

Chapter 14

More bad dreams. This time of Minos, back in what can only be his home district, his arms enfolding his beloved. She has something in her hand that she holds out to him. An apple, ripe and luscious. She places it in her mouth and moves in, as if to kiss him. Together, they sink their teeth in and it turns rotten. Black and moldy, yet the two continue to devour it with almost lustful urgency. Their eyes begin to weep, but not tears, blood!

It begins pouring down their faces, out their nose and mouth, their eyes roll back in their head. The apple is dropped, everything goes mute, but the blood continues to flow as two words appear on both pairs of lips at the same time, when they mouth Haymitch Abernathy.

A deep and sharp gasp for air shoots into my chest as my eyelids snap open. My knife hand flies from my side of its own accord, distorting the tarp, slashing wildly at anything and everything.

Finally, the world comes back and I begin to take slower breaths, filling my lungs with the cool, damp air.

Damp... everything is damp. Why am I so wet?

I remove the now clumped tarp from off my head to find it's raining again... Well no, not raining exactly, more of a thick mist falling from the sky.

This is new. Are they trying to agitate another tribute into something? I would've thought that, with all those deaths at the volcano the day before and Minos yesterday, the Gamemakers would give it a rest for a little bit. Maybe there's still a lot of us left.

I look around and there's just enough light to make out my surroundings. I'm still tired, but I don't think I can sleep while being so wet. I'm also scared to see what else will play on the back of my eyelids if I somehow manage to fall

back asleep.

No, it's definitely time to get a move on. First, I indulge in a little food and water, then pack up and set off.

I may not have been able to use the thread to the purpose it was meant for, but even now the scorch trails it left behind are giving me an easy path to follow; but wait...

My eyes narrow on the path in front of me as my fingers instantly find my knife and pull it out again.

If anyone *did* hear the explosion yesterday and decide to come looking, this is a path leading straight to me. I still have my compass. Maybe I can use it to try and find a new way out... but what's the point?

Say someone does find the path and come looking, as long as I'm expecting it, wouldn't it be a great opportunity to try and get one step closer to home? Yes... as long as there weren't multiple people after me... but even then, I could just loose them in the maze.

So many thoughts and questions, I have to remind myself that sometimes you just have to focus on the road ahead and deal with life as it comes.

An old saying my father use to use comes to mind, "If you chase two rabbits, you wind up losing both."

Just have to keep going and be ready. By the time I come to the edge of the maze, the sun is already up in the sky, shining in bright mid-morning light. Being outside the maze causes my body to utter a sigh of relief. I feel as though my breathing was restricted by how closed off I was, and I am finally able to take a deep breath.

Where can I go now? One direction is as good as another. I can't get through those hedges without something with a little more oomph. It is possible my spool wasn't the only one in the arena, but it's likely the only reason I had

mine was because I gathered my backpack directly from inside the cornucopia, where the most valuable supplies were.

Can't go back there, the whole thing get obliterated when the mountain blew. I guess the only thing to do is follow the outside of the hedge and try to see if there might be another way to go beyond it.

I decide to do just that, but when I finally get to the edge of the maze, it just leads right back into the woods. Suddenly that brief feeling of relief vanishes and now I feel like a caged animal, continuously skirting the edge of his perimeter

I'm so deep in thought as I enter the woods, that I almost completely miss the tell-tale signs of something going wrong. The woods, and everything else around me has grown quiet.

My heart quickens. I can feel my blood start to rush and thud through my veins as the hair stands up straight on the back of my neck. My fingers clamp down on the knife when a voice makes itself known.

"Well, well, well... What do we have here?"

The voice is one I've heard before. My eyes search for Teo.

"Twelve, right? That's funny; you're a dying breed, man, but kudos to you for making it this long."

I see him. The top of his close-cropped head just poking out from behind a tree... but wait a second... it's the back of it. The idiot must think he's completely hidden with his back propped up against the tree.

I start to move closer, hoping I might be able to throw the knife into his skull, when I feel rather than hear something making towards me from the side. Instinct sends me sprawling to the floor as the spear flies over my head and slams into a tree.

From the ground I can see both figures, Royce and Titan, running full out,

towards me from opposite sides. Too slow, however, as I roll to my side and spring up to my feet again.

Royce reaches me first, hacking and slashing away, almost clumsily as I duck and dodge every one of his blows. He is almost as big as Minos, but since I'm guessing he didn't have the benefit of the stim-package, his bulk only slows him down. I make my way to the tree where Titan tries to pull the spear from its trunk.

