

Chapter II

Higher and higher the blackness billows into the sky until it seems to hit an invisible barrier, and begins to spread outwards, blackening out the bright sky with its own deadly form of nightshade.

At the topmost part of the volcano, large fingers of bright red and orange are spilling downwards. On the base, little spots scurry around the rivers of lava as every living creature, both man and beast, head away from the oncoming blaze... and have no other direction to go except towards me.

Explosion follows explosion, as fiery hail begins to rain down towards the plains and forest below. I look down towards the open fields to see tributes running away from the base, toward the cornucopia.

I have just enough time to think that there is no way I could possibly hear a cannon fire in all this chaos, when something takes me completely by surprise.

The golden horn, which normally serves as the base for the career pack, explodes outwards as one of the huge fists of fire smashes down on it. Bits of gold and shattered supplies fly everywhere.

Seeing the cornucopia destroyed from one of the fireballs overhead gets me thinking of my own safety. I lower the binoculars and look up just in time to see a large bright blur flying across the sky, leaving an arc of smoke behind it, making its way towards me.

"Time to run little rabbit." I hear my father's voice whisper in my head. I shove the binoculars in my pack and scramble down the tree and run in the first open direction I see, towards where the cornucopia had, until recently, stood.

Only seconds pass before I feel the impact of the fireball as it slams home. The resulting shockwave sends me sprawling forward on my face.

I prop myself up, turn over to my haunches, and see the tree I just came down from was now completely engulfed in flame.

Got to keep moving!

It becomes a mantra as I keep repeating it to myself in my head.

I place my palms on the ground and shoot myself upwards to my feet. I don't want to continue running back toward where the cornucopia stood, but the fire spreading from the tree gives me little option.

I decide *where* isn't my problem for now, as long as I stay out of reach of the flames. Even this proves to be somewhat tricky as I now have to look up as well as where I'm headed.

Every few minutes I have to violently shift course as another chunk of flaming mountain bombards the area around me. Another problem literally descends upon me, as I notice the black clouds scorching the sky are getting closer to the ground. I'm going to have to think of something and fast, before the air itself becomes toxic, adding to the already numerous poisons littering the arena.

I start to think how this can possibly get any worse, when the violent shaking of the ground resumes and I find myself struggling to stay upright. I look down and see a tiny, red vein open up and shoot through the ground between my legs, as if the whole place had become infected.

I hop far to the left when the vein not only spreads but widens with unnerving speed. The ground opens up like the mouth of hell to swallow any poor tribute unlucky enough to be caught in its path.

The terrain not only starts to part from itself, but shoot upward in some areas, and sink down in others. Trees became uprooted as the ground upon which they stand either ascends or falls into the fiery abyss. The land becomes a giant obstacle course of pads of earth, jungle gyms of trees, and rivers of lava. I

find temporary refuge in a tree that seems to have kept stable among the shifts.

I settle among the branches for a moment to catch my breath. I'm unable to do so because the fiery hail has turned to a steady snow of ash, floating through the air and settling on everything around.

I take off my jacket and shirt, and place the latter over my head, using the neck hole as an opening for my eyes, and I tie the sleeves behind my head. Then I zip myself back into my jacket.

Suddenly, movement catches at the corner of my eye as I see the small figure of a tribute running and hopping from ground patch to ground patch with what looks like their jacket trailing from their hand. A little way behind the tribute is a pack of squirrels, their fur now blackened and frayed with soot, in pursuit of their next meal.

The figure reaches an edge with nowhere left to leap to and turns to face his attackers. As the tribute turns, I catch a momentary sparkle, and something tugs at my memory.

There they stood, back to a drop, facing an oncoming horde of squirrels. I think of the similarity of my own experience, and I feel sorry they don't have the safety of a log to jump into.

I watch the tribute through a curtain of falling ash, as they take their jacket in both hands and dangle it in front of them as the squirrels inch their way forward.

The first of the squirrels has reached jumping distance, when a flicker of surprise (and yes, admiration) runs through me as I see the tribute duck out to his left as the first few squirrels leap for him. With his jacket, he swipes them out of the air and out over a crack of lava, where they can only fall and burn.

The next wave follows the tribute as he jumps to a wall of earth to the left of his patch. I have enough time to wonder where he thinks he is going to go,

because there is nothing but wall, when he lands both of his feet on the side of the barrier, springs off, and back to his original patch of land.

The squirrels follow him out, but unlike him, they can grasp the dirt easily. This extra stop for them, however, provides the tribute with enough time to turn and as they leap forward, and swipe another portion of them into the lava with his jacket.

