

CHAPTER 23

WORKING TITLES: RED FLAG, DETECTIVE, INTUITION

GOLDEN GROVE - NIGHT

We see Careful as we left her in Chapter 19, watching Jasper as he leaves the Grove to meet Edge. With a determined look on her face, she gets up and attempts to follow.

VICIOUS
(yawning)
Where are you going?

CAREFUL
I was just... I was wondering where Jasper was off to, that's all.

VICIOUS
Oh, he's only gone for a walk to strengthen his injured foot. It's best that you leave him to it. He'll want to be alone

CAREFUL
(reserved)
...Whatever you say, Vicious.

Careful walks back to her sister, who makes no attempt to go back to sleep. Instead, Vicious just lies on the ground with her eyes wide open.

CAREFUL
You know you can go back to sleep even if he's not here, right?

VICIOUS
I can't. I worry about him. I also don't want *you* sneaking off either! You're meant to be the careful one, remember?

Vicious nudges Careful and they smile at each other. A rare moment where they get to be two sisters without Jasper around to mess it all up. As soon as it appears, the moment is gone. Careful sighs, finally deciding to address the thunderfoot in the room.

CAREFUL
You know, I've been thinking about what Hope said. Before she left..

VICIOUS
I don't want to talk about this, Careful.

CAREFUL

I'm sorry, but I have a bad feeling about all this, Vicious. Especially after what Hope said about-

VICIOUS

Fangs of the King, don't tell me you're buying into her poisonous lies! "White lion" indeed!

CAREFUL

Well, things haven't been right in the Grove recently. Like Jasper sneaking off to Traveller knows where and there's certainly been times where I've felt we're being watched.

VICIOUS

I already told you: he was off exercising his leg. He can hardly get better sleeping around, can he? As for your obvious paranoia, maybe it's some rogue Traveller? You should be telling your King, instead of... Whatever this is about.

CAREFUL

(sighing)

What this is about is... I wonder if Hope did in fact see something that day. Something that should not be in the Grove...

VICIOUS

And the same something presumably killed Clever, correct?

CAREFUL

(low and serious, somewhat angry)

Hope was right about one thing: she was our sister. If Jasper knows something about...

VICIOUS

Do you not trust your King, Careful?

CAREFUL

I think he has secrets. I'd just feel safer knowing what they are. The Grove would feel safe. *You* would feel safe. Don't tell me it hasn't been playing on your mind too.

VICIOUS

(thinking for a moment, looking down)

Hopeless never got on with her father. I thought Adamant would be back by now at the very least. That's what's been playing on my mind. Why did *she* leave?

CAREFUL

Perhaps Adamant left because Hope told her to. You just have to stop and think about why she believed her. She was no fool, after all.

Vicious looks unmoved, it is only when Careful says the next line that her expression changes dramatically. Perhaps as dramatic as we've seen her, anyway.

CAREFUL

(cont.)

Maybe we should leave as well, just to be safe...

VICIOUS

No, Careful... (Careful opens her mouth to argue) No, I don't want to even admit to Jasper I *heard* the very suggestion that I... That we...

Careful notices that Vicious is looking longingly into the distance, in the direction where Jasper departed. She's not angry now. She's afraid. Almost sad.

VICIOUS

He needs me.

CAREFUL

He'd leave us. And the cubs. In a heartbeat.

VICIOUS

It's... It's not the same.

CAREFUL

No, it's not. Unlike him, we have the cubs to think about.

Speaking of the cubs, all three of them have since woken up. Joyous looks over at Careful and Vicious, knowing that they're arguing and appearing pensive. They soon frown when they hear a squeal. Aggravating has a firm grip on one of Troublesome's ears. Time for Joyous to be a third parent. Or second, since Jasper hardly counts.

JOYOUS

Aggie, be careful! You know they don't like it when you pull on his ears!

TROUBLESOME

Yeah, Aggie. You know I don't like that!

AGGIE

I get you want to be like Aunt Clever, Joyous, but even she wasn't a killjoy like you.

A shadow falls over them, causing them to pull an 'oh crap' face. Jasper has returned from his disastrous meeting. She turns as he addresses them

JASPER
What's all this talk about Clever?

JOYOUS
Nothing, Dad! We were just playing.

TROUBLESOME
Yeah, Aggie was pulling on my ear and Joyous-

JASPER
(walking past them, not at all interested)
If Aggravating was pulling on your ear, you should pull their ear as well instead of complaining,
Troublesome!

A hiss of pain escapes Jasper as he puts weight on his injured leg.

