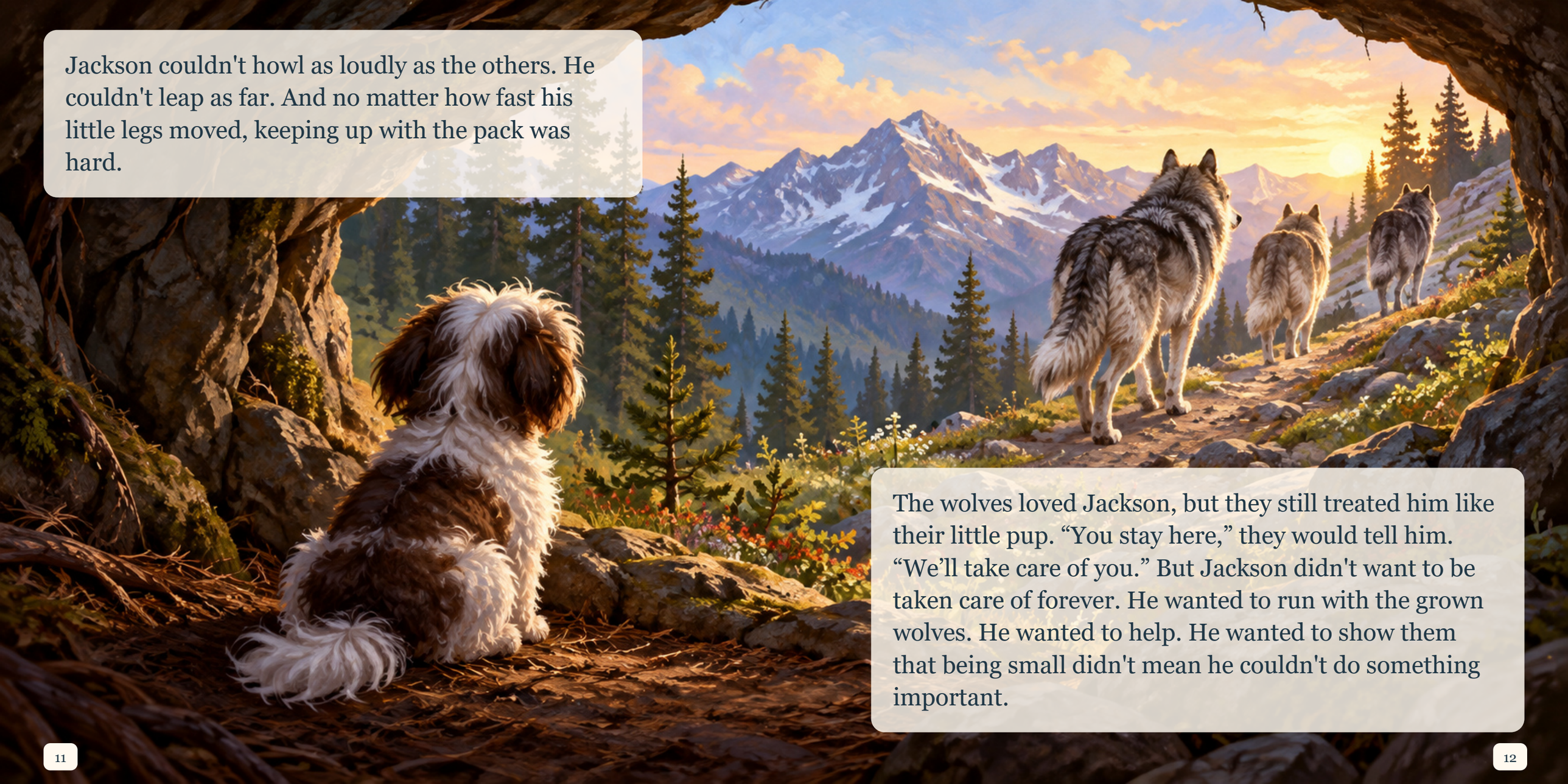
“He smells a little funny,” said one. “Looks like a pup,” said another.