The figure, who landed behind the rest of the horde, starts to beat it back in the direction he came from.

I have to admit, this person has spirit as well as style. A small smile of satisfaction reaches the corner of my mouth to think of the death of those little buggers and denied the meal they worked so hard for. But then, when he tries to jump to another patch of land, the ground shifts, the tribute loses his footing, and slips down a ledge towards the molten sludge below. He grabs hold of one of the protruding tree roots and starts to make his way up, when the remaining squirrels begin landing on him.

He swipes at all he can as he writhes underneath the furry bodies while continuing to pull himself up. I expect to hear a scream, but none comes.

The tribute finally makes their way up but has to drop the jacket in order to do so. They roll round on the ground trying to both squish the bodies of the squirrels underneath, as well as take off their pack to use instead of his forsaken jacket.

That is when I see it. The small sparkle shows in full force as I see Calder's glasses cut through the ash as he tosses this way and that.

Without thought, I leap from my tree and begin to work my way towards him. With each jump to a different platform over cracks of raging fire, my stomach churns at the thought of a normal childhood game, *the floor is lava* (I'd played with Felix many times), had become grotesquely real for all the tributes

still alive to experience it.

When I get there, I take the tiny assassins by surprise and swipe my sword in long, forceful, arcs across the now alarmingly still body of Calder. The furry bodies go flying every which way and fall into flame.

Once the last have been cleared away, I look down at the chewed and bloody face of the little boy from 8. He looks up at me through those thick lenses that have been knocked askew and... and he tries to smile at me.

Not caring his body is preparing itself for shutdown. Those wonderfully crooked teeth bare themselves with a warmth that lava could never match. Then, just like that... the smile departs, and so does he.

I suppose a cannon fires, but I can't hear it. I can't hear *anything*. The surrounding world stills as I stare at the face of a little boy who had no business being out here. My eyes work themselves up and down the small, dark-skinned figure. He managed to get his pack off and it now lay beside him. Something inside me screams that not to take it would be an insult to his memory.

I sling it over my right shoulder, and it bounces a little against my own pack. I'll consolidate them later, right now I need to get out of here, so his body has its best chance of returning home or it'll stay here and burn.

I wonder if the Capitol has ever been unable to retrieve a tribute.

Certainly, there have been many times when there were only pieces left, but at least it's something to be put in a wooden box and sent back for a family to mourn. Aren't they playing it a little too close with the lava? Would the family only have their tribute's last moments forever immortalized in replays to keep and unable to lay them to rest?

Slowly I stand and give one last look at Calder. Something catches my eye. I kneel back down and adjust the thick lenses.

"There ya go, little buddy." I say and set off.

As I make my way further from his body, to where I have no idea, that little flame inside me begins to grow again and starts to make its way outwards. The sky is still black, but things have calmed a little... at least there weren't any more explosions or quakes anyway.

That's when I start to see the hovercrafts. The volcano must be winding down if the Capitol are starting to claim the dead.

I wonder just how many deaths it took to quench the bloodlust today. I suppose I'll find out eventually. I think back and wonder at the sounds that filled the air recently. How many were explosions, and how many were cannons?

I'm wiped, physically and emotionally, and decide to take a break.

The ground up ahead of me levels off and I make my way over. Once there, I settle myself in the crevice between two large boulders in the midst of large piles of rocks. I plop both packs down against the far rock between the boulders and hear the weirdest metal *plink*. I pause for just a moment to wonder what it was, then decide for the moment I don't care. I plop down with my back against the packs.

As I sit there with my sword still clutched in one hand as the tip droops to the ground, mulling over the day's events. I look out at the ash continuing to float down before me against a blackened, blood-red sky. I can't help but think that even this picture, like many of the mental ones I have taken throughout the games, seems somehow serene and peaceful. All is quiet and slowing.

Suddenly, I'm jarred by a loud noise and realize I must've fallen asleep. The assault on my ears continues and my brain registers it's the anthem. I look up to see the sky has cleared to its starry self and the large white seal of Panem shines down on the arena.

"Now comes everyone's favorite part of the day," says the voice of Flickerman in my head. "Time for the remaining tributes to find out who they

out-lasting today."

I'm already in the perfect viewing place wedged between my boulders. With my head resting back against rock, I watch the first of the day's lost tributes take their last look around the games with artificial eyes.

To my surprise, and for lack of a better word *glee*, the first two tributes are from District 1. A girl and a boy tribute. Next came the two girls, Lux and Blush, from District 2. This unfortunately meant that my nose-ringed stalker was probably still alive.

Can't have everything, I guess.

