

Chapter 16

As I hang there, upside down, my leg hoisted in the air, dangling from a tree, I take a moment to ponder at the strange turn events between the last time this happened and now. At least this time it was my choice.

We'd walked about a half an hour towards the two tributes Maysilee spotted. Once we got close enough to see which way they were going, we made it a point to pick a tree directly in their path.

I fashioned a faux twitch up snare and Maysilee swung it over a branch and tied it to the base of the tree. Then I stood on my hands and she helped me get my foot into the noose-like knot. Once I removed my hands from the ground, I began to sway freely. She strategically placed my pack in such a way that looked like I stopped to take a rest and eat, when I accidentally got caught in the snare of another tribute. She then took the binoculars along with all her supplies off in another direction.

As I hung there and watched the back of her form slip out of sight, I felt the blood begin to rush towards my head and wondered if I would ever see her again...

Technically, all she had to do was walk away and leave me to the two tributes who were noisily making their way towards me. They'd kill me, she'd kill them, and then she would be three steps closer to home instead of two.

Home to a district full of people she'd have to answer to for a double cross... This last thought comforts me, at least a little. My head is now starting to pound with every thud of my heart.

After an agonizing period of hearing them walking closer, they finally

emerge from a nearby tree and spot me dangling.

Both are male tributes, I have absolutely no idea what district(s). Neither of whom look very big, or bright for that matter seeing as how when they start taking in the entirety of the picture, they just stand there; mouths agape.

I look at them and swear just loud enough for them to hear me. Both look to be 13 or 14 years old. They eye me and then my pack.

Finally, one of them starts to recover and whispers excitedly to the other. I can't quite hear everything, but I clearly hear the name Chanel. They must think that she set the trap and I was unfortunate enough to get caught in it.

They stop talking to each other, cautiously look all around at the surrounding forest, and start making their way towards me. One splits off towards my pack, the other pulls out something with the distinct sheen of a blade.

At first sight of this, I start to become nervous.

Okay, Maysilee, anytime!

I see the other tribute now looking through my pack and telling excitedly how much good stuff is in there. The other looks in his direction while coming right up to me and stops just outside of arms reach. I get a good look at the blade in his hand and can't help but give an audible laugh. He's gripping a rather small pocketknife.

The laugh brings his attention back to me.

He bends as far as he can at the knees and says, "I know this situation is funny," he says, "but seems like we should be the ones laughing here, not you."

"Sorry," I answer. I look at his knife and add, "Is that for me, or were you in the middle of whittling something?"

He answers with a punch to my mouth. I feel warm starting to collect in my mouth, so I spit it in his face. I see his knuckles go white as he stares into my

face. Then they start to relax, but the blade finds its way to my throat.

"Look, I'm gonna do all of us a favor here and make it quick, neither of us want to be around when the grumpy gargoyle with the axe and a real bad temper comes back, and since we can't have *you* follow us either..."

I look him coldly in the face, press my head forward, and say, "Go on... Do it!"

A cannon fires and he looks to see his fellow tribute lying dead on the ground.

He swivels wildly side to side with the crunch of dirt and rocks under the balls of his feet, looking wherever Chanel might've come from. Then slowly crumples to the ground around my hand gripping the knife now jutting from his back and another cannon fires.

I see Maysilee reappear and say, "About time! What the heck took you so long? Not that I was worried, it would've taken him forever to do any damage with that toothpick, but still..."

"It took a while for me to get close enough, and even then, I'm not exactly a sharpshooter with this thing. The slightest wind knocks it off course."

"Okay, okay. Could you give me a little help here? He landed straight on my hand and now it's stuck underneath him."

"Yeah, I could do that... Or I could just leave your ungrateful behind here." She says coyly as she goes and starts putting everything back into the pack.

My earlier thought pops into my brain and she stands and starts walking in the other direction.

"Geeze, I'm sorry!" I start, then pause, take a deep breath, and calmly say, "I apologize, Maysilee, with all the excitement I just lost my head."

She turns to look at me, not quite able to keep the smirk off her face. She walks over, rolls the dead tribute off my hand, then takes my knife from his back.

She moves to the base of the tree and says, "Apology accepted."

With one motion, she swings the blade against the paracord, and I crumple, headfirst to the ground. It wasn't exactly a far plummet, but it still hurt. I get to a sitting position rubbing and comforting my head. I look over to see her rolling on the floor in a fit of laughter.

"Yeah, yeah, real funny." I say trying to sound hurt, but in truth, I can't help but laugh too.

Once she regains control of herself, she gets up and walks over seeing me rub my head. She lifts up my hand and kisses the back of my head. Soothing warmth, spreads from where her lips touched and goosebumps sprout down my spine.

"There, all better." She says and helps me to my feet.

"Let's collect what we can from these guys and get the heck outta here... although, judging by the weapon this one had, it's probably not much."

My assessment turns out to be pretty accurate, all they have was a little bit of dried beef, some trail mix, and a minuscule water bottle. Still, it's more than we had before, and we're now down to the final six.

It doesn't take long to get back to camp, but with all the activity and adrenaline rushes of the day, we're both exhausted. Now that we're down to the last four enemies, we start to relax a bit.

I know that's a mistake, but somehow we can't help it, but we at least don't relax all the way.

We set up one of the water bladders underneath the tarp again and plunge into our food stores. As we sit on the ground outside, the seal of Panem appears overhead while the anthem plays.