Royce is blindly swinging and hacking away at me. When he jabs straight for my chest, I grab his wrist, slim my body by stepping to the side of the blow, and re-direct his energy to drive the sword tip straight into the gut of Titan (who's finally freed his spear and turned to fight) Royce stands horror struck at what we'd done. I use this momentary lapse to bring my knife straight up and jam it upwards through the base of his chin.

I yank my knife down from Royce's head, blood shoots out from the now open wound as the head bobs limply.

Bang... Bang... Thud...

The first two were the sounds of cannons firing for the tributes I dispatched in a matter of seconds, the third was my body as Teo slams into my right side, knocking the knife from my hand, and me to the ground. My left shoulder, already weak, now screams out in fresh agony. A white-hot pain and fury begins to mount as I feel my attacker push my right shoulder to the ground, pinning my back to the forest floor. He sits on my chest, placing his knees on the crooks of both elbows, making it hard to breath and nearly impossible to move.

Fury takes me as I stare back at Teo. I know this is the end, but I will meet it with all the strength I can.

He places his knife gingerly, almost lovingly at my throat. The gleam of pleasure is unmistakable in his eyes.

"Guess I owe you at least a thanks." He says as the edge of his knife bites ever so slightly into the soft flesh at the base of my neck.

I feel warm beads start to emerge as the blade starts the work it was made for. I register no pain, only the fact that I hate everything to do with this boy who would have my life.

"You took out two of my allies, lord knows they were stronger than me, and I have no idea how I'd have done it myself. I'm guessing it was you who took out Minos yesterday?"

He sees the new look on my face at the mention of his name and smiles.

"Ooooh yes, I've seen the way he looked at you. You would've thought you two were made for each other. Still, you're the only one left I can think of who could've managed that, and for this I thank you..."

He pauses a moment as he sinks his knife just a bit further.

"There's no love lost for him, but all the same, I think they'll welcome me back with wide open arms after I avenge the killer of so many careers. Later, twelve, it seems the odds are not in your favor."

A grimace floods his face as I stare unblinkingly into his eyes. I feel the pressure on the knife increase as he sucks a sharp intake of breath, and the cannon fires.

Is that it? Am I dead? If so, it is very disappointing! There's hardly any difference. I can still see, hear, I can sure as hell still feel... So, what's the big deal?

I'm still looking straight into his eyes as the strangest thing happens, they roll upward, flutter just the slightest bit, and close like someone pulling the shades. Then he falls limp on top of me.

With a feeling of utter revulsion, I quickly push him off. I get up and see the dart sticking straight out of the back of his neck. Suddenly a new voice

emerges, a figure follows, and I jump a little.

"We'd live longer, with two of us."

I gaze up into what once was a pristine face of a merchant's daughter, now covered in soot and pockmarked in beads of sweat. Her hair no longer buoyant and curly, but still bearing some of the streaks of gold that once engulfed her entire head and shoulders among the muck. Maysilee walks out into the clearing where lay the bodies of three dead tributes and one live one.

My hand finds its way to my throat and begins to rub in an attempt to soothe the pain and staunch the slow trickle of blood.

I look up into those clear blues that stare back as if telling the story of what they wish so hard they could unsee.

"Guess you just proved that... Allies?"

She nods and extends a hand down to me to help me up. My right hand still occupied at my throat, I unthinkingly reach up with my left and she yanks me to my feet.

I give a loud sucking sound between my teeth. When I finally have my feet beneath me, I cry aloud, "AHHGHH!" I start working my arm in circular motions trying to work the pain out.

"OOPS, sorry!" She says with a look of horror on her face.

"Don't worry about it." I say as I feel the redness slowly ebbing away from my face. "Just a little tender is all."

"From Teo knocking you down?"

"Nah, I had a little run in with Minos."

"OOOH, so are you the one that killed him?" She asks.

"Fraid so. I'd love to tell you about it, but I think we should get as far away from these three as we can."

She nods, but before we set off, she reminds me to gather their supplies.

We take their food and water; they even have a few cans of soup. We add it to our stores and set off, now two against whatever remains in the Fiftieth Annual Hunger Games.

We get a fair distance, and a hovercraft appears. The long, clawed arm descends three times to retrieve the dead.

