

CHAPTER 21

WORKING TITLES: UNTRUSTWORTHY, FRIEND OR FOE

GOLDEN PLAINS - DAWN

Our trio stand on the edge of the North Cleansing Desert, a vast and empty landscape that spans as far as the eye can see. Foreboding, despite its emptiness.

ADAMANT
We're going in there?

STORM
I know we gotta cross some desert to the Lake. And the stars won't be out for a while.

ADAMANT
Well, sorry, but I have a thing about getting lost in a land of nothingness.

HOPEFUL
Let's get going. (She begins to walk forwards) I'd rather take my chances in the desert than get ambushed... again.

Adamant and Storm look at her as she sadly utters these words. They both appear concerned and it's very little wonder: Hope seems more downtrodden than we've ever seen her. Her fur is still tussled from her fight with Edge and his family, almost like she - unlike Adamant - hasn't bothered to groom herself or see to the various cuts and scratches littering her body.

ADAMANT
We should rest until night. Not supposed to travel during the day, remember?

HOPEFUL
We need to keep going.

STORM
I hate to say it, but Adamant's right. It's not gonna do any good to be exhausted in the desert. I don't even know how long it'll take to find water again.

HOPEFUL
What if they find us again? They won't stop until they have Adamant! He killed Quiet and Clever. And you almost...

STORM
Hopeful...

HOPEFUL

I thought I could move on from what happened to Clever, Storm. I was getting better... and then *he* showed up and now all I can think about now is how I couldn't save her. I just... I miss her so much.

She begins to sob, collapsing to the sand and trembling. Storm and Adamant exchange a glance, the latter looking suitably scared.

ADAMANT

Then I'll just meet you at the lake. He can't follow all of us.

STORM

Yeah, no. You won't last a day on your own. We stick together..

HOPEFUL (protesting, about to suggest she herself stay behind)
I think I should...—

SNAP. The sound causes the three of them to look up in horror. Nothing there. They hurriedly work into the desert, looking behind them nervously. Hope is still visibly tearful. We see a white paw next to a broken twig and Fade watching the trio from behind a rock, visibly cursing himself for giving away his presence.

Unbeknownst to him, he needn't have bothered. Much later, when the desert is slightly lighter, Storm is looking behind her for what is presumably the hundredth time since entering the desert.

ADAMANT

Is he still following us?

Storm's eyes narrow and she sees a distant figure slowly following them through the sand.

STORM

Yep. Persistent little guy, isn't he?

HOPEFUL

What is he up to? I thought he would've gone back to his father by now.

ADAMANT

I'll bet he doesn't want to give some fuzzbrained report about losing us, so he's following us.

STORM

That's silly. He won't be able to find his way back again. Not by himself anyway. Unless he wants to get himself killed.

HOPEFUL

Let's just keep moving. If he's going to tattle to his father on us, I'd rather put as much distance between them and us as possible.

This is easier said than done. As the minutes roll by, our girls get increasingly uncomfortable with Fade's presence. Meanwhile, the Squire maintains his distance, his expression still unreadable. Hopeful finally reaches her limit.

HOPEFUL

I don't like this. Not knowing what he's up to, I mean. Why won't he leave us alone?

ADAMANT

I mean, we could kill him? That might solve the problem.

STORM

That's the thing: he'd be a fool to follow three lionesses that are bigger and stronger than he is. He's gotta know we're onto him, so why keep following us?

ADAMANT

I honestly don't care. He's a creepy creep and I want him gone.

STORM

Let's try to get him to talk first at least.

ADAMANT

OK, fine. If he tries to chew your face off, I'll try to save you.

The three lionesses stop. Fade stops also. For a moment, they consider each other through the sand and with an uncomfortable silence. Fade cautiously comes closer, greeting Storm first as she's the closest.

FADE

You're the King of this intrepid trio?

STORM

No, I'm a Traveller. Just tell us what you want, Squire.

FADE

Let's skip the titles. Just call me Fade. And I don't want anything from you.

HOPEFUL

(stepping in front of Adamant protectively)

You say *you* don't. But your father wants my sister, doesn't he?

STORM

Yeah, I've heard about that. An arranged marriage? Gross.

FADE

Would you believe I object to it as much as you do?

STORM

I'm sorry, lover boy, but no, I wouldn't.