Then was Heron, the girl from 4, which made a total of five career tributes taken out in a single blow. It seems the mountain was equally devastating to all. This brings a slight smile as I think of poor little Calder. At least in a way, he took a bunch of careers out with him... but how many did that leave? Unfortunately, the only ones I knew were gone already were the two I watched die from 4 on the first day.

I may not know exactly how many career tributes were left, but at least seven were gone for sure which meant that more than half were out of the running.

Next on the memorial wall, was a girl from 5. Then, to my dismay, came both beautiful faces of the girls from 7, poor Adalind and Maple. There was small comfort in knowing that they made it this far. But now everyone who was at my lunch table, save me, was gone.

Right on cue, the tributes from 8 started making their appearance. First were the two girls; then the bright, bespectacled face of Calder blared from the sky like the ray of sunshine he was. I remember thinking he never had a chance, but I'm glad I was there to see him through his final moments. He went down swinging, no better way to be taken out. If I were from 8, I'd have been proud at

how hard he must've fought this whole time.

Heck, I'm not from 8 and I'm still proud of the little guy.

The last, and final face in the sky, took me by complete surprise. On some level, you expect everyone's face to show up eventually as long as *you* haven't done so already. Even so, I feel like I've been punched in the gut when the buzz-haired, chiseled features of Clay now glare down from atop the arena. His Eyes stare right down into mine.

I hear his voice in my head saying, "Don't let them get you brother! I couldn't do it, but you can!"

This one hit hard. Clay seemed to know more about what was going on and what we'd been forced into and was still tossed aside.

The final anthem plays and the seal dissolves. In its place comes the full glowing face of the moon. The arena was quiet, everything was dark shades with a tinge of blue, but the sky and was so bright that you could see well enough to get on with for a good distance.

I sat there, completely motionless, in awe of all the information thrown at me at once. After a few moments of silence, crickets started playing their song in the background.

I don't know if I could've called all of them friends, not exactly, but four people I'd known and liked, along with eight other tributes, were taken out of the games in one fell swoop. My next thought is of Maysilee. Is she still alive? If so, she and I are the only ones left from 12.

Who all *was* still alive for that matter? I'd committed the cardinal sin of losing track of time and tributes. It wasn't exactly my fault, but how long had I been out and how many more tributes were lost in that time?

I remember twenty were lost in the first day. So, with another twelve of us gone, that brings the death toll up to a minimum of thirty-two. This leaves a

worst-case scenario of sixteen of us left.

I'm brought out of my head and back into the games when the red warning bells start going off in the back of my mind again.

Something was wrong.

I keep completely still as I try to figure out what. Then finally, I realize the crickets had gone silent.

I have enough time to think *uh-oh* to myself, when movement starts to appear in the trees before my clutch of rocks. They're doing their best to hide the signs of their presence, but still, very clearly, two male figures emerge into my line of sight. They work their way past the trees and, to my dismay, start coming closer.

Blackened and disheveled, the faces of two remaining career tributes, Titan and Royce, show themselves as they approach my spot. They get about fifteen feet away from where I'm sitting, then stop.

My heart begins to race thinking they've spotted me. My hand tightens and I'm relieved to feel the handle of my sword is still there, but gut screams at me to stay where I am. That's when they start whispering.

Their words float toward me as I hear one say, "See anything?"

"Nah, nothing's been around here for a while."

A thrill of joy shoots through me as these words hit my ears. I'm, quite literally, right in front of them and they are too dumb to notice. Why were they so certain that no one had been here?

Royce swivels his head from side to side and says, "C'mon, let's keep lookin. They have to be around here somewhere, it's not like they have any choice."

Titan offers a small laugh and says, "Got that right."

That must mean that it's not safe yet to return to the mountain. I give an

internal groan at the thought that every remaining tribute must've been forced into the woods.

The two figures start moving away and I see a sword and a spear glinting in the moonlight. If I remain quiet, I might be able to sneak up behind them and take one by surprise, then hope I can move faster than the other.

The one with the sword... that's the one that has to go first. The spear is awkward and only deadly at the tip. If I take Royce out first, Titan would have only a split second to swing his spear into position, which would be difficult because they're standing a hair's length apart.

It was a tricky plan and even though a small portion relied on chance, I decide that if I'm going to start actively taking tributes out, I might not get a better chance than right now.

I gather up my courage and am just about to move, when all of the sudden another figure plops down gingerly, right in front of where I sit. He could literally reach out and touch me had he not landed facing the opposite direction.

My heart feels as if it is going to leap out of my chest. I begin to relax, however, as the figure slowly stands and starts to advance on the career duo.