We stare for a moment in silence, almost as if in tribute to the fallen, then Maysilee breaks it.

"It doesn't bother you in the moment, because everything moves so fast you don't have time to think, it's either act, or die... but afterwards..."

Tears begin forming in her eyes, I gather her in my arms and hold tight, knowing exactly how she feels. I've now killed three tributes... all of whom were part of the career pack, bent on hunting the others down and eventually turn on themselves, but that doesn't make it any easier.

I hold her for a few minutes and I realize that I'm not just comforting her, but myself as well. I've been so alone ever since I emerged from the tunnels into this arena. I let the warmth of her body fill my chest as it registers how good it feels to have the touch of another human being.

Maybe there's hope after all, hope that one of us may actually leave this arena one day.

She unburies her face and looks off into the distance as the hovercraft vanishes.

"Well, I guess that means we're down to the final eight."

A moment passes as the shock of what she just said finally registers. I seize her shoulders in both hands and almost shake her as I stare down into her face.

"What did you just say?!"

"What?... There are only eight of us left."

"Eight? Are you sure? From what districts?"

"I'm pretty sure there are eight, although I don't know exactly who's left. There were so many of us. I only counted numbers, not districts... That is except for the careers, of course. I don't think I could forget them if I tried!"

"I know what you mean." I say as I release my grip.

I guess it's the same for every tribute not from 1, 2, or 4. Not just this time when there was an overwhelming amount, but every year.

"So how many of the careers are left?" I ask.

"Well, there were four when I went to sleep last night after the anthem, assuming the one we didn't leave back there didn't die off this morning, she's the only one left."

"She?" I ask with the twitch of an eyebrow.

"District One. Chanel, if my memory serves. Weren't you keeping track?"

"Unfortunately, no." I say as we start walking again. "I suppose you haven't met those blue butterflies, have you?"

"No, why? What happened?"

"Mutts that I had the unfortunate pleasure of testing their venom."

"Really?!? At least you got away, 'else you probably wouldn't be standing here now."

"You're right, I probably wouldn't be standing here now, if it wasn't for you."

"Why do you say that?"

I quickly recap that day's event's about seeing Clay for the last time, the butterfly stings, me finding refuge in her abandoned shelter, and how when I emerged the outside was covered in bite and scratch marks.

"AH... That explains a lot. I went back to that shelter and saw it encased squirrels. I was at the base of the tree before I actually looked up and saw them. I ran away as fast as I could. Those damn things chased me. Luckily, they didn't

notice me running until I had a good head start. So, you were the one who let them in on my secret?"

"I guess so." I say with a shrug.

"Then you're the reason why I can't really trust those baskets anymore."

"Why?"

"Because I think they remember them now. When they see them, they swarm all over and try to gnaw their way in. They've gotten pretty good at making holes too." She punctuates this by holding up her left hand, which is covered in bloody strips of shirt.

"Sorry." I say almost sheepishly.

"That's alright, now *you* can think of something."

"Alright, I'll see what I can do.

"So, other than me stealing your shelter, what else have you been up to?"

An exasperated look floods her face as she launches into her tale.

Apparently, after the gong sounded, she was one of the first people (other than me of course) to come to there senses. She caught a glimpse of me as I disappeared into the woods as she sprinted towards the mouth of the horn to get some supplies.

She saw that her movement, along with a few others, had caught the attention of the rest of the tributes. As she looked around, she saw that too many people were going to get to the cornucopia before her. She zeroed her sights on a small backpack about twenty yards away from the horn.

Just when she grabbed it, another tribute had grabbed her by the hair yanked down hard. She turned around and kneed the tribute as hard as she could in the groin. The boy let go to comfort himself and she set off towards the woods in my direction.

When I pause her to ask why she went after me she replies, "Because I

knew that if you were going that direction, then it was the best chance of staying alive."

A small smile reaches the corner of my mouth as she continues.

When she finally settled in a tree that still had a good view of the meadow, the lake, and the mountain, she opened her pack and found a bowl, dried beef, and a blow gun with two dozen darts. By observing the remaining tributes after the bloodbath, she too caught on to the arena's deadly secret.

"It's a good thing too, because I was in a cherry tree. If I hadn't been so disgusted at what I saw, I might've eaten one before I put two and two together.

"But then it got me thinking and I decided to pick a couple cherries and poke my darts in them for safe keeping.

