

Chapter 8

I've been running into the woods for quite a while before all the excitement of the day finally catches up with me.

I sit down with my back to a tree and once again examine the contents of my pack. Now that I have time to breathe, all of what just happened sinks in. I remember thinking earlier that the amount of food and water I had in my pack was large, but now that I know it's probably the only source of sustenance that isn't poisoned, suddenly my stores look meager.

I also fully realize the consequences of my encounter with Minos and mourn the loss of my sleeping bag. I can cross my fingers and hope it won't get too chilly but knowing what's happened in previous games and how the Gamemakers work, I'd say I'm in for some cold nights.

I eat a few strips of dried beef and take a couple of what I thought were moderate swigs of water. I discover I'm much thirstier than I thought, and frown at how much the bladder has shrunk.

The light is now a deep orange. I'd better figure out what I'm going to for the night. The best thing to do is camouflage myself.

I haven't seen anyone since my encounter at the lake.

That makes me nervous. I'm pretty sure most of the tributes have headed in the direction of the mountain, but I can't be certain. By now, everyone's probably figured out the plot twist of this arena, but then again, this group is full of slow learners. With a little luck, maybe they can still figure it out the hard way.

I find a tree surrounded with shrubbery and use the black tarp as a tent by attaching one end to the base of a tree about waist level, pulling it tight, and

securing it to the ground at the other end. Once that is done, I get to work concealing it. Luckily the tarp should be hard to see in the dark.

I line the bottom of my shelter with small leaf covered branches to hopefully give me some insulation as well as padding against the hard ground.

I crawl in as the last bit of amber drains from the sky and thousands of bright stars start shimmering down in its place. I just barely lay my head on my pack, when I hear the anthem start to play.

Suddenly, my heart is in my throat with the thought of missing any tributes listed, especially if it's one of the careers. I scramble out, hoping I'm not making too much noise, look up and catch the very end of the seal of Panem projected in the sky.

The first picture is of a girl tribute from District 3. This means that all of the careers from 1 and 2 are still in the game. It's expected, but I still mutter a small curse to myself in response.

The other girl from 3 follows, along with the girl and boy from 4 I saw die by the horn. Gregor and the other male from 5 show up next. It saddens me to see that he didn't last very long, but I'm glad that it didn't come down to me having to do it. Silver linings amongst the crimson, I guess.

Following them, all of District 6, the boys from 7 (Leaving Adalind and Maple still alive), even little Calder made it; seeing as only the other male from 8 was shown. The girls from 9, one of each from 10, and the girls from 11. All gone.

Then the one I didn't expect. The very last portrait shining like a star itself, was Violet. The only one of us to get a score as high as those in the career pack, gone in the first day.

Something very powerful must have taken her out... Unless it was the poison. I find myself hoping that wasn't the case. For someone to have come so far with the grace and style she commanded, only to see her taken out by the

main theme of this arena... I don't know... just doesn't seem right. I guess I can't blame her. The only way anyone could really know is through trial and error, it just couldn't be your own or, "hello hovercraft!"

The seal once again shows up in the sky to end the broadcast and I make my way back inside for the night. I settle my head against my pack and start to feel the temperature sink.

Here we go... just going to have to grit my teeth and hope my hatred for Minos is enough to keep me warm.

Instead, I find myself thinking of home, wondering what my family and Brie are thinking, knowing that I live to die another day. I hope they're okay.

With twenty of us gone, it almost brings us down to a normal game. Not much of a hope, but it is a flicker. I have a promise to keep, and Brie's last words echo in my head as I drift off to sleep.

"Stay alive!"

Suddenly I'm surrounded by black. I must have fallen asleep, but something has woken me up and suddenly my hackles are raised and I hear the sound of tiny taps hitting against my tarp.

My hand immediately goes to my knife, but the sound starts to become more recognizable as my senses gradually return. It must be raining outside, and I give small thanks that I'm not stuck out in it.

I can't see a thing. I open the front pocket of my backpack and take out my box of matches. I strike one. The smell of sulfur wafts through the air as I look around the inside of my tent.