The two faces show up, one right after the other. Apparently the one who was trying to cut my neck was from District 9, his companion District 11. It strikes

me for a moment that we didn't even know who these two were at the time, still don't even know their names, all they were had been reduced to a number. They just had the misfortune to be in this arena like the rest of us.

Oh well, just five more to go.

Since Maysilee was able to sleep twice last time, she offers to take the first watch. I make sure she has the binoculars, and we both head inside. I crawl into my pack and am once again out as soon as my head hits my pack.

I don't know exactly how long I've been sleeping, but it doesn't seem like very long until I feel Maysilee calling my name and shaking my shoulder... my bad shoulder.

Something's wrong. She's whispering my name, but hurried and frantic. "Haymitch... Haymitch!"

I rouse myself and sit straight up in the bag.

"What? What's wrong?!" I say mimicking her tone.

I look around to see her. It's still very dark in the hut, but I can just make out her form sitting by the cracked door. She's looking out the door with the binoculars with one hand and hurriedly gesturing me over with the other. I get out of the bag and crouch next to her.

I can feel something's up, but when I peek out through the crack, all I see is dark, unmoving, forest.

"What's up?"

She hands me the binoculars and says, "Take a look."

It's set on the night vision mode. As I scan through the different shades of green, I see dozens of what can only be eyes, staring out at us in a flashy glare. I feel my gut plummet as my finger finds its way to the button on the side of the binoculars. Instead of the constant blue I expect to see, I see what look to be hundreds of bright orange dots in every direction.

Slowly, I lower the binoculars and slide the door shut. I look at where Maysilee is and place a finger over my lips. They haven't started attacking yet, maybe they don't know we're in here. That thought quickly vanishes, because they obviously know somethings up. Why else would they be here? They seem to be waiting for something.

Then I hear it. First one, then two, then it seems as if it's raining with all the thuds that land on the roof of the hut. Too late I realize that we don't have some sort of latching mechanism on the door. I don't know how strong or smart they are as a group, so I slam my body up against the door to try and keep it from moving. I can now feel the vibrations through our makeshift walls.

"Now we'll see if the time we put into this place was worth the effort! Go into the pack and pull out the flashlight, would you?"

"Won't that be basically advertising our presence?"

"I think we've got more immediate problems, don't you? We need to see if any of them are making it through."

She scrambles to the pack and pulls out the light. She turns it on and the hut is immediately flooded with light. She trains the beam on me and I have to squint against it.

"Not me, look around, see if they found a hole or something!"

My eyes have to readjust after the beam leaves my face. They can't seem focus with the light moving all over the place. I can only see what is in the direct path of the beam. As I sit there feeling the little bodies assault our shelter, hearing the chittering, squeaking, noises, I feel a little helpless just watching the beam move around the room. I wish she'd slow it down a little. I can't really focus on anything enough to tell what (if anything) is going on.

Suddenly, I see a flash of movement in the light.

"Wait, I saw one!"

"Where?"

"I don't know," I say exasperated, "probably heading towards one of us so find it!"

She shines the light on me again and I have just enough time to see the flash of fur scurrying towards me and jump towards my face. I reach up and knock it away with the back of my hand.

My blow must have stunned it a little, because Maysilee has just enough time to scurry around and bring down her foot to stomp it to death.

She stomps repeatedly, over and over until I have to say, "HO OH OH WOOOOAH, give it a rest there girly, I'm pretty sure you got it!"

She trains the beam down and lifts up her boot to see the clearly squashed carcass of one of the squirrel.

"Is that the only one?" She asks.

"How should I know? You're the one with the light. It got in here somehow, so it's only a matter of time until another one finds its way." I take a moment to steady my voice, then say, "I know it's hard, I'm freaking out too, but try to stay calm, and *slowly* move the light across the walls."

She takes a deep breath and begins doing so. But now that I know there's a hole somewhere, I feel as if she isn't moving fast enough and my muscles tense in anticipation. The sounds and the vibrations of the assault are making it hard to think and focus.

Finally, I spot movement at the base of the far wall and yell, "Stop! Right there at the bottom."

I assume she sees it too as I see the concentrated circle of light get smaller as she gets up close to it. Then the beam swings wildly all over the place and I can only assume she is trying to beat it to death with the head of the flashlight.

After a few blows, she pauses, and I see her train the light on the bloody

remains of half a squirrel jutting out of the bottom of the wall.

"Well, that's one way to plug a hole." I laugh.

In an out of breath voice she replies, "Hey, whatever works, right?"

"You're not wrong!"

"Now what?" she asks gaining control of her breath.

She still has the light focused on our new wall ornament so I say, "Go back to scanning, there might be other holes."

She does so, but none are forthcoming. She crawls over and put's her back up against the door right next to me. Then she resumes slowly and methodically moving the light back and forth to see if anything else gets in.

She then hands over the light and says, "Here, my arm's getting tired."

I take the light and start my turn at the lookout, and she rests her head down on my shoulder. I almost tell her to try and sleep if she wants, but I know she couldn't even if she tried. The surrounding sounds of the constant attack are ever present, and even though we might've saved ourselves from the physical attack, it seems the Gamemakers have one more trick up their sleeve and it turns to a psychological one.

So, we sit there, huddled against each other, constantly on the lookout for any fresh signs of movement and trying our best to fight the feeling of panic at our hopelessly trapped situation.