

Chapter 17

We sit there for hours until I start to not only see the light shining outwards from the flashlight, but inwards through the little nooks and crannies of our shelter. Slowly, but surely, the chittering and other sounds of the assault start to fade away until they're gone completely.

Then I see that at some point Maysilee had actually fallen asleep on my shoulder. I gently nudge her with it and whisper for her to wake up.

With a violent snap, her head jerks up to attention. "What?!?! What's wrong?? Did another one get in??"

"No. It's alright." I say soothingly. "I think they're gone."

In disbelief she asks, "What? When?"

"Just now, as if the rising of the sun recalled them. I guess they're just particularly more of a pain at night."

"Oh," She adds, calming down, "Well at least they're gone for now anyway."

"Why don't you try to get some sleep, we still need to figure out what we're going to do about the remaining four, and that's gonna take a rested mind."

She makes no objection, but gets up, walks over to the bag and immediately plops down on top.

A little concerned I ask, "You ok? That looked like it hurt."

As an answer I get a fairly audible snore and I can't help but smile.

Hours pass as the sun raises high up in the sky. The little slits of light that penetrate through our walls move slowly along the floor as Maysilee enjoys her brief respite.

I, meanwhile, am alone with my thoughts.

The monotony of watching the same bit of forest over and over causes my mind to wander.

Six... there are six of us left. We have a basic idea where three of them were in the last day or so, we just need to pick one and try to take them out.

Not Chanel... I find myself not wanting to go down that road unless or until it's absolutely necessary.

It does make me nervous not knowing where that other one is though. There are many possible reasons why she couldn't find everybody, but for whatever reason, the unfound tribute is most worrisome.

Then I hear my father's voice in the back of my head telling me that it's the danger you don't see that's the most serious. But what can I do? I find comfort in the fact that I'm at least aware of the threat rather than just being completely blind to it.

Another voice comes to mind again... not my fathers, but more recent... Really recent...

"It's his own fault for falling into one of those stupid traps she left lying around..."

It's the danger you don't see...

"OF COURSE!" I exclaim aloud and mentally curse myself for not thinking of this earlier.

The sudden flood of my voice into our quiet and serene shelter, snaps Maysilee back to consciousness. Her body now in a wicked scramble to get upright.

Blowgun clutched in her fist, she looks around violently as she says, "What?! What is it?! Are the squirrels back?!?"

She looks at me in fervent expectation and I can't help but stare back at her

for a few seconds.

Finally, I'm able to stammer out, "Sorry, I guess I lost my head there for a second, just got excited. Sit back down, everything is alright."

It takes her a second, but she does manage to calm down, at least enough for her to glare at me and say, "Well... What's so exciting that you decided to scare me half to death over?"

"Well, I had a thought about the unaccounted tribute..."

"...I'm listening..."

"As far as we could tell, we could find the whereabouts of almost everybody left in the game, except one."

"Yeah...?"

"When we set our own trap for those two yesterday, I overheard one of them say to the other that they thought I'd been stupid enough to fall into one of Chanel's traps. That means that those two have seen tribute made traps in the forest before."

"So, where does the unaccounted tribute come in?" She asks

"Well, from what I observed about Chanel, and heard from literally *everyone* who talked about her, I get the sense that she's the more direct, brute-force approach kind of person. I don't think she has the patience or temper to set traps. But someone out there *is* actively hunting other tributes. Maybe this same person has, intentionally or un-intentionally, found a way to hide from even our binoculars."

"But how could they possibly know we have them? Heck, we didn't even know their full potential until about a day or so ago... We might still not know everything they can do."

"Your absolutely right, but my point is, you have to be in a certain type of

mindset to set traps for people, you have to think about things like, 'What would they think if they saw this?' Or, 'how can I conceal that?' Etc."

"You mean like you're doing now?" She says.

This gives me a pause. I can't shake it, she's right. That *is* what I did when we set my trap, and what I'm doing now.

"In any case," I continue, "What if, in his preparations for dealing with the other tributes, he's found a way to keep out of the reach of our binoculars?"

"I'd say that means trouble for us."

"Not necessarily..." I say as I stare off, lost in thought.

All is quiet for a few moments then I realize she's staring at me.

I raise an eyebrow and ask, "What?"

"Oh nothing, I just know that look on your face. I've seen it there a few times before. What do we have to do?"

"Funny you should ask; I was just thinking that we should get another look from that tree."

After we make our way back to the cherry tree, we both stare up into the tall branches, softly swaying in the breeze.

"You want me to go up this time?" I ask.

"No, it's still probably a better Idea for me to go. But what do you think we're gonna see this time that's any different?"

I tell her and she looks at me with that weird expression, the one that brings my sanity into question.

"It's another one of those 'listen to the arena' things." I say.

She gives a slight shrug, then places her hands on my shoulders and lifts her foot up, waiting for my hands to boost it.

"If you say so." She says. "Let's get this over with."

"Godspeed!" I answer as my hands cup the bottom of her foot and start to

lift her up.

It takes a few minutes to get to her desired height. Once high enough, she wraps herself around the trunk and begins to search. I see her gaze across the horizon, slowly making her way from left to right, and then back the other way. She pauses, shakes her head and then looks down at me raising the binoculars in an I don't know gesture.

I give a small huff and then point to indicate for her to try the forest behind her. She swivels around the trunk and once again she starts her scan.