JASPER
See? Wounds like this are nothing to a true King! Instead of talking about your traitor aunt all the time, perhaps have a bit of respect for your poor father and keep the noise down!

He grunts in pain as he continues to find a sleeping spot. While Aggravating and Troublesome consider him coldly, Joyous approaches him, only to receive a scolding for their troubles.

JASPER
Leave me alone! I'm *fine*!

Having been watching nearby, Careful walks up, eyes flickering from her cubs to a growling Jasper. A hint of anger flashes across her face as she addresses the King.

CAREFUL
Joyous was just concerned, Jasper. Please don't speak to him like that.

JASPER
Just keep your cubs in line, Careful. It's hard to keep danger at bay if they're going to do nothing but argue.

CAREFUL
Of course, Jasper. You should try and get some sleep, by the way, you look terrible.

JASPER
You wouldn't look your best after a scuffle with a Traveller either, Careful! I'd be more grateful, personally. Perhaps that's what got Quiet in the end...

Careful's cubs look terrified as their father turns away, as was his intent. Careful glares after him hatefully, making sure to hide her expression from her cubs. She turns to the three of them, smiling as they consider her with either nervousness (Troublesome), a frown (Aggie) or concern (Joyous).

CAREFUL

OK, cubs, let's go back to sleep now.

AGGIE

Ugh - Mom, do we have to? (they roll their eyes when their two siblings obey Careful) Fine! But you're only going to sleep because I'm beating you at The Next Great King game, Troublesome!

TROUBLESOME

It's Wonderful when Dad isn't around, Viv! *Wonderful!*

AGGIE

It sure is, Troublesome!

Troublesome looks at Careful for support, she glares at Aggie and is glad to see the cub's ears droop in regret.

CAREFUL

Now, Vivacious, we've talked about this. Your sibling calls you by the name you prefer, so at least try and make an effort with them.

AGGIE

I don't even know if I like Vivacious as a name, Mom.

JOYOUS

I think it suits you. (Aggie looks pleased) Of course, you could always change it. Like Hope did when Aunt Vicious called her Hopeless.

At the mention of her niece, Careful wears an expression that's a mixture of mournful and distracted. Troublesome puts in his own opinion.

TROUBLESOME

Don't let Dad catch you talking about Hope either.

AGGIE

He told us not to talk about *Hopeless*, Wonderful. He never said anything about Hope.

Troublesome and Joyous snicker. Careful smiles slightly but still looks thoughtful. She snuggles between her cubs, her thoughtful expression fading into a smile when Troublesome shuffles closer to her. The cubs are her serotonin.

GOLDEN GROVE - EVENING

The Grove is in its usual routine. The cubs are playing. Vicious is trying to tend to Jasper but he's clearly still in a bad mood and refuses to acknowledge her. We see Careful considering Jasper suspiciously before going over to a despondent, tired Vicious.

VICIOUS

I think I'm going to go hunting. Some food might cheer him up.

CAREFUL

No, you look exhausted. I'll go instead, just please watch the cubs.

VICIOUS

Well, why don't we both go? The cubs will be fine with-

CAREFUL

No, they won't! (She sighs, levelling her tone when Vicious looks annoyed) Look, if there's Travellers about like Jasper says, it's better they have you keeping an eye on things too.

VICIOUS

(nervous)

When did he say there were Travellers about!?

CAREFUL

When he came back from his walk. He did look like he *had* been in a scuffle, to be fair.

VICIOUS

I thought the same. Don't worry, I'll stay with the cubs and Jasper. Just try not to be too long.

Careful nods and leaves the group. There is a clear hesitation lining her face, but it is soon replaced by her hardened, suspicious gaze.

She slowly but methodically leaves the safety of the Grove, clearly scared but pressing on regardless. We see her take the familiar route that Jasper took in Chapter 12, occasionally pausing to look around here and there. The scene grows more red/pink as she progresses. We do not see much of her expression, just her walking through the mist, as if enticed by something.

Eventually, we reach a scene that is disturbingly familiar. A place where the Grove gives out to the red-tinged sands of the Cleansing Desert. We see a few shots before Careful halts, looking

down at something on the ground. The red-pink light of dawn hits her face as we see her final expression at what she sees: one of horror and sadness.

GOLDEN PLAINS - EVENING

Aggie, Troublesome and Joyous are following their mother's trail. Aggie is leading the way while Joyous and Troublesome look concerned/fearful.

AGGIE

(laughing)

I thought Aunt Vicious would never fall asleep! C'mon, let's find Mom!

TROUBLESOME

I don't like it out here. Can't we just go back to the Grove and wait for her there?