At first everything seems to be exactly as I left it, until I spot some movement by my boot. Immediately I'm plunged into darkness again and signals of pain shoot up my fingers from being burned. Hastily, I grab another match, light it, and look down at my boot again.

My heart jumps as movement springs forth, but I almost immediately relax when I recognize what it is.

I look down at the golden squirrel, now matted with wet fur. It pauses near my shin to wipe off the rain from his coat. I go to light another match before this one goes out, then I return my attention back to my odd bunkmate.

This little guy must've just been looking for a place to get out of the rain. I pause looking at the creature, wondering if it happened to be the one I met earlier. Had he been following me?

The gears start turning again in my brain and I have just enough time to remember that in the arena there are no such things as coincidences, when I watch the tiny squirrel lunge, sink its teeth into my leg, and I'm once again plunged into darkness.

I can hardly believe the speed of the little guy as he bites over and over, never striking the same place twice. I manage to swipe him off and I scramble to my feet undoing all the work I put into my shelter. I throw the tarp off and start stomping madly on it.

I pause for a moment noticing it is a little brighter out here and I can see, at least a little bit, but now I'm getting soaked in the pouring rain.

Then I see it. The squirrel dashes out of my tarp and starts making its way toward my bleeding leg. I have just enough time to throw my knife and dispatch my would-be assailant.

I pick up my knife which skewered the squirrel clean through. I hold it up for closer inspection. A flash of lightning illuminates the world and I see that the blood-soaked jaws of the animal are still snapping feebly. A thought occurs that maybe I had just caught breakfast. Remembering the fruit, however, I decide not to risk it. So, I lean down and scrape it off the knife with my boot.

As I do, I catch sight of my bleeding leg and go to inspect the damage. It

doesn't seem to be too bad, but I can't help shaking off the feeling that I'm not out of the woods yet.

Then lightning fills the air again, and I see it.

The flash pervades and reflects through dozens of tiny eyes surrounding and staring straight at me.

I see them, and they see me.

For the moment, we're at a standoff. Not wanting to send them into a frenzy, I kneel slowly, grab my pack and sword off the ground, and inch by inch, try to put one of the straps on my shoulder, all the while staring out around me looking for any signs of movement.

They just sit there, staring, and waiting.

I've managed to not set them off yet and am just getting ready to make a break for it, when I remember my tarp. I already lost my sleeping bag today, I'm not about to lose the last bit of shelter I have left. Not if I can help it anyway.

With an agonizingly slow and methodical pace, I slide the other strap over my shoulder, then ready myself for what is to come.

I spring forward, snatch up my tarp and run as hard and fast as I can. By the sudden chittering sounds, I know they've set off after me. I run and run but feel the bulk of the unfolded tarp dragging me back, that combined with dodging in and out of trees slows down my progress. I grab bunches of material and haphazardly roll it into a lump. That's when I feel the first small body land on my shoulder.

It has just enough time to take a chunk out of my ear before I punch it off with the large bundle of tarp. Another flash lights up the forest and I see dozens of them swarming around me like angry bees.

Every few seconds, I feel a new source of pain as another squirrel jumps up and takes a bite. They land everywhere, on my back, my neck, in my hair. I

start swinging my sword wildly as I run, occasionally hitting something and just hoping it was one of them. My eye's keep looking in all directions, searching for something, anything I can use against them.

The sky starts to brighten as the first rays of light shine behind the rain clouds. Up ahead I see a small clearing with a large rock formation jutting up from the earth in the middle. Not having any better ideas, I head over to it hoping against hope. When I finally manage to reach it, I give a great flying leap onto the first boulder I see. I clamber up rock after rock as fast as my straining limbs will take me.

The squirrels are much faster climbers and in seconds they're all around me on the rocks. Each one leaping forward to try and take its next bite. After what seems like hours (which were probably mere seconds), I finally reach the top.

The formation offers little to no protection, but it did provide one advantage to me, which was leveling the field. They could no longer drop down on top of me. If they wanted me, they had to climb the rock and come at me on level ground.

With slightly more aim, I swing my sword all around at my next attackers. One by one, I manage to dispatch the oncoming swarm. This is only a temporary solution, as with every tiny head I lop off, more pop up on the edge of my rock, and they're so fast, it's maddening.