FADE

Look, all I've ever had going for me in life is my honour. You saved my life and I owe you a debt, which means I can no longer aid my family in hunting you down. However, I've never been without a pride before so maybe if I join yours for a-

STORM

We're not a pride.

FADE

...Sure. Whatever you wanna call yourselves. I just think it's smart to travel together. For now. Then once we're out of the desert, we'll go our separate ways.

HOPEFUL

How could you possibly expect us to trust you? Your father killed my sister and aunt!

FADE

(bowing his head)

I'm sorry about that. My dad always told me that we were doing the right thing by killing a King or Queen here and there. That we were helping their subjects. I guess I tried to believe it because I loved him but killing an innocent cub and an old Queen with no power?

(As Fade continues, we see a silhouette of Edge looming over a frightened cub on his left side while - on his right - there's a silhouette of himself being the noble Knight and standing over the cub protectively. Both sides are a contrasting red/blue)

No, I can't be that. I can't be the King my dad wants me to be. It goes against what I believed a Squire should do.

There's silence from the three lionesses. Storm looks a tad more sympathetic, while Hopeful and Adamant are uncertain. The latter addresses Fade after this moment of deliberation.

HOPEFUL

Could we discuss this in private for a moment?

FADE

(taking a few paces away)

Sure. Take your time. (under his breath) Not like we're all burning out here anyway...

The Squire walks off, seeming not at all perturbed by the request. This only makes them more uneasy, like he expected them to act this way. Once he's gone, Storm huddles up with the other two lionesses. We only see their heads, the Great King hovering above them.

STORM
OK, let's discuss.

HOPEFUL
This is my fault. I didn't think he'd follow us once the cacklers had left. I thought he'd go back to his family.

STORM
You did the right thing. Even after what he did, we couldn't just watch him be torn apart. Besides, he was so bad at trying to kill me that you almost have to feel sorry for him. *Almost*.

HOPEFUL
If he's lying, it wouldn't make any sense to spy on us. He's got himself lost out here. Unless he's not really alone...

STORM
If they were gonna ambush us, it would've happened by now. He's not going to try and fight us by himself either. I know from personal experience that he sucks at it.

HOPEFUL
Adamant, what do you think?

ADAMANT
(mulling over her words)
I say he's less dangerous with us than by himself. I'd feel better if he's where I can keep my eye on him, if that makes sense?

STORM
So, keep your friends close and your enemies closer? I like it. (notices that Hopeful looks unsure) You OK, Hopeful? Any final thoughts?

HOPEFUL
(smiling nervously)
Oh, sorry! I think Adamant is right. (Adamant smirks at the praise "As always.") I just don't want anyone else to get hurt.

STORM
Of course! He can't be harder to look after than Storm Junior, can he?

Storm struts forward and indicates for Fade to come back. The Squire rolls his eyes and walks over to her.

FADE

Are you quite done? Last thing I want is to get lost out here in a sandstorm if I'm not allowed to come with you.

ADAMANT

(under her breath)

You say that like you're not lost already?

STORM

You can come with us. Just be aware that we're watching you.

She glares at Fade, causing him to look back at her with bewilderment. Her eyes follow him as he creeps past her to walk up front with Adamant.

ADAMANT

(to Storm)

We're gonna take shifts on babysitting him, right?

Fade looks extremely annoyed at this, now knowing that he's signed himself up to get absolutely roasted every minute or so.

HOPEFUL

We'll be right behind you, Adamant. The less time we spend in this desert, the less time we spend with him. Let's get going.

FADE

I'm sorry if this sounds weird, but I don't really recall your names. Maybe run them by me again?

STORM

You can call me I Kicked Your Butt Once. How's that?

FADE

Hilarious.

HOPEFUL

That's Storm. I'm Hopeful and that's Adamant, my sister.

ADAMANT

Also your intended Queen.

FADE

(starting to walk forwards)

Let's... uh... Let's not talk about that. I'm never going to be a King. Never wanted to be one.

ADAMANT

Did you happen to tell your father that? You know, before he killed my sister and chased us halfway across the Plains?

FADE

He just needed somebody to take over from him and you showed the most potential. Nothing I said or did would've changed that. What he wants, he gets.

(He sighs, clearly embarrassed to admit the next part)

And he didn't ever want me to feel I couldn't handle the pressure, so he tried to fix things.

ADAMANT

I couldn't ever imagine being ready to kill like he was back in the Stone Forest.