I can't believe it... I mean, I just can't believe it. Twice I've been come across, one of which missed me by mere inches, and both times I've been completely overlooked.

My heart's still pounding it's absolute hardest, this time in relief rather than fear. I wonder if anyone had ever died in the arena from a heart attack. If not, it certainly feels as though I might be the first.

On top of the war drum in my chest, my stomach decides to somersault, when I see that it looks like the newcomer is going to do all the dirty work for me.

Great! All I have to do is wait until their skirmish resolves itself and then

step in and take whoever's left.

I watch as the singular tribute slowly draws closer to the other two, who are still moving off unaware. I can see something in his right hand but can't quite make it out. He continues his way up to them only making minute noises, but in the absence of the crickets it seems rather noticeable and I can't believe that they don't hear him.

He's about three feet behind them when he raises what looks to be a club of some sort high into the air. I have enough time to wonder why he's holding it upside down, when the bottom of it flashes on, and catches the other two in a spotlight.

At the same time, I hear the rough voice of the tribute holding the flashlight say, "This is where they getcha!!!" Then, he falls over and starts laughing.

The other two, who flinched and clutched their weapons in preparation to start their next fight to the death, start relaxing their grip and muscles. Simultaneously, they knit their faces into scowls as they look at what could easily have been their executioner, as he figuratively (unfortunately to the rest of us) dies, guffawing on the ground.

"What the hell's wrong with you, Teo?" I hear Royce say in a hushed outrage.

Teo... yet another of what remains of the career pack and, if I'm not mistaken, the last of the district four tributes.

Titan quickly steps toward the laughing teen, picks up the still illuminated flashlight from the ground, clicks off the light, and says, "Are you an idiot?"

I inwardly nod in answer.

"Are you trying to advertise to everyone around where we are?"

"Oh, c'mon, Ti." He seems to be unaffected by his allies' plain dislike. Still,

his laughter subsides as he clammers to his feet again. "Who am I going to advertise to? You said yourself that no one's been around here for a while!"

You were... and so was I, I think to myself.

Surely you can't be so dense to not know that if one person, even if it's yourself, can escape detection, it's possible that there might be more.

"Besides..." Teo continued, "You guys are one to talk, making all that noise. I could've followed you with my eyes closed."

Royce almost barks, "Your flashlight can be seen for miles, dummy!"

Talk about pot calling the kettle...

"So, what? The whole reason we're skulking around this stupid place is to find people. Why not give them a chance to come to us?"

"Yeah, and then they sneak up and get the drop on us." Royce snaps back.

"On you two, maybe, but now you've got me here." Then in a mock baby voice he says. "I'll pwotect you fwom those mean ol' peons."

He steps forward slightly and grabs each by the cheek. Both knock his hands away in disgust, but he continues, "We can take care of anything these sheep come up with."

We'll see about that, Teo.

Arrogance, stupidity, and numbness to the world around you, three of the biggest mortal sins in these games. It's a wonder they've been able to stay alive this long.

The other two seem to either relax, or merely wish to move on. They stand there in a small triangle looking as if they didn't have a care in the world.

"Where's Chanel?" Titan asks.

"She said that she had to go blow off some steam. She was pretty upset after seeing the tribute list tonight." Teo returns.

Titan's eyes widen. "You mean you let her go off on her own?"

"Look, it's not like she's defenseless. You've known her all your life, yeah?"

"Basically." Titan says.

"Then you know what an artist she is with that axe... aaaaaaaand just how much of a temper that little lady has. If you want to try and stop her from doing what she wants, then by all means... It's your funeral, pal."

This brings a smile to Titan as he laughingly says, "Coward."

"That's not cowardice, it's self-preservation. I don't want to tick that chick off aaaany more than I need to. Better to keep her talents focused elsewhere." Teo finishes and starts to brush the sleeves of his jacket and the legs of his pants.

"That's pretty much useless, ya know." Royce remarks with a sardonic smile. "That stuff is *everywhere*. Even if you manage to get it off of yourself, the moment you start moving again you'll be right back to where you started."

Suddenly an idea strikes, and I now have some vague understanding of the situation.

"Any word on Minos?" asks Teo.

"Nah," says Royce, "He's still off doing his own thing. Anyway, he said not to worry about him."

Off in the distance behind me a bird cry echoes. All three careers look up and off in that direction.

Then Titan says, "That'll be Chanel. Sounds like she found something. We'd better go give her a hand." He then cups his hand around either side of his mouth and reproduces the call.

That's useful information, I believe that'll come in handy later. I have just enough time to relish this new knowledge, when I see all three tributes start to lumber straight for me.

