White Wolf
by Stephen Whitt

You’re running faster than you’ve ever run before, chasing a small white shape that darts back and forth a few yards ahead. A frigid arctic wind blasts your eyes, ears, and snow-white fur, but you don’t feel the cold. For you, this is warm and lovely summer weather.

You are an arctic wolf. You were born two summers ago, a roly-poly pup in a litter of four. Your mother, father, and packmates (mostly your older brothers and sisters) all took care of you that first summer. They brought you food, they protected you from danger, and they played with you. By playing with you almost every day, your packmates taught you how to pounce, how to wrestle, and how to chase down food.

Now you are an adult wolf, two years old, fast, sleek, powerful, and getting stronger every day. You’re chasing your own food across the arctic tundra. The young arctic hare, a long-legged rabbit with fur even whiter than yours, is very fast, but you are a strong runner. You can run this fast for a very, very long time. Eventually, if things go your way, the hare will tire, and you will eat.

After you’ve eaten, you will head back to the den. Your younger brothers and sisters, this summer’s pups, will run up to greet you. You might feed them a little from the food you’ve stored in your own stomach. Or you might just play with them, as your older brothers and sisters played with you when you were only a pup.

You will also sleep. In the long arctic summer, the Sun does not set for four months. So you sleep when you’re tired, hunt when you’re hungry, and travel with your pack whenever the leaders decide it’s time to go.
You and your packmates spend much of your time sleeping in the sunlight, lying near enough the den to be sure the pups are safe. Each year’s pups are precious; without them, your pack will soon disappear. Arctic wolves do not live long lives, perhaps only seven to ten summers.

Later, you might follow the pack leaders on a group hunt. You’ll head off toward the far horizon, leaving behind the pups and one member of your pack (sometimes, but not always, the pups’ mother) to care for the pups while you are gone. You might run five miles or more, without stopping to rest, eat, or drink. All the while, you’ll scan the tundra for any signs of life.

Finally, you’ll spot a herd of musk oxen. They are huge, shaggy animals with dangerous curved horns and sharp, powerful hooves. They might weigh 200 times more than you! Still, you’ll approach these giant creatures. In this cold and barren land, you must find food, even if it comes in the form of a 2,000-pound monster.

When the hunt goes well, you and the rest of the pack will eat. There will be plenty of food to take back to the pups, and they will grow into strong and swift young wolves like yourself. When the hunting goes badly, you or one of your packmates might be injured or even killed by the oxen, and the pack will go hungry. The summer days will not last for long, and the hunger never stops; you must find food soon.

For winter is coming. When the Sun disappears below the horizon for the four long, frigid months of winter, your life will be different. Then you will struggle each day just to stay alive. You’ll find food where you can, huddle together with your packmates to stay warm, and wait for the day when the Sun finally returns.

But now it is bright, lovely summer. You’re running faster than you’ve ever run before, chasing the white shape that is just a little bit nearer.
Glossary

barren – empty, producing few plants

dart – to move suddenly or quickly

frigid – very cold

litter – a group of baby animals born at the same time

tundra – a flat, treeless plain