

Chapter 21

It's sometime later that I finally emerge from the maze. I look around at the tall Forrest in front of me and pause to think for a moment.

Really it doesn't make a difference which way I go, I'm sure the Gamemakers will find a way to bring us together. In order to try and avoid their intervention, I make my way in the direction of the mountain in the distance, where her last known location among the rocks had been, rather than trying to make it back to our... *my* old shelter.

I move along as silently as possible with my knife gripped in my hand, knowing it's just a matter of time before I'm forced to use it. The forest is eerily silent, which I've come to learn usually means there's danger around but continue down my path with no interruption.

I make my way along at an agonizingly slow pace, trying to hear any signs of life, but it seems when the last tributes fell, the arena died along with them. I know this could change at any second, but I have a feeling as long as we're making our way towards each other, it won't.

Every nerve seems to be standing on end as I move around each tree. Finally, it happens.

I just make my way around a large trunk, when I find myself starring Chanel full in the face. For a brief moment we consider each other. As I look at the hard-freckled face staring back at me from a curtain of matted brown hair, I can tell that she's as surprised as I am to suddenly find herself in front of her last opponent.

The moment of surprise passes as quickly as it came, then it's as if the

world slows and I see her make the first move.

Her face contorts from surprise to sheer rage as she brings up her axe to swipe for my head. I dip under just in time to feel the wind whoosh past and the axe sticks into the tree beside. Shards of wood splinter everywhere to emphasize the power behind the blow. With a flick of her wrist, it obediently releases from the trunk.

I dart off to her left and try to drag my blade into her as I pass, but with effortless grace she twirls out of its reach and brings the axe around for another blow. This time, however, I'm not fast enough to get out of the way in time, and I feel the blade slash through my left shoulder.

I keep on the move as a cry of pain escapes and my right hand finds the wound. It comes away with copious amounts of blood, and I wipe my hand on my pants to try and clear it; then shift the knife, blade downwards, into it from my left.

I chance a look to see her trying to make her way towards me with the axe flurrying between her hands and around her body. She starts to slash wildly through the air as I make my way toward her. I dart from side to side, keeping away from its bite.

When I finally feel close enough, I slash upwards towards her face trying to gain purchase on her neck. The blade misses her throat, but she can't move out of the way completely and I feel the knife cut across her face. This barely registers with her however, as she brings the axe around my middle for another attack, and I jump backwards.

She has the advantage in size and power, but I hold my own with speed and agility. The fight becomes a game of inches. I try to get close to her while struggling to stay out of her reach.

Every chance I get, I dart in to claim some of her flesh. Sometimes my

knife comes away bloody, but always never enough to do real damage before her blade comes around to strike and I'm driven back again.

It's quiet the chore to have to dodge the axe swings of a raging teenage girl *and* the trees of the surrounding forest, so I decide to try and make it back to the clearing before the maze.

Right as this thought forms in my brain, however, my foot catches on a root, and I fall backwards and hit my head on the base of a tree.

My eyes can't help but clench in pain and when I'm finally able to pry them open, I find myself between the stanced legs of Chanel, looking up into the contorted face, axe poised above her head, starting its journey downward to split my skull like a log.

Without a moment to lose, I turn quickly to my left and stab my knife down as hard as I can through her right foot. She lets out a roar of pain and her blow swings wide. I roll my body to the other side, bring my left hand back, and with every bit of force I can muster, slam the heel of my palm into the side of her left knee. There's a loud pop and her leg gives way as a fresh roar of pain thunders through the air.

The two blows I land distract her enough for me to slip out from underneath. When I get to my feet, I see she's staring at me with eyes of red-hot embers as her left hand tries to pull the knife from her foot, which is stuck and pinning her down to a large root.

This is my chance. I look around for anything that could be used as a weapon, but all I see are trees. The only other weapon is the axe still clenched in her right hand.

I get the idea of using my backpack to maybe bludgeon her or choke her to death with one of the straps, but no sooner do I start to work the straps off, when I see her stand up slightly, raise the axe with both hands, and bring it down

towards her own foot.

I can't help but stand there, mouth agape, for a few moments as my mind frantically tries to make sense of what just happened. I look down at the foot I thought she'd tried to chop off, but I realize she actually brought the side of the head down to the knife handle, which snapped off at the guard.

She looks up at me and smiles grotesquely as I watch her pull her foot off the broken end of my knife.

My heart feels like it snapped in two along with the knife as the knowledge that only one real weapon was left between us, and it was being wielded by... there was no other way to put it... a lunatic.

Her legs now free, she begins to make her way toward me, a stroke of luck finally seems to be shining my way when I notice that both her legs are now unsteady, blood flowing freely from her right foot.

I decide the only way that I'm going to have a chance is if I find a way to disarm her. A plan rapidly comes to mind and I gulp in displeasure at the thought of what I have to do.

Keeping my face towards her and backing away, I try to make it look as if I'm retreating to keep her from getting suspicious, while still allowing her to get closer.

When she's finally within slashing distance, she starts to swing wildly again. Although her forward movement has been noticeably impeded, she's lost none of her strength and fighting speed, but I have to let her in close in order to achieve my goal.

The nearer she gets, however, it seems the more blood-thirsty her blade becomes and I can't completely remove myself in time. I hop backwards and throw a few punches towards her to keep her away from my true purpose, but her blade makes contact, barely catching, but slicing into my chest, my arms,

and even my cheek.

