

The baying of her pack grew louder as River closed in on the dens. She ran on a path parallel to the one Echo and Sky had taken, though she no longer cared if her scent was detected by either of the pack leaders. Punishment was nothing more than a fleeting thought in her mind as the sounds of distress echoed through the thick morning air.

As she pushed on just a few paces behind the Alpha and Deputy, another smell hit her nose, almost instantly overwhelming her with its putrid odor. Its caustic tang was unmistakable: it was the overwhelming smell of rats. Her lungs ached with the implications of violence and the thought of jagged yellow teeth sinking into tender flesh.

She arrived back at the dens just a few paces behind the two leaders, both having disappeared through the entryway moments earlier. Fear leaked from the walls, mixing with her own as she struggled to draw in a deep breath. There was a barrier of terror between herself and the place she called home, and she couldn't tell if it was coming from within her own mind or from the growls inside the dens. There was Echo's powerful roar resounding alongside Sky's thunderous rumbling, set to the tone of the terriers' fierce barking.

Her senses all told her this was a fight for their lives.

With her tail tucked between her legs she forced herself in through the entryway, claws clicking on hard ground in an uneven pattern. It took all of her strength to keep her eyes open, looking ahead towards the danger that awaited her rather than blind herself to what would certainly be a painful reality.

And somehow, once she passed through the threshold and drank in the sights which caused the cacophonous roar, it was worse than anything she could have ever imagined.

The ground had come alive, what had once been dirt and sand turning into a sea of black fur, countless rats moving as a continuous wave. Amidst the chaos she saw flashes of white and brown and chestnut, the only sign of her packmates fighting to keep above the fray. Ivory teeth flashed through open air, striking at rats who were biting and clawing their way into the dogs who remained.

In the middle of it all was Echo, her massive form towering above the fray, stepping forward even as the vermin grabbed onto her thick white fur. The Alpha had a steely glint in her eyes, unflinched as she took confident steps forward towards the back of the den.

It took only moments for the numerous enemy to arrive at River's paws, the first of the rats nipping at her ankles with such intensity that she yelped, yanking the limb back from the

sudden pain. Blood welled beneath her golden fur, but she could do nothing more than shake frantically to dislodge the creature.

The moment seemed like an eternity, but the rat finally released its grip, flying through the air with a final shake. But there were suddenly two in its place, coming up beneath her and threatening to strike.

“River!” She heard her name cut through barks of pain and terror, and the intensity was enough to make her look up from the oncoming enemy.

It was Echo, now almost to the back of the den. The purpose of the Alpha’s footsteps and ferocity in her words told River all she needed to know.

So even as the rats came up to greet her and the wails of her packmates echoed off the walls, she sprung towards the back of the den with just one thought in her mind. It was time to defend her pack, and prove her place once and for all.