With every passing second, I swing at anything that moves and continue to look around to try for my next maneuver, but there's just too many of them. No matter how many I kill, they just keep coming and pushing me back.

The heel of my left boot finds empty air and I know I've run out of rock. I grab the tarp in one hand and whip it and my sword around to try and keep them at bay. My left foot slides a little in the motion and I almost slip off. In a

reflexive movement, I turn around and look down.

That's when I see directly below me, with its mouth wide open, is a hollowed-out log, resting lazily against the rocks at an angle.

It was the only plan to pop into my head, so I seize it. I drop my sword and bunch up my tarp into a large ball as fast as I could. Then, with the tiny furry pursuers inching their way closer, I place my hands and tarp above my head, leap down into the opening, and slide down inside the log.

It's a bit of a tight squeeze and although I feel pretty good with my adrenaline going, I know I'm going to feel the consequences of scrapes and splinters later, but right now I don't care.

I turn my tarp into a cork as I spread it around my head, filling in all space above me to try to keep the squirrels out. I could feel them dropping onto the material above, feel them scratching around trying to get at me. I find myself praying that there isn't knothole or something that they can squeeze through.

As if the thought had summoned it, I feel movement around my feet below. Without being able to see what I was doing, I start kicking frantically to try and deal with whatever it is.

After a few moments pass, I realize that whatever it was, it wasn't hurting me (not yet at least). I let it go for now and do the only thing I can do. Sit and wait.

For a while, the only thing I hear is the scratching against the tarp above my head, but then a new sound emerges at the same time I feel something moving around my foot again. It was a weird buzzing sound that coincided with the vibrations. The strange thing is that it sounds familiar. I know I've heard it before, but I can't quite place it. With everything going on, it's very hard to focus and think about anything.

Then it hits me. It's the same noise that brought my attention to the little

camera at the cornucopia just before Minos attacked.

Were there cameras inside the log with me? There had to be. I wonder if some sponsor might feel inspired by my performance today and send me a flame thrower or something.

The thought brings a smile to my face as I think about setting each and every one of those fur balls ablaze.

Heck, why stop there? Why not torch the entire woods, maybe even the whole arena? At this last thought, something starts tugging at my brain, but it is almost immediately wiped away as it sinks in that the squirrels can't get to me.

Apparently, that's all the convincing my body needed, and I immediately felt tired again. Sore, battered, and bruised, I drift into nothingness.

When I wake up I'm momentarily disoriented before I remember where I am. The sharp panic that stabbed my heart upon waking in a dark wooden space like the inside of a coffin slowly ebbs away as the events return to me.

The smell of wood rot and dirt fill my nostrils as I begin to move. I find this is a difficult chore. My body has had time to rest, and now it is completely sore from injuries and strenuous activity.

How long exactly have I been asleep? It's so dark in here, and by the feel of things, it could have been weeks rather than hours. I wonder if my furry little friends have given up.

Slowly and gingerly, I start to work my hands back up to the tarp and push it out until the tiniest stream of light shoots into my sanctuary. It's white and intense.

The sudden flood of brightness into pitch black stings my eyes. I push the tarp up a little further. Every rustle the plastic fabric makes feels so loud that surely if anyone were around to hear it, I'd know straight away.

At first, all I see is a blinding white blur. Then my eyes adjust, and I start

making out shapes. Forward and slightly above me are the rocks that got me into this place. The only thing else I see is hundreds of leaves, stretching forth to block patches of the high afternoon light.

Damn, from the looks of things, I've been out for way too long. My small comfort is that there's no sign of the carnivorous fluff balls.

I take a deep breath, and slowly start to shimmy my way back up the log to get a better look. My head, wrapped tightly under the tarp with just my eyes and nose poking through, pop up and out and I take a good look around.

I see no sign of the squirrels, so I unwrap my head and breathe in the fresh air. I dump the tarp on a rock next to the mouth of the log and place my hands on the rim of the opening. My muscles scream as I push my body out and get a look at my surroundings.

