

## Chapter 7

After wrestling with what the picture can mean, I start thinking of my family, and of Brie. What must be going through their minds with tomorrows plunge into the arena? Do they think they'll ever see me again? I made a promise and I'm pretty sure I can out last my competition. But the other tributes aren't the only thing I have to worry about.

This brings fresh, new horrors to mind. With all this attention the Capitol seems to be showing me, has my family been watched or bothered? I need to get back to them, now more than ever.

The only way to do that is focus on what's right in front of me. Clutching at this thought, I slip into the last bit of sleep where I don't need to keep one eye open.

The next morning, I go down to breakfast where none of the other tributes are eating. I don't blame them, I don't have much of an appetite either, but I can't pass up the last certain opportunity for food. I take whatever food I can manage to choke down. Azrael steps in with Orla, Aurelia, and Cyril.

With a grave look he says, "Alright boys and girls, today's the day. Your arrangements have been made, and in a few moments, you'll be escorted by one of us to your designated hovercraft. The next time you see each other will be in the arena, if you have anything to say, I suggest you do it now.

"Otherwise, this is goodbye, and for possibly one of you, see you soon."

With that they exit to wait for us by the elevator. We all rise, but no one says anything to each other. I decide I do want to say something. I wait for the girls to start walking away, when I gently grab Clay's arm and hold him back a moment.

"What's up, Haymitch?"

I look to make sure the girls have left, then in a whisper I say, "I just wanted to say, I think you might've been right all along, look at what I found yesterday."

I pull out the photo of me and give a brief account of what has been going on with Minos.

"Geeses, Haymitch! Do you know what this means? It means that we've been chosen for execution!"

He turns very pale and says, "We're not coming out of that arena alive, are we?"

"Not with that attitude! Don't give in so easily. Even if this is my time to go, I'm going to make them pay for it. Give 'em hell, Clay!"

He faces me, and for a moment we just look at each other. A grim understanding passes between us, then he extends his hand and says, "Give 'em hell, Haymitch!"

I grasp his hand firmly, shake, and we make our way out the door.

I think for a moment that maybe it wasn't the best idea to tell him what happened last night. I might've taken some of the fight out of him. Whatever happens, I just hope that it doesn't come down to me having to kill Clay or any other of the District 12 tributes. Though our time together was brief, it was enough for me to like them. Well... enough to not want to kill them anyway.

Once we're out in front of the elevator, I notice that four of us are gone, and only Azrael, Aurelia, Clay and myself are left. I guess the others are already on their way. Azrael gestures for us to get in the elevator and we begin the final journey.

Once in the lobby, the four of us split into pairs as Azrael leads me to my hovercraft.

We board, and I see we're not alone. One of the male tributes from District 6 is already seated next to his escort, and female tributes from 9 and 11 are likewise seated. I'm about to sit down when I feel a slight tug on the back of my shirt.

I turn around to see the huge eyes of Calder as he waves to me. Glad to know he can keep his spirits up.

Azrael and I take our seats as a capitol attendant injects the trackers into the tributes's arms. Once finished, the craft takes flight and we're on our way.

We're in the air for about a total of fifteen minutes before we land, and little Calder gets off with his escort and we're off again. We stop again to do the same for 6, then we land for me. Azrael places his hand on my shoulder and gestures me to move down a tunnel. We walk for a long time in the sterile lit maze of passages until we get to a door with, surprise surprise, "Haymitch Abernathy" written on it.

We find ourselves in a very small room with a couch, a changing area, my new outfit hanging on the wall, and the ominous clear tube through which I'll be birthed into the arena in.

The outfit that we'll all be wearing this year seems simple enough: Black cotton shirt, hunter green cargo pants, hiking boots, and a light, slightly darker green jacket. I put it all on and show Azrael.

"Not exactly body armor, is it?" He says with a raised eyebrow.

"No, but hopefully this means it won't be a frozen wasteland." I chuckle.

"That brain is always going, isn't it?" He says knocking on my head.

"Guilty."

A mechanical female voice comes over the PA system and says, "All tributes prepare to depart in one minute."

"So." I start, "Is this where you give me another one of your peppy

speeches?"

He laughs heartily and says, "No. like I said, I'm not worried about you. You just stay alive and I'll do what I can to keep you that way."

His words remind me of the last thing Brie said to me, and I find that little flame inside me starting to grow once more.

"Count on it!" I say as I step inside the tube. He presses a button and it slides shut.

"Remember, Haymitch, it's rightfully yours, all you have to do is take it. I know you've got the guts, now prove it." The platform begins to rise, and I'm plunged into darkness.