This last one gets me hard as I feel the tip catch me. I feel and hear my cheek bone break. My head turns to the left from the force, then to the right to see what is to be my savior. I place my hand onto the tree to my right and slightly slump into it to give the impression that she's dazed me.

The crack of the bone had vibrated back up the axe and she sees me panting, trying to regain my breath. Chanel decides to work herself up to a killing blow, to try and catch me right in the side of the neck, when I finally put my plan into action.

When she reaches the point of no return on her swing, I duck down below as the axe head slams home into the base of the tree. Before she has time to recover it, I stand back up to the side of her outstretched arms, lace my fingers together, and bring down the ball of fists onto her elbows.

It works and she releases the axe handle. Instead of taking a moment or two to comfort her wounds or plan her next attack, however, she immediately lunges at me pinning me to the ground on my back.

She gets up to her knees, her hands find their way to my throat and begin to constrict around my neck, choking off my air.

At first my hands try to pry off hers, but they're in a death grip. Colors become fuzzy, little specks pop in front of my eyes. I realize I only have a few seconds of consciousness left. I curl my hands into fists and start punching her face, her nose, her temple, even her ear, but it's not enough. She brings her forehead down on my broken cheek bone.

The pain is so intense and white hot that it turns what focus I have left razor sharp and gives me an idea.

I grasp her hands with my left and bring my right thumb up to her eye. I press down on the squishy orb hard, and I feel the grip on my throat lessen.

Cool, soothing air begins to make its way past the pressure and fills me with the courage to press forward. Harder and harder I start to drive my thumb into her eye socket until she can't help but scream in pain and frustration and release the hold on my throat to try and remove my hand.

Too late, though. Suddenly I feel a slight suction on my thumb as it dips underneath and behind her eye. With a savage yank and a pop, her eye hangs freely on the side of her face by the thin cord of tissue still sending back information to the brain.

We both make it up to our feet and, for a moment, stare as if in shock at each other over what just happened. In reality, we were planning out our next move. My right hand closed over the dangling white and red sphere and in one swift, downward yank, I tore it free of its last tether.

Her hands, however, closed over the axe, and in almost a mirror image of what I had done, yanks it free and brings it upward, driving the blade into my gut.

In just a fraction of a second, I realize I'd just received the blow that would end my life, but I can't give up, not while I have a single breath left.

I'm still on my feet and I have to keep going. No weapon, I have to make a run for it. Then all at once as my feet started carrying me before telling them to. One thought becomes seared in my head, wiping out almost everything else.

GET TO THE CLIFF!!!

I start making my way back to the maze, knowing how long I have to go. I can feel warmth trickle out of me, but I dare not move my hands which are now clutched around what can only be a gaping gash in my middle.

I make it to the edge of the maze and can hear my peruser yelling to take the rest of me. Her injuries are slowing her down more than mine; so, for the moment at least, I retain the upper hand.

The journey is long and agonizing and given that there is a large scorch mark on the floor that I'm following, it is very unlikely that I'm going to lose her.

When I finally make my way to the clearing where Minos' camp still rests as a dark monument to the fallen tribute, I cross directly past the tent in an attempt to widen the gap between me and my fellow tribute. Too late do I remember the shallow hole that I dug, and I trip and fall forward. It's all I can do to twist in the air to make sure to land on my back. The fall is somewhat cushioned, and I realize I still have my backpack on.

I decide it must go and it's all I can do to peel the straps off without succumbing to nothingness.

As soon as I get them off, I hear the unmistakable crashing sounds coming up behind me.

I feel so weak and cold, but I've made it this far, I can't give up now. I make my way to my feet and stumble my way forward.

With every step I take, I feel the strain to keep conscious grow harder and the temptation to succumb picks at the back of my mind and works its way forward. My singular thought keeps me going. I know that any possible salvation lies at the cliff.

When I finally emerge from the hole, I see a bright pink sky surrounding the arena in the golden hour of the last rays of sun. Sweat and blood trickle down my body and I have a grim thought that I can't have much of either left.

When I find myself facing the drop off, I feel a cool breeze hit. It gently tickles my face, and I feel something gently press against my chest beneath my soaked shirt. The touch and thought of this last gift from Azrael brings a smile to my face. I look at the colorful sky off in the distance and think of Brie.

Then I feel, rather than hear, Chanel standing behind me.

I turn to see she's little better off than I. Blood pouring from her empty eye

socket and down her front. She stands there staring at me with the one eye she still has. I get one good look at her and notice that she too has gotten rid of everything except the axe that will declare victory for this game.

It's as if the world has been put on mute as she unceremoniously lifts the axe and throws it straight at my head.

My next action was the easy part, given that it was taking all the strength I had to stay standing. I let my knees buckle out from underneath me and fall face first into the barren, cracked earth, still grasping my stomach in both hands. The axe flies harmlessly over my head and into the great unknown.

The hard part now began as I used every fiber, every nerve of my being to try and stay conscious, but it is a losing battle.

My body starts to betray me as I begin to convulse on the ground. My one hope, the last thought keeping me alive, if not merely conscious, was that Chanel didn't peruse the attack. Instead, she just stood there, watching the last of my life leave my body.

I can't help but inwardly smile, and even choke out a final word. Whether she heard what I said or not, I'll never know. Mere seconds after I utter it, the axe finds its way home; burring itself in her skull. Then I hear and feel the thud of her body hitting the floor.

I lie there, pondering what very well might be my last word and am ok with my choice. My body tries to laugh but can't because of the convulsions and damage to the necessary equipment.

Finally, I'm consumed by nothingness and know no more.