I'm perched up high on my log that leans on the rich dark colors of the rocks. Beyond them, the tall trees fill the rest of the portrait, showing off their bright green leaves and their ripe, brightly colored poisons dangling from long fingered branches; as if bidding passersby to taste of their fruit.

Below on the floor lay a thick mane of green grass as if untouched (rather than created by) human hands. All is peaceful and serene, which is the snare of this arena.

Better get moving.

The first thing I do is go back and retrieve my sword, which by some miracle is lying right where I dropped it. Once it's safely back in my possession and the tarp placed back in my pack, I shimmy down the rocks onto the forest floor. My entire body is painfully sore with every movement.

Once the climb is over and I am walking again, I start to feel my stomach roar for attention. It's only then I realize just how dry my mouth is and can feel my lips start to crack.

I don't want to stop for food just yet, but as I move, I go to pull out one of my water bladders to take a drink. My once pristine pack looks as if it has aged a hundred years over night. That's when I notice that the bottom is soaking wet.

My heart leaps into my throat as I see the coin sized hole in the front. I rummage through and, sure enough, one of my water bladders has been punctured. The hunk of wood still jutting outward towards me. The sacrifice in exchange for my safe haven. In the arena, whether it be from a sponsor or from your own making, all good things come at a price. Be grateful it was the pack and not flesh.

I still have the bladder I'd been drinking from yesterday. I unscrew the cap, lift the opening to my lips, and feel sweet relief trickle past my lips and down my throat.

Each gulp I allow feels so good, it as if I'm taking that wonder drug I've heard so much about, Morphling. Pains I wasn't fully conscious of, immediately subside when quenched by the cool liquid. Like the drug, however, the more I take, the harder it is to will myself away.

I somehow manage to pull the plastic away from my lips and see there's about half a bladder left. I have to make this last until I can find a new source.

I continue on through the forest, keeping the mountain at my back for direction, and move slowly to try and keep an ear out for other players.

I've been moving for quite a while and I haven't seen any sign of another tribute. At first, I take this as a good sign, but I'm going to have to face something eventually.

If there's no other tribute, the gamemakers probably have something cooking on the back burner specially for me. Then I start getting a feeling... a strange feeling almost as if I'm being watched. Which is silly because I *know* I'm being watched, possibly by all of Panem.

Then I hear it, somewhere off in the distance. It sounds as if someone is trying to stampede their way through the forest.

Thanks for the warning, whoever you are.

I put a little more distance between myself and the oncoming blunderer, when I come across a fallen pomegranate tree with its limbs still carrying thousands of branches, leaves, and the occasional fruit. All are now spilling onto the forest floor.

I can hear the crushing of foliage and the clumsy stomping throughout the forest getting closer. If I'm going to hide, there probably isn't a better place than this.

I throw myself into the thick bushel of branches, trying to work my body through the tangles of thick sticks and leaves. I continue wiggling my way in until I reach something hard and figure I've reached the trunk.

The noise is steadily making its way closer and I still myself. I can just see beyond my tree through gaps in the leaves. The bright sun leaking through makes it even harder to tell what I'm looking at.

After letting my eyes adjust, shapes begin to materialize and I can see parts of the forest floor. Then something happens that makes my heart skip a beat. The crashing slows down.

Something about my tree must've caught their eye, or maybe I'm not as well concealed as I thought. Then I see a large leg stomp right in front of me. There's only one person I can think of who's big enough to own that leg.

Minos must've picked up my trail. He doesn't seem to notice me exactly but continues to linger. All I can do is stay perfectly still and hope he doesn't go poking around. Quiet for a moment, then the shadow the massive figure casts looks as if he is bending over and... yes... He's picking up a pomegranate.

Does he not know?! A bolt of excitement runs up through my spine and

into my heart as I hear him, tearing the fruit in half. I hold my breath and hope for a cannon blast... but none comes. What is he doing with it?

A few moments pass in silence, and I can feel myself starting to sweat. I'm just about ready to make a break for it, when he starts to move off again in another direction, leaving the area fast and noisy.

The sound of him tromping through the forest once more begins to grow fainter as he moves on, and I start to relax a bit... that's when the hand comes out from behind me and closes over my mouth.