FADE

My sisters once felt the same way. Living in my father's kingdom changed them, like it would've changed you or Hopeful. I just got out before it could have an effect on me.

Adamant almost looks sad for him. Almost. Hopeful looks disturbed, obviously remembering Bright and Radiant. How they and their brother were probably once innocent cubs like she, Adamant and Quiet. Only to be brainwashed into being cold-blooded killers. Storm rolls her eyes.

STORM

Why didn't you just get out earlier? Become a Traveller?

FADE

Me, a Traveller? I wouldn't last five minutes. Ablaze always said so.

HOPEFUL

Who?

FADE

My Knight. They told me I'm only good as a Squire and nothing much else.

ADAMANT

(sarcastically)

They sound nice.

FADE

They're just a realist. All Knights have to be like that, I suppose.

Hope notices that Storm has pressed on ahead. Worried, she leaves Fade and Adamant to chat. While Adamant looks confused, Fade calls out to Hope.

FADE

Hey, don't try and go too far, Hopeful! It's best we stay together in case a sandstorm hits!

HOPEFUL

(moodily)

Like I'd leave you with my sister anyway! (She addresses Storm upon reaching her) Did you hear what Fade said? We need to be careful.

STORM

(moodily)

Oh, is Pretty Boy suddenly a weather expert?

HOPEFUL

(laughing)

No, it's the lioness with the weather-themed name, obviously. Anyway, what's up? Worried he might have a better mane than you?

STORM

(spluttering at her nerve)

You can mock but he'd be the least intimidating King in the history of Kings with that mane. (She turns to look at him, seeing him still chatting with Adamant) All the more reason to want to believe he's serious. About leaving his pride, I mean.

HOPEFUL

I wonder why *he* has to be King, though. His sisters seemed stronger. Scarier.

STORM

Especially that Bright. His dad seems like a jerk though, so maybe that's why. He wants a King over a Queen.

HOPEFUL

No. Why would he want Adamant, then? It doesn't make any sense. You don't really need a Queen to be King or vice versa.

STORM

What about Heirs?

HOPEFUL

The Knight would normally take over if anything happens and there's no Heirs. That's what Clever taught me. Shame her King, Merry, didn't have one.

STORM

Edge killed him as well, didn't he? (Hopeful nodded sadly) It's awful. Lions killing each other like that.

HOPEFUL

It is. That's why I'll kill him myself if he tries to hurt either of you again. I never thought I'd hate anyone. But I hate him. And Jasper. They're a disgrace to everything that makes us lions.

Storm opens her mouth to say something, clearly concerned as Hope is getting rather tearful again. Fade suddenly cries out behind them.

FADE

Wind's picking up, you two! We better pick up the pace. A storm's brewing.

STORM

We need to keep heading north, that's the way to the Lake.

FADE

Then, north we go. Just brace yourself, these sandstorms can get quite disorientating. At least it'll throw my father off the trail.

STORM

Riiight, because you have our best interests at heart.

HOPEFUL

(interrupting before another argument can ensue)
Let's just get going, OK?

Fade raises his eyebrows at her snappy tone, Adamant passes him to follow her sister while Storm eyes Hopeful with concern. She soon follows the party.

As time passes, the sand completely blocks out the sky and all we can see is an endless scenery obscured by the storm. The quartet are mere specks in the merciless desert, doing their utmost to navigate through the wind. Fade, the lightest and smallest of them, is nearly blown over but Hopeful - the biggest - nudges him to his feet and allows him to lean against her.

After a moment, Fade looks around with clear concern, his small mane bellowing in the gale.

FADE

We're off course!

STORM

Traveller's light, I think you're right! We should've reached the Lake by now.

ADAMANT

(scared)

What... What do we do now? I can hardly see or breathe with all this sand!

FADE

Find shelter, maybe?

ADAMANT

Except we're out in the open! I can't see anything, let alone anywhere to take cover!

FADE

I'll run on ahead, see if I can find anything.

HOPEFUL

No, you're too light and you'll just get hurt or lost. I'll go.

STORM

There's no cover, Hope! We'll stay and huddle together, that might protect us from the worst of it!

Although the other three members of her party seem unconvinced, they know that they have no choice. They huddled up together, faces scrunched up against the dense sand blowing into them. Suddenly, Hopeful's ears twitch and she looks up to see a distant figure making its way towards them. Fade has also spotted them.