“He is a pup,” said Mama Wolf. “And he needs a family.” She gently nudged Jackson toward the others. “He’s one of us now.” And just like that, Jackson became part of the wolf pack.



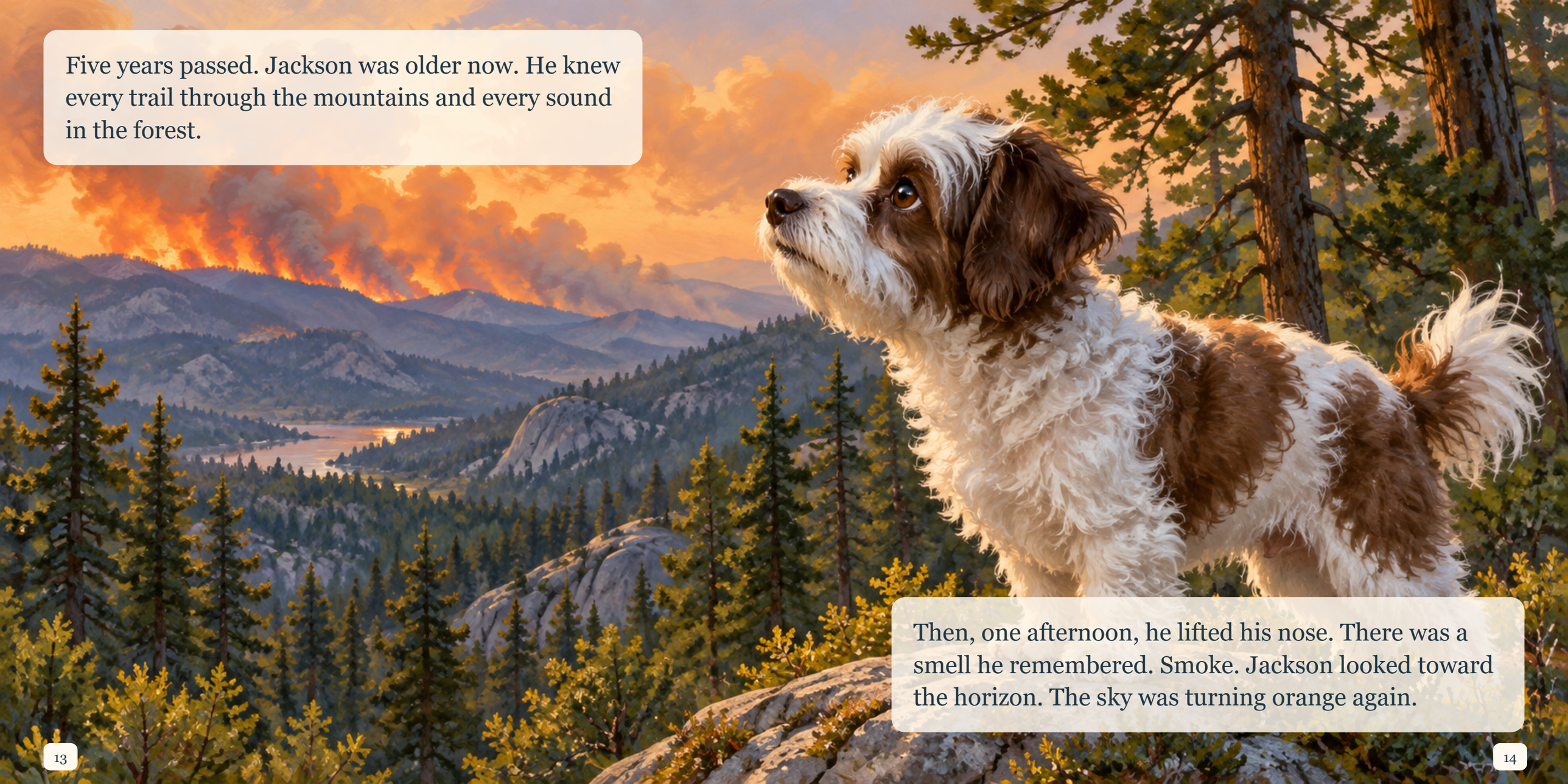
The seasons passed. The wolf pups grew taller. Their paws grew bigger. Their howls grew louder.