AGGIE

You can do whatever you want, but I'm looking for her. She could need help hunting and we know I'm getting rather good!

TROUBLESOME

At hunting crawlers and hoppers anyway...

AGGIE

Better than you - you freaked out when a hopper landed on your head!

TROUBLESOME

That was months ago!

JOYOUS

(squinting and looking off into the distance)

Oh, look: she's over there!

A frightened, wide-eyed Careful appears through the grass. The three cubs run at her, seemingly garbling things but we don't hear them, just like Careful. Her mind is obviously elsewhere. Joyous and Troublesome look disturbed.

AGGIE

What-What's wrong, Mom? (Careful doesn't answer) Mom, stop it. You're scaring me.

As if the fear of her fiercest cub has brought her back down to earth, Careful looks down at them. Tears are visible in her eyes but she forces them down, looking down at her cubs with determination.

CAREFUL

We're leaving, my cubs. Let's go.

TROUBLESOME

Back to the Grove? Great! This place gives me the creeps and-!

CAREFUL

(sternly)

No! (Her cubs look alarmed, she calms herself down) I'm sorry but no, we're not going back there. I... I can't keep you safe there. I can't feel safe here. We have to leave.

TROUBLESOME

You mean... You mean we're going to become Travellers?

AGGIE

Cool! Does that mean I can give myself a weather-y name?

JOYOUS

This isn't a game, Viv!

CAREFUL

No, it's not. And I... I don't know what we're going to become but we can't stay here.

Her three cubs consider her. For once, they're unified in their expressions: all three of them look concerned and afraid for their mother.

CAREFUL

Just please do as I say, cubs. Perhaps I'll explain later... Once we're far enough away.

The cubs look uncertain but make to follow their mother, who leads them through the tall grass of the Plains. Suddenly, Careful freezes. Her ear twitches. She's heard something. Or someone.

CAREFUL

Show yourself!

Alight speaks from their vantage point above her. They appear almost bored in every aspect, right down to their expression and body language. Careful takes in their fur colour and swallows visibly.

CAREFUL

(thinking)

A white lion? Just like Hope said...!

Her expression hardens, refusing to show fear.

CAREFUL
Who are you!?

ALIGHT
Now, that's not a very nice example you're setting to your young ones. I might remedy that if you're not... Careful.

Alight jumps down from the rocks, landing nimbly for a lion their age. Careful continues to put on a brave face, only she's doing a very poor job of it now. Her cubs huddle around her, Aggie being more visibly protective... for what good it'll do.

CAREFUL
How do you know my name?

ALIGHT
I know a lot more than your name, Careful. I've been watching you all...

CAREFUL
Why? Because you want to kill us? Like you killed my sister?

ALIGHT
It may not seem likely, but that wasn't me. It's someone who's not as pleasant as me.

CAREFUL
You spying on a mother and her cubs tells me all I need to know about you!

ALIGHT
I only noticed that you all seem a little far from home. You're leaving the Grove, aren't you?

CAREFUL
That's not your concern.

ALIGHT
That's where you're wrong, Careful. This territory is of greater concern to me than you can fathom. So, I ask again... Are you intending to leave with your cubs?

Careful says nothing. Her cubs look fearful. Alight considers them for a moment, raising an eyebrow as they take in Careful's terrified but determined expression. After a brief face-off, the Knight sits down disarmingly. Careful and the cubs appear confused/suspicious.

ALIGHT
If you're intending to leave, leave now. Jasper will likely be made aware of your absence soon.

CAREFUL

You're just going to let us leave? Just like that? How do I know you won't follow us? Or tell Jasper?

ALIGHT

(angry)

The very idea that I would tell that useless fuzzbrain... (calming down)... No, I'm not going to follow you or tell Jasper anything. I'm not asking you to trust me. You leaving just gets me one step closer to what I want. With you and your cubs gone, Jasper loses his Heirs and a consort and I step in.

Rather than turning away from Alight, Careful silently indicates for her cubs to press on ahead. Once they've vanished into the tall grass, Careful turns to face Alight once more.

CAREFUL

What about Vicious?

ALIGHT

Either she joins me or runs. I think we both know that I'll be doing her a favour by stepping in. She'll be well taken care of if she opts to stay, I assure you.

For once, Careful doesn't appear to want to argue. She knows that Alight is right. No lion could treat her any worse than what Jasper has. It's clear she's conflicted on leaving her only sister regardless, except one glance in the direction that her cubs have taken convinces her that they're her priority now. Vicious, on the other hand, is an adult who must make up her own mind.

