

Though she had been struck by an incredible amount of force, when River opened her eyes she was surprised to find there was no pain except for a dull aching where her shoulder had hit the ground. It took a few blinks to orient herself, turning the dense fog of confusion into the image of two dogs standing above her, their lips curled back to reveal pointed fangs.

“Echo, enough!” Sky snarled, standing defensively over River’s prone body. It was the first time River had ever seen the Deputy stand up to the Alpha with such fierceness. The usually amicable collie had always followed obediently at Echo’s side, doing the leader’s bidding with a soft wag of her tail. Now, it appeared as though the Deputy’s intervention may have saved her life.

“What are you doing here?” Echo demanded with a throaty growl. Between her nervous pants, River could smell the aggression coming off the larger dog in waves. Had she been able to scramble to her feet from beneath Sky’s defensive stance, she would have bolted back for the dens. But instead River was stuck staring up at the two powerful dogs, lightning crackling between them.

“Stopping you from making another mistake.” The words seemed to stun Echo into momentary silence, leaving nothing but heavy breaths suspended in the air.

“Another mistake.” There was no question in Echo’s brusque reply. Sky dipped her head in confirmation, tail curling around one of her hind legs.

“Yes. But now is not the time or place for that conversation. You’re needed back at the den. It’s going to rain tonight, and the beds in the south of the den need to move or they’ll be flooded again.”

The Alpha let out another snarl at the Deputy, but even River could see that the dispute had come to its conclusions without a single drop of blood having been spilled. Fangs disappeared, ears relaxed, and fur rested flat once more across both dog’s shoulders. As for River herself, she kept motionless on the ground, watching wordlessly as Echo began to walk away.

“Remember who here is the Alpha,” Echo said as she padded past, disappearing from River’s line of sight. In what River could only assume was calculated silence, Sky kept her mouth shut.

Only when River could smell Echo’s scent growing distant did she scramble to her paws, pausing only moments before burying her head into the soft fur of Sky’s neck. It was all she could do to swallow the whimpers rising from her chest.

“What were you thinking?” Sky asked, though there was nothing scolding about her tone. “You could have been hurt, if not killed.”

“Going North is wrong!” River said, firmly as she could muster through the lingering fear. “We all know it, but no one wanted to say anything. I thought if I could just say something, maybe Echo would listen to me.”

“The weight of decisions rests on neither of our shoulders.” Though River knew the words were a warning, it almost sounded as though Sky was trying to convince herself of the same.

“I can’t lose you,” River admitted, the weakness tumbling from her mouth before she could stop it.

“You won’t,” Sky said, now wrapping her body around River’s own in a protective embrace. “Whatever happens, the Pack is going to stick together. You’re one of us, and we won’t leave anyone behind.”

“But if we go North, not everyone is going to make it. You know that, right?”

“You’re brave, I know that much.” Sky said this while burying her wet nose into the short fur on River’s head. Warmth radiated through River’s body from the touch, and she felt her legs growing weak at the comfort of it all.

“I just want to be home.” Her confession grew, the weight from River’s heart growing lighter with each word. “I want the Pack to trust me. I don’t want to keep running forever.”

“Then let’s go home.” The collie said this with a soft wag of her tail, just visible as River picked up her head. “Come on. There’s still work to be done at the dens. There are many dogs there who care about you and would be worried if you’re gone too long. Why do you think I came looking for you?”

Though in her heart she knew the answer, River didn’t answer. She only wagged her tail and began the long walk back to the dens, Sky pressed against her side.