I feel like I've been moving upwards in the dark forever, when a painfully bright light surrounds me, and I am forced to slam my eyes shut. I feel the breeze of open air, and tons of delectable aromas begin to tickle my nose. I open my eyes and am completely taken aback by what I see.

It is the most breath-taking view I've ever seen. A veritable paradise, the likes of which I've only read about in fantasies. The sky is a bright blue with puffs of fluffy, white clouds, and a bright warm sun. We're in the middle of a large green meadow. The traditional golden horn of the cornucopia stands surrounded by a huge ring of tributes. Supplies are piled high inside the horn and scattered around it, the best are located inside and gradually lose value the further away they get.

Blotched throughout the meadow, are large patches of beautiful flowers in a wide range of every color imaginable. A cool, crystal-clear lake lies off to one side. In front of me, beyond the cornucopia, a large patch of woods as far as the eye can see. Behind me is a large, snow-capped mountain. I feel myself being taken in by the beauty of my surroundings, then remember why I'm here and focus my attention on the numbers counting down just above the golden horn.

The clock ticks to zero and the gong sounds.

I ignore my surroundings and bolt straight into the heart of the cornucopia. My heart pounds so hard that I feel it's trying to break free. I scan the supplies inside the horn as I run and lock upon a good-sized knife as well as a short sword that will suit my purposes. Just beyond that, at the mouth of the horn, I see a large, dark-green backpack.

I run as fast as my legs will carry me and don't stop for anything until I have both the weapons and the backpack. Once I do, I head straight for the woods. I run so hard I feel like my heart is going to burst, but I don't stop. Other tributes will be on me any second. The thought brings fresh sweat to my forehead. The only thing I can hope for is to put distance between us.

When I reach the woods, it finally registers that the entire time, I hadn't been attacked... Not one hand, blade, spear, or arrow has tried to stop me.

This needed an explanation. I see a tree ahead to my right and dart behind it to try and get a glimpse of the bloodbath that always happens at the start of the games.

For the second time in what might be as many minutes, I'm completely floored at what I see. No one, *not one person*, (other than myself) has moved off of their platform. The idiots were just staring around, open mouthed, and gawking at everything. I start to curse myself. If I'd known they were going to do this, I'd have taken a little more time selecting my supplies.

Oh well, I got the knife I wanted, and the backpack was actually from inside the horn so there's a good chance I've got some choice supplies. I'll check it out later when I'm sure I'm out of immediate danger. I look at my fellow tributes one more time, shake my head, and laugh out loud at this blatant display of stupidity. I turn around and disappear into the woods.

I continue to run deeper and deeper into the trees to put as much distance

as I can between myself and the other tributes. As I increase my distance, I slow my pace to a fast jog as I take in my surroundings. I look at the trees surrounding me and notice that many of them have lush, plump, fruit dangling down from their branches. Pears, peaches, apples, you name it. They're all around offering an abundance of food from their branches.

I decide to rest beneath a large apple tree to take inventory of my supplies; knife kept handy just in case I'm interrupted during this necessary ritual.

I unzip my pack to find that my initial assumption was right. The large backpack was stuffed with food, water, and supplies. The food and water were enough to keep me going for days, weeks even, if I came to it. I don't think it'll even be necessary since food is in such abundance in this arena. The water was packed in two large bladders, and look incredibly inviting after the exertion of getting away from the cornucopia.

The supplies consisted of a black plastic tarp, a pair of expensive looking binoculars, a lightweight sleeping bag, and a large spool of some kind of metallic thread, a box of matches, and a snake bite kit. I open it up and in it are three syringes labeled "anti-venom." What kind of venom would this be helpful for? No specifications, just instructions on how to use it. I can only hope I won't need it.

Out of nowhere, something hit's me on the head. Immediately, I grab my knife and swing around looking for my attacker.

I'm alone.

It takes me a minute before I calm down enough to see an apple fell from the tree and hit me on the head. I look up into the branches to find a single, fluffy, golden squirrel that must've knocked the fruit loose. He sits there pondering me, and I him.

I decide to leave him be and attend my supplies. After I finish packing

everything away, I come across the apple that hit me on the head. What the heck, I think, I deserve a little treat for making it this far. I pick it up and toast to the squirrel.

"Thanks!" I say and raise the juicy red apple to my lips. That is when the first cannon fires.

One loud boom sounds after another, each signaling the death of a tribute and the end of the bloodbath that must've finally taken place. I stay quiet and still to count the number of shots. Even though there are so many of us, I'm still taken aback by how many have fallen already. Eventually they cease, at least for now, and I count eighteen shots.