Jackson grew up, too. But he didn't grow very much. He was still the littlest wolf.



Jackson couldn't howl as loudly as the others. He couldn't leap as far. And no matter how fast his little legs moved, keeping up with the pack was hard.

The wolves loved Jackson, but they still treated him like their little pup. “You stay here,” they would tell him. “We’ll take care of you.” But Jackson didn't want to be taken care of forever. He wanted to run with the grown wolves. He wanted to help. He wanted to show them that being small didn't mean he couldn't do something important.



Five years passed. Jackson was older now. He knew every trail through the mountains and every sound in the forest.

Then, one afternoon, he lifted his nose. There was a smell he remembered. Smoke. Jackson looked toward the horizon. The sky was turning orange again.



“FIRE!” The pack raced through the forest. Sparks flew between the trees. Branches crashed behind them.

The wolves leaped across streams and scrambled over rocks as smoke filled the sky. Jackson ran with them as fast as his little legs could carry him.



Then Mama Wolf stopped. “The pups!” The youngest wolves weren't with them. Through the smoke came a frightened cry. The pups were trapped behind a fallen tree.

The adult wolves tried to reach them, but the opening beneath the trunk was too small. Smoke curled thick and low around it. “We can't get through!” cried one wolf.



Then Jackson stepped forward. **“I can.”** The wolves stared at him. “You’re too small,” one said.

Jackson looked at the narrow opening beneath the tree. Then he looked back at the wolves. For the first time, being small didn't feel like a weakness. Jackson smiled. **“Exactly.”** And he disappeared into the smoke.



Jackson stayed low. He squeezed beneath branches. He crawled beneath the fallen tree. He listened for whimpers and sniffed for tiny paws. “Where are you?” he called.

Then he heard it. A tiny cry. Jackson followed the sound. And there they were.



The pups huddled together, trembling. Their ears were down and their eyes were wide. Jackson squeezed beside them. “It’s me,” he whispered.

One little pup looked toward the smoke. “I’m scared.” Jackson's tail began to wag. “I know the way.” He turned toward the opening. “Follow my tail.”



One by one, the puppies followed Jackson. Under the branches. Beneath the smoke. Through the narrow opening.

Whenever they became frightened, they looked ahead. There was Jackson's little tail, still wagging. And they followed it all the way home.



