

Old Wolf

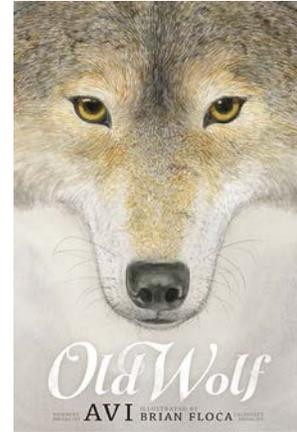
an excerpt from the book

written by Avi

with illustrations by Brian Floca

Richard Jackson Books, Simon & Schuster

Copyright © 2015. All rights reserved.



1

It was the starving time.

Not the end of winter. Not the start of spring. Not cold. Not hot. Daylight and nightdark were almost equal. Mud lay here and snow lay there. It was as if earth herself could not decide between life and death.

2

In the high country, on a late afternoon in the month of March, the eight gray wolves of the Iron Mountain pack--Tonagan, Garby, Nikito, Pildown, Debalt, the two pups—Conall and Onai—and the pack leader, the old wolf called Nashoba--lay before their den, a cold, shallow hollow in an outcropping of dull red rock.

Nashoba was allowing his two five-week-old, blue-eyed pups to tumble about him, yapping and squealing. Nonetheless, he was worried. The wolves in the pack had not eaten for two weeks, not so much as a chipmunk or a vole. They were hungry and increasingly tense.

The pups concerned Nashoba most. Originally, the litter had been three in number. One had died. Needing something more than Tonagan's milk to survive, Conall and Onai were already mouthing Nashoba's muzzle, their way of begging for meat. Where, he fretted, was he going to get it?

While Nashoba lay deep in thought Garby--three-years-old, and the largest, strongest wolf in the pack--suddenly called out, "Nashoba! It's time *I* was pack leader."

Taken by surprise, but choosing to act as if he had not heard the challenge, Nashoba did not move.

The other wolves did. The adults got up swiftly and backed away. Even the pups, sensing something amiss, scrambled to their mother, who nosed them behind her for safety.

"You are our pack leader, Nashoba," snarled Garby. "But you just sit here playing with your pups. You should be leading us in a hunt."

Uncertain what the outcome might be if he fought the much younger wolf, Nashoba remained absolutely still.

Garby, taking the old wolf's response to be weakness, leaped to his feet. "We're hungry, Nashoba!" he barked. "We need food. If you can't lead us to it, I will!"

Nashoba spread his toes a little and gazed steadily at Garby with his deep golden eyes. "Are you challenging *me*?" he asked, in a soft, rumbly voice. He knew the answer to the question perfectly well, but was hoping Garby would back down.

All Garby did was snarl, "We know the truth, Nashoba. You're too old to lead."

The words stung Nashoba. *How dare the young wolf speak so!*

With a deep-chested growl, the old wolf came slowly to his feet and stood with legs stiff, neck hairs raised, and tail high. He wanted to give Garby time to retreat.

Garby, however, held his place and dared to stare directly into the pack leader's eyes, a blatant challenge. "Admit it, Nashoba," he said. "You've become useless!"

Nashoba drew back his lips to show his teeth, and took a step toward the strong young wolf.

The other wolves moved further away.

"You don't frighten me, Nashoba!" Garby spat out.

Knowing he must act quickly or lose all respect, Nashoba lunged at the young wolf's neck.

With the deftness of youth, Garby slipped to one side, causing Nashoba to miss. At the same moment, he dove, gripped Nashoba's right front paw in his mouth and bit down, hard.

Nashoba, ignoring the piercing pain, twisted about, reached up and grasped Garby's neck in his jaws. He began to squeeze, tighter and tighter.

With a gasp, Garby released Nashoba's paw, and dropped to the ground.

Panting, Nashoba let go of the young wolf, but stood over him, undecided what to do. Choosing to be generous, as befit a pack leader, he lifted his bloody paw and placed it on the back of Garby's neck.

The young wolf whined in pleading submission.

That was enough for Nashoba. Pleased with himself, he stepped away, but glanced pointedly at the other wolves. One by one, they lowered their heads and tails in wordless acknowledgment of the old wolf's leadership.

Nashoba, not wishing to reveal how much pain his paw was giving him, how shaken he was, how rapidly his heart was pounding, turned his back on the pack and walked into the woods--slowly.

When he was some forty yards from the den-- beyond the pack's view -- the old wolf flopped to the ground, stretched his feet before him, and allowed himself a deep, deep breath.

For Nashoba was well aware that he had come close to being overthrown as pack leader. The next time Garby challenged him -- as he surely would -- the young wolf might well be successful.

3

When Nashoba regained his composure, he examined his paw closely. Garby's bite had been not just painful but deep, far worse than the old wolf had realized. He licked the oozing blood, cleaning and soothing the hurt.

Then he rested his chin on the earth between his front legs. Eyes closed, he sought to ignore the ache, the ache in his paw and the ache in his heart. *How dare young Garby challenge me!*

In the wild, wolves can live for as long as nine years, sometimes more. Nashoba was eight. He weighed some eighty pounds (down from a hundred and ten) and was thirty-five inches tall at his shoulder and just less than four feet long, not including his tail.

The gray fur on his back – it had become much grayer of late--and along the top of his tapered nose--was soft and thick, except for the stiff, white muzzle hairs. His chest and belly fur was also white, but tinged delicately with brown; ears were dark and rounded, and his golden eyes, encircled by black markings, had ebony pupils.

The life of the Iron Mountain Pack depends on me, Nashoba told himself. I am not too old to hunt. Or kill.

Now Nashoba knew that he must prove it--soon.