She moves slowly and methodically until suddenly she jerks back slightly in the other direction. She lowers the binoculars, and I see her squint off into the distance, then once again raise the binoculars to her eyes.

Just barely audible, I hear her mutter, "Well would you look at that..."

Yes! I think to myself. *Man, I'm tired of being right all the time!*

She makes her way down the tree. As she climbs down me as well, I find that it is less awkward this time, even though her body comes as close to mine as it's ever been.

When she reaches the ground, she brushes herself off, straightens up and says, "Well, you were right, there's a big dark patch over there." She points off in the direction she stopped to look at while in the tree.

"That's great! I have a hunch that's where we'll find that missing tribute."

"How do you figure?"

"Well, the spot isn't showing any heat signatures at all, right? And it's darker than the surrounding forest?"

"Yes..."

"I'm guessing there's something about that particular patch of forest that hides heat signatures."

"Really?"

"Only one way to know for sure." I say. "Shall we go have a look?"

"Right now?"

"Why wait?"

"Did you sleep at all last night?"

"Not really... I was keeping an eye out for more squirrels."

"We should probably wait until we can look at the situation with fresh eyes. Let's go back and you can rest for a bit, then we can go have a look."

"But it's already afternoon, by the time I wake up, we won't have a lot of time before it gets dark. I don't think it will be a good idea to stay out after dark... Those stupid squirrels seem extra rabid at night."

"Then we can go track down whoever's over there tomorrow. We'll both be rested, and we can start at first light."

"Giving the tribute time to change locations on us, possibly losing our only chance to gain the upper hand. Not to mention giving time for the Gamemakers to release something new to keep the games interesting."

"Can we please!..." She says in a shout but cuts herself off.

She covers her face for a moment and when she brings it up again, I see that she is trying to hold back tears.

In a calmer, somewhat steadier voice she says, "Just... not today."

I look at her and my heart sinks. I can understand how she feels. I don't want to keep killing people either, but I want to go home and that's the only way I can accomplish it.

Still, I don't want to push her. She's already kept it together for so long after having to kill many tributes. I owe her my life a few times over, so I decide go with her request. There's a big possibility that it'll blow up in our faces, but she is right. It would be better to look at the situation with fresh eyes.

"Ok, Mays, let's head back to the hut..." She comes in close and my arms

automatically enfold her as she places her head in the crook of my neck. "But you're taking first watch!"

I feel her hot breath escape in a huff of laughter and we release.

When we make it back to camp, I open one of the soup cans and split it between the two of us. We switch out the water bladder under the tarp to collect more rainwater tonight. We also decide to add a few more layers of branches to the hut to try and keep our furry little friends from dropping in on us unexpectedly. Finally, we go inside, and I hunker myself down into the bag.

I hadn't realized just how tired I was. I guess the excitement of the squirrels and my earlier revelation kept me going. But now, as my body prepares itself for sleep, it's all I can do to keep my eyes open before my head hits my pack and I'm out like a light.

I awake a few hours later to the echoing sound of the anthem being played across the arena. I look expectantly at Maysilee who is staring out at the night sky.

Even though she doesn't look my way she knows I'm watching her. After a few seconds she answers my unvoiced question.

"Nope, no deaths today. But not to worry, that'll change tomorrow."

Yeah... let's just hope it's not one or both of us that ends up looking down at the arena in tomorrow night's sky.

I try for a few minutes to make my way back to sleep, but it doesn't take long before the sounds of the vicious fuzz-wads making a fresh attempt at our lives to start rising up around us.

I sit up and grab the flashlight. Light floods the room and I see Maysilee propped up against the door, hugging her knees to her chest. I get up and sit likewise next to her. I scan the rest of the hut for movement, but it seems we've buttoned up tight tonight.

"Well..." I begin. "At least there's one good thing about our shelter being continuously overrun by carnivorous squirrels..."

She looks up with that weird look that seems as if it was invented just for me and asks, "What's that?"

"No tribute would, *literally*, be 'caught dead' trying to break down our door with them around. Sure, if they see it, they'll know that someone is in here, but I guarantee they'll think that the squirrels will do the dirty work, and they'll keep clear."

She rolls her eyes at me and says, "Gee, Haymitch, you sure know exactly what to say to make a girl feel better."

"Thanks! It's just one of my many great attributes."

Finally, a grin cracks her veneer wide open, and I even get a glimpse of teeth.

"Whatever." She says rising to her feet. "I'm gonna try and get some sleep."

"More power to ya if you do!" I say as she climbs in the bag.

Good luck! I know I wouldn't be able to get any sleep whatsoever with all the noise of the gnawing and scratching of the dozens, perhaps hundreds of the little creatures. But to my surprise, it doesn't take long for her to show the unmistakable signs of sleep.

I sit there, my back propped up against the wall and ponder how she is able to fall asleep at what could very well be the cusp of death.

Many possible answers cross my mind: She's confident in our shelter, she's just talented at being able to sleep in awkward situations, etc. Then another possible explanation comes to mind. What if she feels comfort in the fact that I'm watching over her, protecting her?

That can't possibly be the reason... can it?? That, pretty much, goes against everything this arena stands for. Could she really be that confident that not only

would I not do anything to harm her, but that I won't let anything else harm her either? I don't know why, but the idea makes me uncomfortable.

I shake it off and my mind drifts to thoughts of the day ahead. What exactly will we find when we reach this dark mark in a sea of blue? Will we be ready for it, and more importantly, will we have or do what's needed in order to survive?