

## Chapter 19

"We have to draw him out?" I tell her, trying to keep the panic out of my voice.

"How are we supposed to do that?"

I place a hand at the small of her back to push her forward towards the pond.

"He knows that we're here checking out the place. I say we continue to do so to try and set him at ease, make him feel we don't know he's here. Eventually, he'll strike. When he does, we'll try and be ready for it."

"I don't like that plan... and what makes you so sure it's a he?"

"I'm not, just guessing. Let's try to get close to get a look at his campsite, I'm sure he won't like that."

"So why are we doing it then?!"

"Because we're trying to provoke him. Just stay out in the open."

Maysilee moves forward with me, one hand gripping her blowgun, the other clinging to my arm for dear life while she keeps muttering, "I don't like this. I don't like this. I really don't like this..." Over and over as we walk.

As to what remains of the fire, something catches my eye... or rather doesn't, because the string of ears is gone.

He's made a nest of sorts on the ground next to the fire out of the long grass. Smears of dark maroon are dried every which way. Something in the distance towards the tree line also catches my eye. I can just make out the opening of a hollow tree.

The thought of what this could mean starts to register and I decide that I

need a closer look, when I hear Maysilee yell, "HAYMITCH!!" and shove me forward.

In a quick, blackish blur, the tribute bolts out of the trees brandishing what looks like a club he must have made himself. He takes a swipe, but just barely managing to catch me in the leg after Maysilee knocks me over. I hit the ground with a hard thud, drop the binoculars, and they slide forward and into the pond as a storm of mental swears tears through my head.

As fast as he appeared, he vanishes again right into the dark pond.

I move in to get a closer look, keeping a firmer grip on my knife than I had on the binoculars. The pond is almost black, with the bright green pads and white lilies sprinkled through its surface. When I touch it, I discover that it is much thicker than water. When I pull the tips of my first two fingers out, they're coated in whatever makes it up.

I remain there, knife poised in hand, thinking he's been in there way too long.

He somehow springs out and flies straight at me, knocking me backwards to the ground. I swipe at him with my knife, but he bats it away with his club.

He positions his knees on my chest and it's then I get a good look at him. Small frame, but under the coating of pond there's a layer of rippling, lean, muscle. Then I notice the odd shapes dangling around his neck and realize that he is now wearing the string of ears as a necklace.

In his right hand, drooping almost lazily by his side, he holds his club. In his left, which he is now bringing closer to me, is what can only be one of the frogs from the pond. As it gets closer to my face, the expression of the frog contorts to rage as it hisses through long fangs and pupils that turn to vicious vertical slits.

The frog has spit something at me and it has landed on my neck.

Immediately, the skin where it hit begins to burn.

When I finally regain control of my senses, I push his chest as hard as I can away from me and Maysilee nearly tackles him, and he falls back. A flash of recognition runs through my fingers as they graze his necklace.

As he scrambles to his feet, Maysilee gets to her knees and tries to take a shot at him. She misses and I watch him for a moment before he takes off back into the trees. I get another good look at his necklace, and I reaffirm what my fingers already knew.

I sit there wiping my neck at the spot the frog spit on me. My hand comes away with a black foamy substance that immediately starts to prickle my skin. I quickly wipe it off on my pants, and my mind goes back to the tribute's trophy.

Somehow, he'd gotten ahold of some more of the explosive thread! He braided the stuff thickly together and is wearing it... *around his neck!*

I sit up and bring my pack around. As I rifle through it.

Maysilee asks, "Why'd he leave?"

"He knows he can't take us both on at once. Don't worry, he'll be back once he thinks he can regain the element of surprise."

"That's exactly why I *am* worried..."

"Just keep your blow gun ready."

My fingers have just closed around the small rectangular box, when all of the sudden, buzzing registers in my ears and the bottom of my stomach drops out as I think of the butterflies. Then I feel a small explosion on my cheek. Then another on my shoulder, my back, my arm.

At first, I think the ferran might have actually figured out the secret of the thread and is lobbing little balls of the stuff at me, but then I see the dozens of fireflies buzzing around me, every so often one flies a suicide mission into my body.

I start to try and swipe them away, but this just causes them to explode in my hand and pain shoots up my arm. I look up to find Maysilee in the same predicament.

I plunge my hand back in my pack searching for my tarp. A streak of dread bolts through me as I remember we left it hanging by our shelter. My brain frantically searches for another idea, and my mind settles on my on my jacket.

I peel it off as I scramble to my feet and start using it as a net for the tiny flying bombs. Each time one comes in contact with the jacket, it blows a hole right through. Still, I keep swooping it around us until the fabric starts catching in little spurts of fire until the melting fibers start putting themselves out.

I keep swirling it around us until I start seeing less and less of the glowing insects. With each swipe, however, the jacket stays lit longer and longer until...

Wham!

The ferran seizes the opportunity, comes out into the open again, sweeps my legs out from underneath me, and I land face up on my back. He continues on with his club raised to strike at the back of Maysilee's head.

"DUCK!!!" I shout at her. Maysilee, not needing to be told twice, immediately drops to all fours and the blow easily clears.