Eighteen dead within the first twenty minutes of the game; that has to be a record or something! Thirty left. I can't help but feel grateful because each tribute lost brings the odds further in my favor. The first cannon shots of the games have a double implication to them, and I better be on the move because it also means the fighting at the cornucopia has died down, those left in the career pack will be on the hunt.

I look back down at the apple and am just about to sink my teeth in, when those little red warning bells start going off in my head. I lower the apple and look at it once more. It looks delicious and the thought of its sweet juices flooding my taste buds causes my mouth to water. Still... something doesn't feel right about it.

"On second thought..." I say to the small ball of fluff, "... You go ahead and keep it." I drop the apple at the base of the tree and turn away as the squirrel watches me disappear further into the woods.

After a few moments, the first of a series of hovercrafts appear. I have a nagging sensation at the back of my brain, telling me to go back and see what my fellow tributes are up to.

Finally, curiosity gets the better of me and I circle back until I find a large tree near the edge of the meadow that can see over the others. I climb to the top as quickly as I can because since the hovercraft is moving in, it means no one's near the bodies they're collecting.

I need to know how many careers are left, where they are, and if possible where they plan to go. With any luck, ol' nose-ring will have been taken out of the game already. Somehow I doubt it, though.

Later tonight, I'll know for sure when they show the faces of the fallen in the sky. But even that won't answer the most crucial question of where the remainder stalk.

I grab the binoculars from my pack and look at the area surrounding the cornucopia. Once again, I'm taken aback by the beauty of it all. I feel as if I'm looking through a television screen at a picturesque park. It's a beautiful day out, the sun is shining, the birds flutter around the treetops singing, the flowers on the meadow sway in the breeze. The only thing that reminds me of the situation I'm in, is the blood staining the ground around the golden horn.

All the bodies are gone. I missed my first glimpse of who was lost already and will have to wait for tonight. I relax my gaze to try and pickup any movement. It takes a moment, but finally, I see a group of tributes far off in the distance, beyond the real range of my binoculars, heading off towards the mountain. The others must've gone up that way to escape.

I decide I need to get a closer look to keep tabs on the situation. No doubt they left a guard or two to watch the remaining supplies. Maybe I can see something useful to use against them. With a worst-case scenario of twelve careers to contend with. I need all the upper hand I can get.

I move slowly down the tree and towards the edge of the clearing, which unfortunately takes a lot of time, but helps me ensure no one's around by



listening for any signs of other tributes. I hear nothing but the sound of songbirds, however, and it adds to my ever-growing sense of unease.

Once I've reached the edge, I don't dare go any further at the moment for lack of concealment. I grab my binoculars once again to look at the golden horn.

Immediately I see movement, two tributes: a boy and a girl, I believe both are from 4. One tribute is walking towards the lake while the other stands before a large pile of supplies, rubbing something she has in her hands. I look back at the boy and see he's washing the blood he's been soaked in, off in the lake.

I look away for just a second to try and see if there are any others around, when two more cannon blasts cause me to nearly jump out of my skin. I look back at the careers guarding the golden horn and see that both are now lying still on the ground. Something took both of them out in the blink of an eye.

What can move so swiftly as to take two tributes out almost simultaneously, when they were yards apart. I need a closer look, but I can't be too hasty, incase whatever killed them is still around.

I move as quickly as I can to get close enough where the hovercrafts won't come in to retrieve them. I sprint across the plains until I reach a patch of flowers near the lake. I throw myself flat into them to try and keep out of sight. The flowers are about a foot and a half tall, so as long as someone isn't too close, I shouldn't be seen.

The aroma of the flowers is very powerful and fills my nostrils. I'm only there for a matter of seconds, but for some reason my head starts becoming foggy. Seeing no movement around, I sneak up to the male tribute lying face down in the shallow waters. I look him up and down and see absolutely nothing wrong with him, aside from the fact that he was dead. Not even a scratch which could have been a result of the bloodbath. The fogginess in my head has gotten a little worse, and suddenly a streak of terror sinks my heart into my stomach.

I've heard of certain gasses, both natural and artificial, that are used to kill people. I start to panic for a moment thinking maybe that's what killed these tributes, but then I start thinking straight again and relax.

For one thing, I'm not dead already. Whatever took them out seemed to work almost instantly. For another, we're out in open air, a person would have to be really close to the source for it to be that effective.