"It was finally time to use one when one of the boys got a little too close to my tree. I pulled a dart from a cherry and sent it flying into him. He dropped instantly. After that, I decided to move a little farther into the woods in case any more tributes decided to come poking around."

I can't help but stare and admire her ingenuity. I'd just been barely keeping my head above water and *I* had supplies from directly inside the horn. She had so much less, and yet has fully utilized every bit. Waste is something we all despise in twelve, but some of us are better at getting full use out of things than others.

"So, have you come up with an answer to our little sleeping arrangement issue?" She asks.

I choke back a laugh at her choice of words. "Well, not yet, but let's look around for a sec, and see what the arena has to say about it."

She looks at me as though I have mutts crawling from my ears and says, "What does *that* mean?"

"It's one of the things I picked up in our time here, when there is a problem

that really puzzles you, look for an answer in the makeup of the arena itself."

"You lost me..."

"Well, for instance take the squirrels. They've figured a way to get past the small sticks of your baskets, but I once spent a night in their presence using only a hollowed-out log and my tarp as a cork."

"Maybe we can find a log that's big enough for the two of us?" She asks.

I can see she's really trying so I just answer with, "If we can find one, sure! But I haven't really seen any living trees with trunks big enough for us both, let alone hollowed out ones. Let's keep moving and see if we see anything."

Finally, we come across a patch of peach trees, and as I look up at them, it gives me a thought. I go up to one, climb up until I reach one of the branches that are about as thick as a large coin, or when you make the "OK" gesture with your fingers. It's still springy, but it is much bigger than the twig-like branches she used for other shelters.

I rub my chin with my right thumb and say, "What if we made a shelter like the ones you've made before, but out of thicker branches like this? If I help, do you think we can weave them together?"

"Sure, it'll probably be a little trickier to keep the holes in the weave to a minimum, and I don't think it will be as structurally sound in terms of it being able to hold them together."

"What does *that* mean?" exactly imitating her earlier question.

She gives a small laugh and says, "It means I wouldn't exactly feel safe if we were to put it up a tree."

"So, let's keep it ground level. The large clump of branches would be more conspicuous anyway, it'll probably look less suspicious if we were on the ground and cover it with leafy branches."

We come to an agreement with this arrangement and when we see a

cluster of four trees close together, we decide that in between them will be a perfect spot to build our new quarters.

The work takes a long time, mainly because I have to do most of the weaving under Maysilee's instruction. The branches are too thick for her to manage alone. The result is a rather cozy sized dome inside the clump of trees that we cover thickly in branches. We make a door out of thick stalks and Maysilee ties them together which we then line with a generous layer of leaves.

"Not exactly inconspicuous, is it, Haymitch?"

"Well, under the circumstances, I think it'll serve our purposes. Besides, there are only six people left that we need to worry about in this whole arena."

"Well, you mean in these entire woods." She corrects, "The mountain's still going, making everything beyond the woods too dangerous."

"In any case, I'm more worried about those squirrels than other tributes. Besides, now that there are two of us, one can stand watch while the other sleeps."

"How are your water stores?" She asks.

"Not bad, with the stores we picked up earlier I think we can make it last a bit."

"Well that's good news, the gamemakers are making it even harder to collect the rainwater. Last night, I hardly collected any in my bowl because it was just a thick mist."

"Wait... You've been drinking rainwater?!" I say incredulously.

"Well, yeah... I mean I didn't exactly have any water provided to me. Since I knew the lake was untouchable, and I ran out of the other tributes stores so quickly, I decided that the rainwater was my best bet."

"Of course!!" I say slapping my hand to my forehead. "That's why it's been raining every night! I should've put that together a long time ago... Especially

since I never died in the rain after constantly being so wet in it."

I mentally curse myself. I hadn't practiced what I preached in listening to the arena. This obvious, life-saving fact was *literally* hitting me in the face every night.

"Hardly seems to matter though if we can't find a better way of collecting it." She says.

But I'm hardly paying any attention. I'm off in my own thoughts thinking about this new information.

She has to repeat herself and actually shake me to break my concentration.

"What? Oh... that's not a problem." I say shrugging her off.

"It's not?! Care to explain why?"

I reach into my pack and pull out my water bladder and the thing that puts a bright smile across her face and I get a brief glimpse of the girl I saw at school; my tarp.

In a matter of minutes, we set up the tarp close enough to keep an eye on it, but not so close as to completely disclose our whereabouts. We place a couple of the tarp's grommets on the side of the plastic around small twigs in the trees and funnel it down into one of the water bladders.

