

Chapter 9

The sudden movement takes me by such surprise, that I can't stop the yelp that rises to my lips and dies in the fingers now spread across the lower half of my face.

Immediately, I reach for my knife when a voice makes itself known and, amazingly enough, it calms me.

"Well that was close, eh, Haymitch?" the owner of the hand says as he releases my face.

"What the...? Clay?! What are you doing here?!"

The shock of this unexpected reunion has not worn off and it's all I can manage to get out as my brain tries to make sense of the situation. What I'd thought was a tree trunk was apparently the incredibly still body of my fellow tribute.

"Hiding... same as you. Looks like your boyfriend's trying really hard to find you." Clay says in a hoarse voice.

"I keep telling him I'm not interested, but he won't get the hint. I think he's gone though, let's get out of here." I say as I start untangling myself.

"Easier said than done I'm afraid." He croaks, still lying as still as the tree he lay under.

I work my way out, stand up, and start rooting around for him, following where his voice came from. When I finally uncover his face, I'm taken aback by what I see.

What once was considered a handsome, young, face, was now as colorful as the poisonous fruit that littered the arena. Everywhere you looked on it was black and blue or covered in congealing blood. One eye was completely swollen

shut. The other glared up at me, studying my reaction which must not have been good.

A gore caked grin suddenly split his face in two as he said, "Oh great, I must look as pretty as I feel."

"What happened?"

"The girl from District One, she's a mean-spirited lil' lady. She decided to rearrange my features. Guess she doesn't like guys being better looking than her... Ya know, ever since the reaping re-cap, I always pegged her for the jealous type."

I start to uncover more of his body when he stops me, saying, "Please don't, she did most of my dental work with her bare hands, but she also managed to get her hands an axe. I don't think I can handle any more good news from your, somehow *pristine* face."

"Well don't you want me to try and help you then?"

"You kiddin?" He says with a cough. "Face it, Haymitch, I'm done."

"Well, yeah, with that attitude."

Despite what pain he's experiencing, this brings another smile to his face.

"I can't move, Haymitch, and I'm so tired. Just let me lay here a bit and recover my strength."

"Fine, be that way! I didn't want to bring you back to the mansion I found anyway."

"Finders, keepers in the arena, Haymitch. I don't want to have to take it from you if I end up liking it.

"You'll get all mad and resentful, then you'll try and kill me. I'll end up killing you and catch hell for it when I go back home. I just don't need that on my conscience."

"Well, thanks for your generosity, I guess."

"Yeah, I'm a softy... It's my one flaw."

"Clearly..." I utter before a smile cracks open my face.

"Listen, Haymitch, I want you to go."

I can hardly believe what I'm hearing, let alone what blurts out of my mouth immediately after.

"Don't you think you could use some help?"

"Thanks for the offer, but I'm not exactly going anywhere, and we both know that bad things happen to tributes who stay put for too long. Let me deal with my problems. Somehow I feel you've got your own to worry about."

My mind immediately goes to my stalker and I can't help feeling he's right. I need to keep tabs on Minos while I can, or risk him getting the drop on me. And, as much I hate to think it, having an immobile ally is like giving yourself a broken leg.

"Fine, you stubborn jackass, but it's unhealthy to push everyone away like this."

"I'll keep that in mind."

He closes his one good eye as he winces at the pain the laughter brings. Then I see the good humor slide off his face as he looks up at me once more.

"Jokes aside, Haymitch, you need to get going. *Remember* what we talked about before the games."

He spoke as if trying to pass me a message while attempting to keep others from overhearing.

"Nothing has changed except the venue... and the fact that they've released their mutts on us."

I get the feeling that he wasn't just referring to the manufactured mutations the Gamemakers have in store.

That little flame begins to grow white hot again as the pang of truth rings

home.

The rage threatens to set loose as I blurt out, "WHY THOUGH?! What's the point?! Why go through this whole song and dance?"

"They are making an example out of us." He said so plainly, it was if it was the most natural thing in the world. "They don't like being made the fool, and they will do whatever is necessary to keep others from attempting to do it again."

My anger begins to ebb away at his surprise at having to explain what he thought was perfectly clear. That was when a low buzzing noise began to grow off in the distance.

I turn my head in the direction the noise is coming.

In my outrage of the situation, I either didn't know or didn't care that our conversation was being bugged. They probably stopped the whole of Panem from listening, but to the powers that be, we were coming in loud and clear and now some fresh new horror is on the horizon.

I look back at Clay and the expression on his face tells me the same thoughts passed through his mind.

"Go, Haymitch, get out of here!"

"Anything I can do before I high-tail it?"

"Actually, do you have any water? I'm so dry I haven't been able to take a leak since yesterday!"

Without a moment's thought, I spin my pack around and pull out my remaining water bladder. I unscrew the cap and place the opening to his lips. greedily, he begins to drink. After a few gulps, he gives a small grunt in the base of his throat to signal that's enough. I bring the now considerably lighter bladder back, cap it, and replace it in my bag. The buzzing noise grows steadily louder as I get to my feet.