I look to my right where I dropped my jacket, still smoldering with little bits of flame dancing on its surface. I grab the box of matches that fell to the floor in the confusion and without a second thought, threw it on the flames.

Without waiting to see what happens, I get to my feet and fling myself around the back of the ferran tribute, my arms pinning his to his sides.

I feel his muscles writhing beneath my grip, and even though he is so skinny, he's coated in the pond sludge, and I find it's all I can do to keep him from wriggling free.

I lift him off the ground and his legs start kicking wildly. I turn around to see that the combination of the flaming jacket, the matches, and the dry grass it landed on, have grown into a good size blaze.

Still holding on for dear life, I make my way over towards the open flame. Once there, I slam his body down, face first into the fire.

The new sense of fear driven into him by the heat renews his strength and he breaks free and rolls up to his feet.

For just a moment, I see those golden eyes looking down at me in pure hatred. Then a loud bang, a short poof of flame, and the now headless body of the tribute falls to its knees, and finally to the floor.

Faintly, a cannon shot registers in the back of my mind.

We remain still for quite a few moments with only the sound of our heavy breaths to fill the silence. When Maysilee speaks, it's almost as jarring to me as the explosion.

"Well, that's certainly one way of doing it. But what exactly did you do?"

I briefly fill her in about the explosive thread, but then we both notice the now raging fire growing rapidly in size. The tightly woven trees making up the canopy of this swamp has kept it from being soaked every night like the rest of the arena.

"We have to get out of here!" Maysilee coughs.

"Right! But there's one thing we have to do first."

I make my way over to the hollowed-out tree I saw earlier, all the while feeling the heat of the flames growing behind me.

"What are you doing?! We have to get out of here while we can!"

"Just a sec!"

I make my way over and inside I find a whole cache of supplies. Soup cans, water bottles, dried beef, fruit, extra garments (all of which are smattered

with dried blood). I open my bag and haphazardly shove anything and everything I can into it. After removing a few items from the pile, I see what appears to be the shoulder strap of another backpack, poking its way out from the bottom of the supplies.

"Haymitch, we have to go, or we might not be able to get out at all!"

One look around tells me this isn't an exaggeration, almost everything is starting to catch, and I can feel the flames breathing on the back of my neck, sweat flowing freely in streams down my body.

With one good yank, I pull the bag free, sling a strap of each onto a shoulder and bolt to catch up with Maysilee who's already making her way towards the exit.

She glances back at me and pauses for a second.

"Just go, I'll catch up!"

As I get closer, I see the look of terror her face as she looks behind me and says, "You better run faster!"

*Now what?!*

I don't have to wonder long. One quick glance behind me shows that the heat from the fire has driven all the frogs away from the pond and are now pursuing us.

They are only feet behind me, and I can hear the serpent like hisses coming from them. Mutts... Mutts everywhere! All I can do is run and hope I can get out of this death trap.

I manage to keep mostly out of their reach, but it doesn't keep them from spitting that weird black stuff at me.

After what seems like a lifetime, we finally make it to the head of the passage that leads back to the rest of the forest. When we reach the opening, we start hearing loud bangs, one right after another.

"Keep moving!" I yell as the thought registers in my head that he must have secured the squirrels up in the branches with that same thread and now they are beginning to ignite, sending bits of squirrel and other debris raining down to add fuel to the fire.

When we finally reach the end of the passageway, we both jump as far as we can to clear the booby trap at the mouth.

Lying on the ground, out of breath, I lean up on my elbow to see if any frogs make it past the hole. Either none make the jump, or made it out of the clearing, because all I can see is the rustle of a few leaves kicked up by our hasty retreat.

With a thud, I slump back down to the floor, and we lay there panting for a few moments.

After a while, Maysilee, still in an out-of-breath voice says, "That's it, you don't get to make the plans anymore!"

We continue to lie there, now both laughing as much as our lungs allow.

After the laughter dies down, I start making my way to a sitting position. A thought registers and I start shaking her leg.

"C'mon. We'd better get a move on. If anyone was within ear shot of that, they might decide to come 'round and have a look."

We slowly make our way back to our feet, I sling the packs over my shoulders, and we set off back towards our shelter.

When we get back, the sun is starting to turn golden amber and we decide that, as a treat, we'll start a small fire while the dusk light can conceal the smoke, and warm up some soup.

"Why on earth, do you think, would anyone live in that place?" Maysilee asks. "How could he?"

I think about it for a minute before I answer.

"Well, he figured out a way to use the arena to his advantage, didn't he? He was able to use it as a way to defend himself."

"But why didn't those same defenses attack him?"

"I think the answer to that is whatever made up the pond. You saw him, he was covered in the stuff. I think that, along with the fact that he was in a really dense area of trees, is what hid him from being read by our binoculars. The only reason I was able to spot him in there was because he had his eyes open. Maybe that same substance shielded him from the mutts being able to see him too."

"You respect him, don't you?" She continued.

"Not for what he was, or what he'd become, but you have to admit being able to figure out how to use the arena to work for you as a weapon is... genius."

We both went silent in thought for a bit. Once the food is hot enough, we put out the fire. Then sit there staring into the glowing embers and gorge ourselves on our celebratory dinner. The sun dips below the horizon, and we watch the stars come out.