As it turns out, I'm not *that* far off. This become clear to me as soon as I walk over to the girl tribute. At first the mystery continued, because like the boy, nothing seemed to be very wrong with her. That's when I see the apple. It'd rolled away from her hand when she fell, but sure enough, there it was with one large bite taken out of it.

Suddenly everything starts falling into place in my mind. The plethora of food and water (both in the supplies AND the arena), why there were no survival stations such as the edible plant station, the hunting station, etc., even the fogginess after being in the flowers.

Everything that makes this arena so breathtakingly gorgeous, is also deadly poisonous.

In a way, it makes sense, I guess. With so many tributes this year, they've got to do what they can to keep the time relatively short. Once, my father told me that when nature creates something more brilliant in color than its surroundings, it's a warning to others that death is in store for anyone who chooses to disobey it.

I stand next to the cornucopia near the fallen girl for a few moments lost in thought, when I see some small movement on the ground next to the horn. It looks as if a small cylindrical camera had popped up from the grass. It turns around and freezes when it locks on me. I bend down to get a closer look, when a spear slams into the side of the golden horn with a loud thud, right where my

head had been seconds before.

Without thinking I sprawl down flat, roll away, and spring up to my feet as fast as I can. Once I get my legs underneath me, I look at my attacker.

"There you are, Curly!" Said the nose-ringed behemoth. "Been looking for you all day!"

"Took you long enough, you sure your heart is really in this?" I ask.

He snorts and stamps his leg down in frustration.

"Let me show you just how much, with the pleasure I take from smashing every bone in your body!"

"Careful, Minos, that was a complete thought. Save what little brain power you have, you're gonna need it."

He stampedes forward drawing his right fist back. I lunge over to my left out of his way and Minos' fist hits the cornucopia, leaving a giant dent where it struck.

It didn't even begin to faze him. He just turns toward me and renews his attack. Despite his size, he's unnervingly fast and carries a lot of force with him. I doubt he can keep up a good pace for long, however, and if I could put distance in between us, I could probably get away. But I need to keep him off my trail and with a large open meadow like this, he could see exactly where I go for quite some time after he fails to catch me.

My best chanced is to find a way to keep him occupied while I make my escape. To buy some time, I climb on top of the horn. Tiny grooves in the metal are enough for me to gain traction and I get up quickly. Due to the weight and bulk of my competitor, he seems to have a little trouble.

I don't have much time before he finally makes his way up, I have to think of a plan and fast!

My first thought is to grab my sword, but to my dismay, I find I don't have

it with me. I must've left it on the ground. I clutch my knife in one hand, open my backpack, and frantically search for anything useful. My eyes fall upon my tightly rolled sleeping bag.

A crazy idea pops into my head that, if I can pull off, will hide my escape. But to do it, I need both hands. I drop my knife in the pack, pull out the bag and unfurl it, then put the pack on my back.

It's a thin bag, designed mostly to reflect body heat. I look at the opening of it and discover that fortune smiles upon me. It's a wide mouth with an excess of fabric, complete with a draw string to close it around the occupant's face to keep the heat in.

I've got one chance at this and I'm going to take it. I grab the mouth of the bag so that it's opened wide between my hands and wrap the end of the drawstring in my right. Then I carefully accordion the length of the bag in each hand scrunching up the fabric with my fingers and thumb until I have a flat net.

I go over to where I can hear Minos clumsily making his way up and peer over to see his progress. He's about three quarters of the way. It's now or never. I crouch down and place my hands and net on the shiny metal.

"Hey, Minos!" I yell to grab his attention.

It works, and I use my legs to spring forward as I aim my sleeping bag towards his head as I slide down the horn. It takes him by surprise and the top portion of his body is swallowed by my makeshift trap. I decide to go for broke and let gravity do the work as we both slide downwards toward the ground. The shock of my decent easily dislodges his hands and his arms snap to his sides. I allow my bag to unfurl as it engulfs him further acting like a snake devouring its prey.

We both hit the ground and are now sprawled out. The bag made it to about halfway down his forearms. This is the best I can hope for and I release

the rest of the fabric and pull the drawstring as tight as I can around his wriggling body. Once it's as tight as it can go, I quickly tie a knot.

Once his surprise wears off it won't take him long to get out, so I drop the string and get ready to bolt, when I remember my sword. I frantically look around and lock on the glittering blade, blinking up at me from the grass. I snatch it up and sprint as fast as I can back toward the woods.

When I finally make it back behind the tree line, I hear a long, un-muffled yell from Minos. He's broken free. I don't dare look back to give him more time to discover my location if he hasn't already. All I can do is run and hope.