"Try and take care of yourself." I tell him.

"You worry about you and let me worry about me."

With that, I find the direction in which I last saw Minos heading and bolt after him.

As I leave, I hear Clay yell, "If you do make it out, Haymitch, tell Aurelia I was going to ask her out, but I got held up!"

I couldn't help but smile and grimace at the same time as the thought that what might very well be the last words I would hear Clay utter would still be a joke.

There were many things the Capitol had taken from him. His family, his home, and more than likely even his life. It was comforting to know that his sense of humor was something they couldn't, no matter how hard they try.

The thought is driven out of my mind by the rising sound of the buzzing coming from behind me. I can only be grateful that I wasn't closer to wherever it was these things were released from.

They, like Minos, were kind enough to let me know they were coming... and then it hits me...

With all the strength and technology in the Capitol, even though they try to make it seem as though they're hands are invisible, there are still traces of them everywhere. The camera that popped up out of the Cornucopia, the one that shared the hollow log with me, the fact that the mutations didn't just materialize next to us and take us out right there instead of giving us a head start.

All of what they have to control us in the arena is surely a wonder, but they're still limited by it. With all their careful and meticulous scheming, they can't plan for everything. There are... holes... little flaws in the system that remind one that the "might of the Capitol" isn't quite as omnipotent or as absolute as they want us to think.

If this is true, then one only has to look for the traces in order to stay one

step ahead. The arena, it seems, is talking. One simply has to find a way to listen.

Then another thought occurs. This place was designed as a glorified slaughterhouse. Huge and advanced for someone coming from the most technologically starved district, but it still has to have its limits...

Yes, that's exactly it!

The arena can't just keep going and going, there has to be an edge somewhere. What is it? What will be there? Could there possibly be a way out?

I'm going to find this edge and see what there is to see. If there are flaws in the system that makes up the arena, maybe there are flaws in whatever encloses it. If nothing else, having a wall to put my back against to keep my fellow tributes from sneaking up behind me is never a bad idea.

All of these thoughts flood my mind as I continue running through the forest. The trees that pass are little more than green and brown blurs surrounding me as I try to stay ahead of whatever is making that sound.

I've been running alone with my thoughts for a few minutes before I realize that the buzzing has stopped. Were they recalled to whatever pen they'd been released from?

I come to a halt for a moment and listen.

Nothing...

I can't hear anything. Just the sound of my own heavy breathing and the rapid thudding in my chest. The buzzing may have stopped, but something didn't feel right.

I relax my gaze a bit to see if the arena might start *talking* to me.

Still nothing.

I start slowly moving my head around when something catches the corner of my eye. I look up into the trees and see a very thick clump of branches.

I move closer to get a better look and my suspicions are confirmed.

Someone has made a basket-like nest.

In a muffled whisper I cry, "Maysilee?!"

No answer. I start again a little louder, "Maysilee?!?... Maysilee?!?"

Over and over, I go around the tree saying her name trying to see if she was concealed somewhere.

I don't think she'd believe I'd try to kill her... not when there are so many of us left, anyway.

How interesting to know that the three remaining tributes from 12 all went in the same direction. Was it just chance, or did they happen to see which way I went after their trance wore off?

I realize I'm no tracker, but there doesn't seem to be any sign of her. It's possible that she was only in it last night and the rain washed away any signs of her presence. Or maybe I'm still just not listening properly.

One comforting thought is that I haven't heard a cannon all day... Come to think of it, I haven't really heard anything all day except Minos' blundering, and that weird buzzing sound. This also means that, whatever that was, it didn't get Clay... or at least not yet anyway.

I wonder if whatever made the sound has trouble getting through branches. If so, that's useful information.

But now that I really think about it, there were no *real* signs of Clay around his tree either. No footprints to be sure, but no blood either on the ground leading up to nor immediately visible on the leaves...

It's possible I could have mistaken a few signs of blood for the tree's fruit at first glance, but what if Clay took a page out of the Capitol's book and made it so not all was as it seemed?

I sit there mulling this over and feel certain I can't count Clay out of the running yet, and in order to make sure Maysilee isn't here, I'm going to have to

go up and investigate.

I do one more glance around at my surroundings, when I see something I don't quite remember seeing before. One of the trees has brightly colored leaves. Blue leaves as a matter of fact. I don't think I've ever seen bright blue leaves before.

I take a few cautious steps forward to look at the blue leaves bouncing off their green surroundings. My sense of wonder and warning start to grow as I notice it looks as if the tree... is breathing.

My father's voice speaks up in my head, "for every danger you see, there are about ten more you don't."

I'm still under Maysilee's tree, about twenty feet from the electric blue mass, doing what I can to focus my eyes.

I'm just about to go for the binoculars in my pack, when I see it. The tree isn't breathing... the leaves are moving. Moving in such a way that it looks like waves rippling through it.

A streak of dread shoots through my heart and down into the pit of my stomach. A quick sharp buzz, almost like the whine of a mosquito but in a lower register, rings in my ear. Not from the direction of the bright blue leaves in the distance, but behind me. I spin around, as a bolt of lightning shoots up my arm.