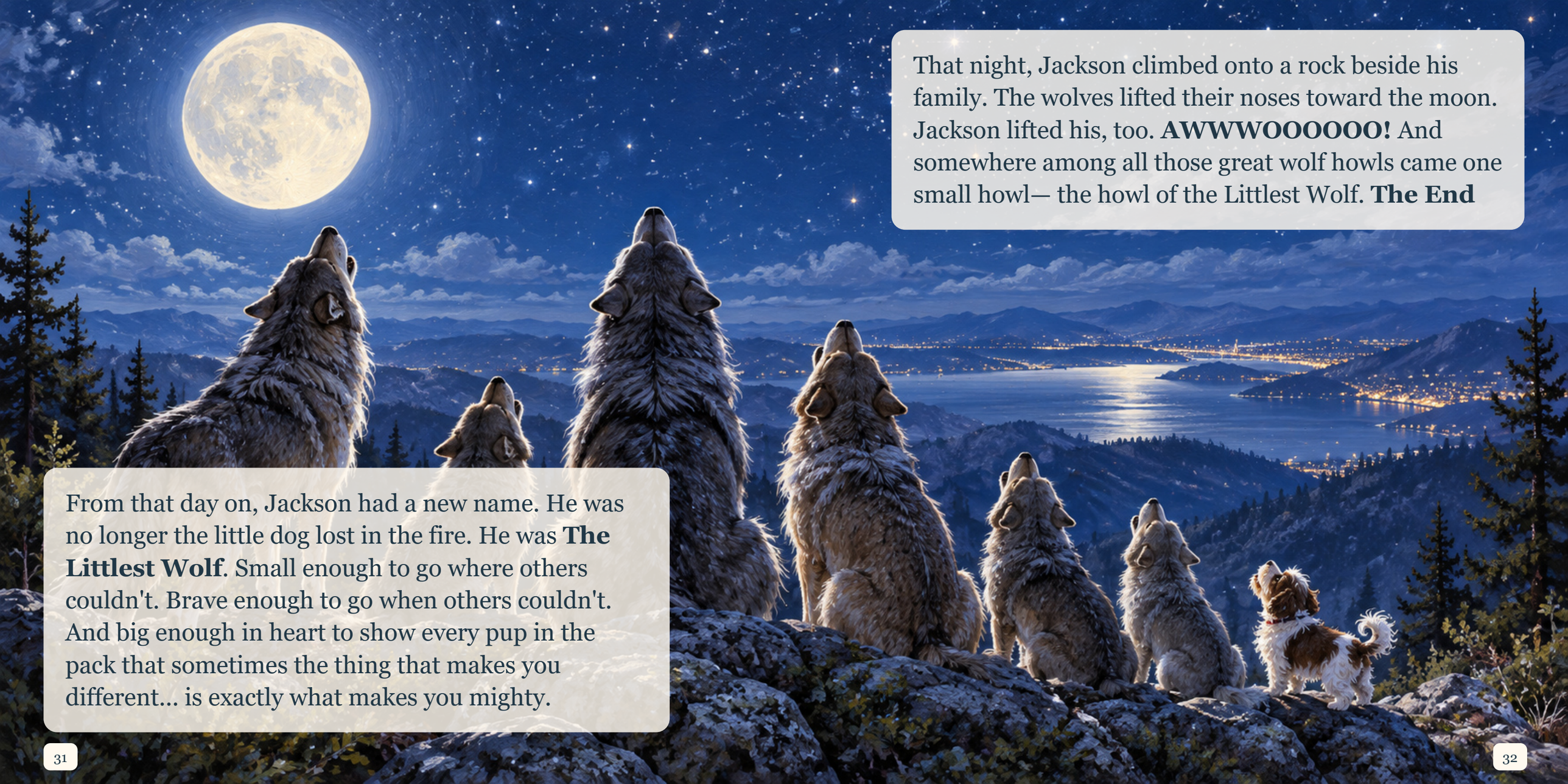
Jackson burst through the smoke. Behind him came one pup. Then another. And another. Every one of them was safe.

Mama Wolf raced forward and gathered the pups close. Then she looked at Jackson. Years ago, she had found a frightened little dog who needed her help. Now that little dog had saved her pups.



The wolves gathered around Jackson. For once, nobody called him a pup. Nobody told him he was too little. “You went where none of us could go,” said Mama Wolf.

Jackson looked at his little paws. All those years, he had wished they were bigger. Now he understood. He didn't need to be the biggest wolf. He didn't need the longest legs or the loudest howl. He just needed to be Jackson.



From that day on, Jackson had a new name. He was no longer the little dog lost in the fire. He was **The Littlest Wolf**. Small enough to go where others couldn't. Brave enough to go when others couldn't. And big enough in heart to show every pup in the pack that sometimes the thing that makes you different... is exactly what makes you mighty.

That night, Jackson climbed onto a rock beside his family. The wolves lifted their noses toward the moon. Jackson lifted his, too. **AWWWOOOOOO!** And somewhere among all those great wolf howls came one small howl— the howl of the Littlest Wolf. **The End**