I slam my eyes shut and hold my breath. I'm afraid the thumping in my chest is going to betray me as it once again starts on the war path.

Luckily, just to the right, in front of my foot, there is a good hold they decide to use to gain purchase on my surrounding rocks. Titan has reached the top of the boulders as the other two make their way up.

Just as Royce starts making the climb, Titan dislodges a small rock that falls down and hits me square in the forehead. My insides scream, but I clench my jaw and try to stay as statuesque as possible, hoping that my head isn't bleeding. I still have my shirt wrapped around it, but given what I think is going on here, the sudden shimmer of blood spilling through the fabric could give me away. They don't seem to notice, however, as they all keep moving.

I wait completely motionless for a while. Slowly I start to relax as the far-off scuffling subsides. Tentatively, the crickets begin to start their moonlight serenade once more.

Once I'm absolutely sure the three are gone, I decide to get up and have a look around. I clamber up to my feet, walk forward a few steps, and turn around to take a look at my spot. Not surprised by what I see, I look down and examine myself.

The volcano is still seeping lava down its sides off in the distance behind my rocks and everywhere I look, the world has been covered in a thick film of black ash. It's kind of funny to see a clear outline on the rocks and floor where my body prevented the ash to settle.

Right in the middle of this hole in the ash sat my two back packs and sword. A lot of my body had been exposed to the moonlight, but some of the rocks surrounding me cast shadows to break up the sight of my outline.

The others must be trying to track down tributes by looking for disturbances in the ash. I look down and, sure enough, I see a tale of footprints practically screaming the story of the account I just witnessed.

So, the careers *are* smart enough to use the world around them, they just

can't take in the whole picture. They hadn't counted on a tribute lying as still as I had for so long.

That must have looked really intense to the audience... if they decided to show it. Somehow, I am certain they did, if not only because they'd anticipated my death.

I decide to make a show of it for the people watching. I take off the shirt surrounding my head, hoping that the streak left across my eyes came close to resembling a form of war paint, and stare at the moon with the intense gaze I'm known for, my grey Seam eyes reflecting in the moonlight against the surrounding black soot, and beat my chest with my fist. To the people of Panem at least, it'll look like I know what I'm doing.

With all I've lived through so far, I wonder why I haven't gotten any help from sponsors. Had I done too well at keeping myself under the radar?

I suppose being down for the count for a good chunk of time isn't going to turn me into a crowd favorite. Hopefully, that little stunt might just turn the tide. Then another thought hits me. Do I really *need* anything? The first thing that comes to mind is water, but other than that, not really.

Then I remember the extra backpack Calder had. I walk back to my spot and examine its contents. Upon first look, I see what looks to be a giant hole on the top of his pack. I open the bag wide and gawk at what I see. It was the very tip (about a foot long) of the golden horn of the cornucopia. The tip, now pointy and jagged where the curved end snapped off. The little grooves reminiscent of the ones that saved my life during my first encounter with Minos, spreading down from one end to the other which was just wide enough to stick my hand into.

Suddenly, a scene plays out in my head of Calder running along as fast as he could to try and escape the flowing lava and the fiery hail, spewing fourth from the mountain. I picture him running towards the concealment of the

woods when one of the balls of flame hit's the cornucopia, causing pieces of it to fly in all directions.

He is just about to get to the woods when the tip of the horn slams into his backpack, knocking him to the ground. He probably didn't even know it was in there, just relieved that the impact didn't kill him, and kept on moving.

His cash of food was on the low side, especially for how much he seemed to eat all the time in training. Maybe he grew a little too used to eating so much and couldn't stop once in here. I added it, along with the little bit of water he had left to my stores after taking a few much-needed gulps.

Nothing else. I sit there with the piece of horn in my hands, contemplating my next move. Off in the distance I hear thunder rolling in. I look up and see storm clouds have begun to swell in on the moon.

Guess the Gamemakers didn't like my camouflage after all and are coming to wash it away. I think back and remember the absence of the camouflage booth at training. Albeit small and unintentional, add that to the list of things I've done they didn't plan for. In all fairness, I did warn them in my interview.

The rain is just starting to make its appearance and I'm still sitting there, pondering the golden horn. I raise it up high in my right hand and am just about to cast it away from me, when something... I'm not sure what... stays my hand.

I look down at it again and watch as the rain slowly tries to wash it clean. Then I place it in my pack, it was so big that my pack wasn't able to fully accommodate it as well as my supplies. I zip up as best as I can and head off in what I hoped to be the direction towards whatever edge made up this place. With the spewing mountain at my back, I go forth to whatever destiny I find.