FADE

It's my father! He's followed me!

Storm looks up in alarm, one eye closed against the - well - storm. Adamant raises her head slightly but it's clear that she has no energy to really care all that much. Hopeful squints with her remaining eye.

HOPEFUL

I don't think that's Edge. They don't have a mane.

FADE

Well, it's either my mother or one of my sisters. We have to get moving!

Fade, Storm and Hopeful slowly rise to their feet. Adamant half rises before falling again. Hopeful frantically tries to make her stand, but she's having difficulty remaining standing herself. The figure continues to approach. Fade tries to move forward, growing but he's visibly scared and the storm blows him backward.

FADE

Get away from us! I don't want to hurt you!

DAGGA

(chuckling)

Well, that's a fine 'how do you do?', isn't it?

The figure is a fully grown lioness, well-built and stocky. She's smiling playfully at Fade, who continues to consider her with uncertainty.

DAGGA

Don't worry, I'm a friend. My name is Dagga, and I'm the Knight of the Red Stone pride. I'm here to help.

FADE

Truly? (He bows his head) Forgive me, Knight.

DAGGA

(quickly walking by him, prompting a double take)

No need for that. Let's get you and your group out of the storm. My pridelands aren't far. (Hopeful opens her mouth - ready to make introductions - but Dagga only talks over her in an excitable manner) You can introduce yourselves once we're out of the storm. This little one looks to be in a bad way.

ADAMANT

(panting)

Hey... I'm not little!

Dagga ignores her, lifting her up on her back. She considers the others. Storm looks utterly bemused, Hopeful looks worried and Fade is looking up at her in awe.

DAGGA

(laughing)

My heroic deed has you spellbound, I know. However, I think it's better you all gape at me once we're out of the storm.

She walks on ahead with Adamant. Hopeful walks over to Fade, who is struggling to follow. Storm joins them to help.

STORM

Didn't she say she was the Knight of a pride? What's she doing helping Travellers?

HOPEFUL

Is it really that strange for a pride to be nice enough to help Travellers?

FADE

A pride that my father controls once got so hungry that they actually lured a Traveller in and-

HOPEFUL

(noticing that Storm looks scared out of her wits)

Fangs of the King, Fade, cut it out!

FADE

I'm just saying!

HOPEFUL

Look, she seems nice enough and if this were an ambush, it would be madness to come out into the middle of a storm alone to mount it. We're also quite far from Edge's kingdom, so prides might have a different custom around here when it comes to Travellers.

FADE

Or maybe they're just as brutal.

HOPEFUL

Are all Squires a barrel of laughs like you or are we just lucky? (to Storm) What do you think, Storm?

STORM

If you truly feel that it's safe, Hopeful, I trust you. Besides, she has Adamant. We have to go where she goes.

The three of them follow Dagga through the storm. It is clear that the Knight is used to the weather, her movements less of a strain than the younger lions even with Adamant on her back.

After a while, the storm begins to lessen and the desert becomes calm once again. Hopeful, Storm and Fade are almost covered in sand, their fur sticking out in all directions from the wind. Fade coughs out sand and pants as Hopeful walks forward to stand with Dagga, noting the tall red cliffs before them.

DAGGA

We're here. You can tell by the... redstone of the cliffs. Clever, right? (she rolls her eyes)

HOPEFUL

(laughing politely at the joke)

You live in the cliffs?

DAGGA

No, the pridelands are through this passage. The cliffs on either end will keep us out of the remainder of the storm. Follow me.

She walks on ahead, her charges following nervously. Storm - obviously remembering the ambush in the Stone Forest - is looking around nervously. Fade takes the lead, attempting to be brave but clearly as uneasy as his companions. Hopeful sniffs, clearing sand from her nostrils.

HOPEFUL

Wait... I smell grasslands. Plants.

FADE

Weird. Me too.

Once they make it to the other side of the cliffs, Dagga vanishes into the white of the rising sunlight. Hopeful and the others hesitate for a moment and then follow, squinting in the sunlight (think of the scene from Dinosaur where they exit the cave and find the Nesting Grounds), before it finally fades to reveal a bountiful kingdom of lush, green grasslands, protected from the elements by the redstone cliffs that serves as its namesake.

STORM

Woah...

DAGGA

Welcome to the Red Stone pride, everyone!