Careful backs away from Alight, who remains sitting and emotionless. It is only when Careful vanishes completely that a ghost of a smile plays on the Knight's lips.

ALIGHT

I suppose this begs the question, Jasper: can you be a King without a kingdom?

We end with a shot of Careful and the cubs leaving, the world around them unknown and dark in the dim light of dawn but with the sun on the horizon.

THE OASIS - EVENING

The seat of Edge's empire is lush and glorious, although this tranquility is not matched in its inhabitants, who are nervously milling about and keeping a suitable distance from their King and his lionesses. For now, we cannot see his expression but based on his posture and the injuries to his back, he's obviously in a pretty dark mood. Radiant and Bright eye him occasionally, the former uncharacteristically subdued. Vanish is tending to her two youngest cubs, Lucent and Brilliance, who are completely oblivious to the tension hanging over their family.

Suddenly, the lionesses look up at the arrival of Alight, who is clearly tired from their long trek across the desert. After taking in the obvious injuries of their ruling body, they raise an eyebrow: their only sign of concern.

ALIGHT

I think it's safe to say we don't have our new Queen in hand... Or our future King, for that matter.

Vanish growls. Bright pulls the mother of all sad faces. Radiant shuffles closer to her sister. Edge, meanwhile, is official-sounding. All business. He's in a bad mood, but he is not one for throwing a tantrum or getting emotional. Yet.

EDGE

You better have important news if you've left your post, Alight. Deliver it. Or else we lose a Knight soon as well.

ALIGHT

(lowering their eyebrow)

Careful has fled the Grove with her cubs. Only Jasper and Vicious remain.

EDGE

When did this happen?

ALIGHT

...I'm afraid I'm not entirely sure.

VANISH

You didn't see them leave? You were ordered to keep an eye on things!

ALIGHT

If you recall, your Majesty: I was never ordered to contain those within the Grove. That's Jasper's duty.

EDGE

(getting pissed)

Do not backchat your Queen, Alight. Our situation is more dire than you realise. Not only have we lost Fade and Adamant but you dare come to us and report that you've allowed subjects to slip away!?

ALIGHT

So, you *have* lost Fade, then? I told you he wasn't ready-

EDGE

SILENCE! How many Squires do you know that could take on a whole clan of cacklers?

ALIGHT

(utterly bewildered)

Cacklers? How in the Great King's name did you run into cacklers?

VANISH

We didn't run into them, you fool! It was an ambush!

EDGE

Correct - an ambush concocted by that... that *Hopeful!* I offer her a place in my pride and how does she repay me? By letting cacklers kill my son!

BRIGHT

How... How can you be so sure that it was her fault? They seemed just as surprised as we were!

EDGE

This is why you need to work on paying attention, Bright: *the cacklers ignored them!* They only attacked us and I certainly didn't see Hopeful, Adamant or the grey Traveller running away!

RADIANT

It just seems ridiculous. Cacklers helping lions...

EDGE

We're not dealing with ordinary lions, Radiant. Adamant is special. It is the Traveller's will that she is to lead us. The cacklers were a setback but they were also a sign that I've made the right choice. We can't let her escape.

VANISH

(growling with irritation)

Never mind your 'signs' or the Traveller! If you believe Hopeful is allied with the cacklers, we'll risk losing our daughters as well as our Fade!

EDGE

I'm aware of that, my dear. So, we'll split up and take different directions from where we last saw them. We'll cover more ground and the girls will be in less danger. If the cacklers are going to come after any of us, it will be you and me. Not them.

Both Bright and Radiant appear uncertain, before exchanging a sisterly glance that confirms that they're in this together, regardless of their reservations. Alight waits patiently for further instructions, their brow furrowing when Edge looms over them. They're in for a scolding.

EDGE

Return to the Grove, Alight. If I were you, I'd make sure that not even a scurrier enters or leaves without my knowledge. Or I shall have this Oasis slaughter you like one.

Alight takes note of Edge's closest zealots eyeing them murderously, knowing full well they would be torn apart in seconds by such a number. With a sanctimonious bow, Alight turns and runs from the Oasis, the eyes and heads of Edge's subjects following them. Edge, meanwhile, turns to address his Queen and daughters.

EDGE

Try and rest up as much as you can. We resume our search for Adamant when the Traveller reappears.

VANISH

And if she doesn't come quietly like before?

EDGE

Oh, she will. If it means me allowing her sister and her hero to surrender as live captives after all they've done... Though I can't say our subjects will exercise the same generosity once they arrive.

Edge and Vanish consider the sizable circle of lions surrounding the Oasis, their eyes gleaming ominously in the fading light of evening.