I don't see anything from where the noise came from, so I lift up my arm to see what had caused this new excruciating pain.

There, sitting on the backside of my right forearm, as if resting itself, is one of the electric blue leaves.

Fireworks explode in my head, but I'm still able to register that the leaf, is a bright blue butterfly.

I swat it as hard as I can. That's when another buzz starts ringing from behind me, and another bolt of pain shoots down every nerve in my body, this

time originating in my neck. I smack at it and feel the soft, satisfying, crunch underneath my hand.

Then I turn to the not-really-breathing tree to see the butterflies have vacated their position in an eruption of bright fluttering wings, and are making their way towards me with a speed unlike real butterflies.

My mind starts to fog over, and along with the immense pain I can also feel the ability to form coherent thoughts begin to ebb away. The only thing to surface now is simple. Get to Maysilee's shelter.

I run to her tree and start to climb. I can feel whatever is in those stings start to work their way through my system. Each grab for another handhold to bring me higher comes with a brilliant pulse of pain and it costs more and more effort to push through. I'm about four feet below the shelter, when the sound of the oncoming swarm comes so close, it's as if I can sense the electric-blue hoard, breathing down my neck.

I'm not sure, but I think I begin to feel the weight of some of the creatures landing on my pants and on the upper sleeves of my shirt. I give a little thanks that they haven't reached any exposed skin and push faster.

Finally, I'm at her basket. Sticking out from the top of the entrance, on its own threaded hinge, was a hatch. I grab the top edge of the small enclosure, lift up the lower half of my body, and slide inside feet first, pulling down the hatch behind me.

It, like the rest of Maysilee's shelter, was just a basket woven from the thinnest branches of the tree. To try and keep it from reopening, I take off my pack and place it over the bottom part of the seam where the hatch met the rest.

I have just enough time to see the yet-another tight space I've gotten myself into and give a little chuckle at the irony that I was now in a cocoon. Then another bolt of pain shoots through my left arm, and I remember that I brought

some of the little buggers in with me.

I've heard of a tactic that some reptiles use as a way to break off a chunk of food, or even as a defense. I believe it's called a "death roll."

In any case, now I'm doing my best to recreate it. I remember thinking that the structure of the last basket Maysilee wove was amazingly strong. I could only hope the same was true for this one as I throw my body against its walls.

I spin as hard and fast as I can, trying to keep the fogginess from taking complete hold of my brain, and fighting the sensation of passing out from the agonizing pain spreading through my body.

Eventually, I bang my head against my pack, and when I look at it, I see that the motion has opened up the seam in the cocoon. The thought of letting more of them in brings me somewhat back to my senses and I button everything back up and try to assess the situation.

I haven't felt anymore stings; I can only hope I've dealt with them all. I start to look around for bodies, alive or dead, and see a few. That's when I notice that it's getting harder and harder to breathe. My windpipe is beginning to close up.

I hear and feel myself starting to gasp for air and the amount that gets through shortens with each attempt.

This is it; they've finally gotten me.

After avoiding the main ploy for so long (the fruit, the flowers, the water), I've finally been poisoned...

No, poisoned wasn't the right word. Poison was something you ate. This stuff must be venom... Another lightning bolt streaks through my head and into my heart. This one wasn't of dread or pain, but hope!

Didn't I get something from the cornucopia in my pack specifically labeled anti-venom?!

I grab my pack and start yanking things out without thought or care of anything but the little zipper pack that lie in there somewhere.

After what seems like an eternity of searching, I find the bright red pack with the white circle encasing a red cross in it. I unzip the three sides and open the container like a book.

The three syringes lay strapped, surrounded in protective plastic packaging. I grab one and fumble to unwrap it. To get this far, only to be foiled by a wrapper seems like a really stupid way to go out, but it just might be it. I place one edge in my mouth, grab it with my teeth, and yank.

Success! The wrapper was open.

I reach the first two fingers of my right hand in, pull out the needle, and see it's just a plastic cylinder. On the side it says, "Place on injection sight and press red button on top."

Injection site?!... Where the hell am I supposed to inject this thing?!

I feel my face burning as the lack of proper oxygen start's turning it purple. There's a weird sensation in my chest that I can only assume is my heart starting to beat out of rhythm. Then a thought pops in my head and I grab the red container.

There directly on the opposite side of the syringes, was a diagram. It showed a basic human shape placing the plastic cylinder on the side of the thigh and pressing the button.

Hastily, I mimic the picture. When I press the little red button, I feel the distinct pinch of the needle puncturing my skin. A thought occurs that I never did figure out just what kind of anti-venom this was, then I remembered that it's not like I had a choice. All I can do is cross my fingers and hope for the best.

Pain from the stings, the swelling in my throat, and my heart beating funny, continue to bombard me. With nothing really left to do that I can think

of, blackness forms at the edge of my vision. I find myself thinking of Brie and hoping that she can find happiness as darkness swallows me.