It's such a peaceful scene, and when the anthem plays signaling the days end, we both give a little jump.

Only one face appears in the sky tonight. We had absolutely no idea who the tribute was, until a very different face lights up the sky and stares down at us. He looks about thirteen, very pale and small, even before he entered the arena.

Apparently, he was from District 3. I feel this explained a lot. District 3's main export is electronics, and whatever training they receive in life develops your brain, not any investment towards physical labor. Like our district, it's very rare that they ever have a victor spring fourth from it. Maybe all of this combined just added up to be too much for the little guy to process.

That thread had to be a product of his district. Did he simply not know what it was? Surely, they have different facets that people are trained into,



maybe explosives weren't one of the subjects taught to him. Maybe also, his brain became too fragmented to really hold on to the full knowledge of what it was, but was still able to grasp that it was familiar to him in some way.

"You gonna let me in on what's going on?"

Her sudden words jerk me out of my train of thoughts and I become aware the anthem had ended, and the crickets started up.

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"Well, you've been staring fixedly up at the sky for a few minutes now. You wonder off in your own thoughts a lot. You should keep an eye on that. One day you'll get lost in there and your mind will walk you straight into trouble."

I sit and stare at her for a moment before she continues, "I just wanted to be let in on what you're thinking about."

"Well, first and foremost, I think that we should probably make our way inside now, incase our furry little friends decide to pay us another visit."

A look of concern flashes past her face. She gets to her feet, brushes her hands off on her pants and says, "Yeah, let's get inside."

Once settled, she pulls out the flashlight and says, "So, why the sudden drift off to Haymitch-land?"

"I dunno, really, I guess I just can't help but think about things."

"Liiiiike?"

"Well, seeing what we've seen today, everyday really, I can't help but wonder. Mostly of about who these people were and how they came to meet their end... It's like coming across the last few pages of a book. You can't help but wonder about the missing pieces."

"I know what you mean. In the Capitol especially, but also to an extent in the districts...Unless your here, really in the thick of things, it's so easy to forget that these are actual kids in here. Kids that, had it not been for the fact of ending

up in the arena, would've grown up to live lives of their own."

Suddenly, I don't like where this conversation is heading. I'm sure it's being blocked out from being heard by the viewers, but who *is* actually listening to us? If I don't want to make things any harder on myself than they are, I should probably avoid topics like this.

I hear the click of the flashlight and look up at the now illuminated face of Maysilee and see that she has little welts and scorch marks across her cheeks, forehead, and one that's bleeding on her lip.

The realization that these are the aftermath of those little fireflies, suddenly floods my palms with pain. I look down and see a dozen of those same marks across my skin.

"Yeah, I know what you mean..." Says Maysilee watching me look at my hands now smoldering in pain. "Now that we've had a chance to relax, I'm starting to feel them too, along with being sore all over."

"At least we took out another tribute, and I'll bet the Gamemakers are quite content with the towering inferno in which it was accomplished. Maybe they'll reward us with a night of no squirrels or something..."

As if the thought had summoned it, we both here a noise outside and I know our minds are in tandem with thinking that they've just arrived.

We pause, completely silent and motionless expecting to hear the continuous assault once again... but nothing. I look at Maysilee, who just stares back, reflecting my look of bewilderment.

I grab the flashlight and decide to have a look. I crack the door a smudge, shine the light through and am almost blinded by the reflection off of the silver parachute leaning against the door.

I put the light under my arm and hold it against my side, grab the chute and the little tube attached to it. I bring it in and Show Maysilee.

"Oh, finally a gift from a sponsor! I'll bet it's medicine for the fly burns."

"Only one way to find out!" I say as I unscrew the cap and squeeze a little onto a fingertip.

I waste no time in smearing it all over the palms of my hands and am greeted with sweet, absolute, relief.

I hand it over to Maysilee, who hastily spreads a bit of it anywhere that hurts. She gives a very audible moan of relief that makes my face feel very hot.

Feeling uncomfortable at what I think this means, my mind hastily searches for something else to focus on. My eye catches on the two backpacks on the floor.

"Hey, while we're in the mood for gifts, let's see what we got from our friend earlier."

"Maybe it's another pair of binoculars, since somebody had to go and lose our only pair."

There's a real edge in her voice as she says this, and I can't tell if she's being serious or not. She can't possibly think that there was any way I could have prevented that... can she? Either way, my face's temperature seems to go back to normal.

I decide it's not worth pressing and continue with the pack. I start pulling things out. Pretty much more of the same, really. A mess kit, matches, another pack of syringes, a sleeping bag that I throw directly to Maysilee who seems to be content once again, more sealed food.

Then my hand touches something hard with a little weight to it. My heart rises at the thought that maybe it *was* another set of binoculars. The thought passes as my hand closes around the cylindrical metal object, and I sit there staring at what is clearly a blow torch.

*This is it!* I think. This is the answer to getting past that stupid maze!

"What?" She asks.

"I'm not sure exactly... but I think I have myself a plan..."

"Oh great." She says with a roll of her eyes.