By the time we get everything set up, and start digging into a can of soup, the seal of Panem once more takes to the sky as the anthem plays. Titan is the first to appear, which means that Chanel (the District 1 female tribute) is still alive and presumably on the prowl. Royce, and then Teo follow and take their places among the fallen. The seal reappears, indicating that there are no more deaths today, and the sky resumes its night splendor.

I decide to take first watch, and we go inside where Maysilee takes out Teo's flashlight and places it upright in the middle of the hut.

"I don't think it'd be a good idea to have that on for too long." I say.

The light is very distorted by the many branches and leaves, but the rays that do escape will probably cut the night air like a knife.

"I agree, I just want to check out the ground before I lay on it. Don't want any nasty surprises." She says while preparing to lie on the bare ground.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I should have brought this out sooner."

I rummage through my pack until my hand emerges with the sleeping bag. As I unfurl it, I see her eyes light up.

She utters a small sigh of pleasure, "Ooo, it's been so long since I had anything to remotely remind me of an actual bed."

"Well hold on to your boots, 'cuz now that we're working together, we're gonna be livin' in style!" I say in a gruff voice.

She giggles as she makes herself comfortable. Once she's tucked in, I go to the flashlight and turn it off.

The hut sits in silence for a few moments, I look out into the darkness through a partially opened door and my eyes adjust. Suddenly, her voice breaks the quiet, and I can't help but jump a little. Luckily, it's so dark that I don't think she notices.

"What do you miss most about home, Haymitch?"

The question is so innocent, and my mind immediately flies to Brie. Then I remember we're still in the arena and there's a very real possibility we're on every screen in Panem. It's none of their business and I don't feel like broadcasting details of my love life to everyone in the nation, but she didn't mean anything by it, so I think for a minute and come up with a believable substitute.

"I think, my brother, Felix. But more specifically the look on his face and the brightness that lights up his eyes whenever something excites him. For many

years it's been a goal of mine to get his face to shine on a daily basis. A lot of the time, it was the best part of my day."

"Oh, that's sweet." She says.

I give a little huff of laughter at this and ask, "Yeah, well, what about you, Mays? What do you miss most about back home?"

"Well, obviously I miss my sister, but I also miss my songbird. It used to sing me to sleep, or that's what I'd tell myself. I'd lay there in bed listening to it until I nodded off and my mother would come in to cover it up for the night."

"Trouble falling asleep?" I ask.

"Yeah."

"Well, I'm no mocking jay, so I can't really help you there."

She laughs and says, "No, it's not a mocking jay either, it's a canary, retired from the mines."

"Same difference. Just try focusing on the memories you have of it. Before you know it, they'll surround you until you drift peacefully off to sleep."

"I don't think I'll ever have a peaceful night's sleep again."

I have no answer for her because I think the same will be true for me. The hut goes silent once more. Except for the sound of her breathing, which steadily becomes slower as time slips by.

Four or five hours pass and with nothing happening, I start to nod off. Finally, I feel I can't stay awake any longer. I rouse Maysilee and tell her we need to switch.

She agrees with only the grogginess in her voice for complaint. She manages to shake it off and I barely have time to put my head down on the bag before I'm out. Until now, I never knew how much of a difference sleeping with someone watching out for you can make versus having to be able to rise on your own at the slightest sound or movement.

I don't really dream, at least not that I can remember, but it seems like only a second passes before Maysilee rouses me to ask for a second turn. I have no objection and switch places.

The sun is now bright with late morning glow. It's so quiet around that I can hear the surrounding forest life going about its daily routine. It might have been peaceful, if I could ever shake off knowing where I was.

Nevertheless, sitting in such a picturesque environment with nothing but my thoughts and Maysilee's soft breathing to keep me company, I can't help but think that I want to go home.

Only 6 more deaths to go before that can become a reality. No... 7.

My mind tries to block out the fact that in order for me to go home, Maysilee can't. I can only hope that someone or something else will do that dirty deed. After she saved my life, I don't think I'll ever be able to cross that line.

Ok, so Maysilee is out, but maybe with our combined efforts we might be able to thin the herd. My mind brings up the book I read just before entering the games. Didn't Crixus and Sparta resolve to do the same? It didn't work out so well for Crixus, but Sparta was crowned victor. Hopefully one of us will be able to do the same.