

## Chapter 18

Hours pass as the maniacal drone of the squirrels trying to gain entry to our hut, drags on and on.

*Don't these things have anything better to do?!*

After what seems like a lifetime, the chittering, gnawing, and scratching begin to taper off. Finally, sunlight starts showing through cracks and the little creeps withdraw for a while.

I take this as a sign to get moving. I go and rouse Maysilee, who looks up at me dreamily through those baby blues and a layer of morning haze. I can't help but feel a little flutter in response to the way she gazes up at me.

"My shift?" She asks in a sleepy voice, that has just a little touch of silky tones behind it.

For a moment I have to think in order to remind myself why I was waking her.

Eventually I manage to get out, "Uh, no. The squirrels are gone, and I figured it would be best to get a move on."

A shadow crosses over her face as she recalls our grim chore for the day. Still, she doesn't protest. She sits up straight, rubs the rest of sleep out of her eyes with the bottoms of her palms, and prepares herself for the day.

Before we set off, we make a small meal. While going through the supplies, I notice a tiny brown packet that simply says "Strawberry" on the side.

I show Maysilee, she takes it and says, "I think I know what this is! Hand me one of the water bladders."

I pass one over. Before I can stop her, she opens up the packet and dumps

a bright red powder into the bladder. At first, blood red swirls make their way through the water, until the powder disperses and becomes a uniform pink as she shakes it.

Once done, she opens up the bladder and sniffs the concoction.

"What'd you do that for?! It takes forever to fill one of those things up!"

She doesn't answer, rather just lifts the bladder up to her lips. I move as fast as I can to try and stop her, maybe swipe it out of her hands, but too late she's already tasting it.

"ARE YOU NUTS?!"

She just answers with an, "Mmmmm it's delicious! Here, you have to try this!"

She hands out the bladder for me to take. I do so, but I sit there for a moment and stare... possibly waiting for her to drop dead at any second.

"Oh, would you just try it?! It's fine. In fact, I think you're really gonna like it."

While still glaring at her through narrowed eyes, I tentatively raise the bladder up to my lips. A waft of fresh strawberries pervades my senses and I decide to take a drink. Maysilee was right, it's delicious!

We sit in silence for a few moments, passing our drink back and forth. We take in the morning, and really, if you can put the fact that you're in the arena aside, it's actually a beautiful scene.

We watch the light bounce playfully off the trees and grass. The birds are singing and the cold of the morning puts a slight bite in the air, but is immediately righted as the sun spreads warmth across our bodies. This strange brew we stumbled upon was a real treat, and boosts our spirits a bit, which was something I needed after having to listen to those squirrels all night.

Now that we've been fed and watered, it's time to begin our task.

As we make our way over to the cold spot Maysilee saw in the binoculars yesterday, I start to notice that I'm feeling... good... really good! Either there was something in that mixture, or the brief respite it gave us has got me feeling hopeful about the day and I'm not the least bit tired.

We're walking for a good few hours, occasionally checking out our binoculars to keep an eye out for other tributes, or perhaps a mutt or two; but the Gamemakers must really want to see what we do because nothing comes up, until finally...

"What's that up there?" Maysilee asks as she points to a thick cluster of trees up ahead.

I follow along the direction her finger points until I see what looks like a hole that splits open the tightly woven clump of trees.

"Only one way to find out." I say.

Before moving forward, I decide to get a good look through the binoculars. At once the world is put into shades of cool blue. The only heat signature I see is when I pass the gaze over Maysilee. Then I turn my focus on to the opening, which comes through as a large dark hole. I switch over to normal view, then into night vision.

"I don't see anything... Not sure how that makes me feel..." I say.

"Well, no news is good news right?"

I can't help but smile. "Welp... let's get this over with..."

We make our way up to the entrance, and just before Maysilee takes a step in, I stop her.

"Just in case I'm right about what's going on here, I think we should be really careful, especially at the entrance."

"Why's that? It looks like there is limited access to get in and out of this place, wouldn't whoever is hunting other tributes need to be able to get in and

out freely?"

"Yes, but it doesn't mean he couldn't sidestep a few traps along the way."

I see understanding wash over her face as she takes a step back and says, "Okay, you go first."

I step forward and am almost immediately rewarded by the sight of a trip wire placed low to the ground that is almost invisible over the leaf covered ground.

I point it out to Maysilee and say, "There's one!"

"Should we try and set it off??" she asks.

"No, I think we should just try and avoid it. Probably better to keep from tipping off our presence."

"So, what would you suggest?"

In answer, I raise my right leg over the trip wire, bring it down on the other side, and abruptly fall face first as the ground gives way beneath my feet. I have just enough time to register what's going on and grab the ledge in front of me. I'm pinned up on my elbows, arms crossed in front of my face, trying to lean my chest forward, out and away from the gaping hole that once looked like a walkway. My legs are dangling freely, my toes trying to gain purchase on the slick muddy side of the hole.

After a moment of shock, I hear behind me in a frantic voice, "HAYMITCH!"

"I'm alright, but I could use a hand here!"

"Hang on!"

"Kinda don't have another option at the moment, Mays."

I can just hear the voice of my father, laughing maniacally in my head. I was too focused on the trap I saw; I didn't think of the ones I couldn't.

I sit there, mentally cursing myself as I hear Maysilee making her way

across one of the sides of the walkway that were left intact; I'm guessing to allow whoever set the trap a free way to get around it.

She bends down in front of me, and grabs for the back of my belt. With the combined efforts of me pushing up with my arms, and her pulling, we manage to get me to a point where I can lie flat on my stomach to crawl the rest of the way out.

I take a moment to regain my breath, then I sit up and inch my way over to get a look at what may have ended my journey in one fell swoop.

It's not very wide. The opening in the trees is only about three feet, and whoever set the trap left about a half a foot on either side for safe passage. It's about three feet long, but when I look down, it is at least six feet deep. I look down at the leaves and twigs that made up the false floor to cover the hole, and I see that the bottom is also lined with sharp, pointy, spikes; jutting upward like teeth.

A voice, although soft, startles me when it makes itself known right next to my ear.

"Man, if that was its own trap, I'd hate to see what the trip wire does!"

I steady myself before I answer her, "I don't think it does anything. It's a decoy to keep your mind focused on it, rather than the real trap..."

*and I fell for it... literally.*

"That sounds like something you would do." She says.

That *is* something I would do... I never thought another competitor would actually use their brain in the arena. Everything I've seen from the other districts so far, every year up to right now, supported this... could I have possibly underestimated someone?

I give my head a little shake to bring my focus back. I need to keep my attention on what's in front of my face for the moment... but whoever they are,

they certainly have my attention.

"Let's keep moving." I say. "I'll take the lead but keep an eye out for any more surprises." She nods, and we make our way slowly and methodically up the path.

We don't have to walk far before we reach the end of the passageway. When the path opens up, we emerge into one of the most beautiful spots I've ever seen in my life. Which, in *this* arena, is saying something.

The, for lack of a better term, *clearing* of the woods encases a gorgeous swamp. What little sunlight makes it through the trees, dances off each surface in a warm golden color. Fluffy grass covers the floor around a beautiful pond, where lilies and pads are dotted across the surface. The soft incremental glow of fireflies slowly buzz around the air. The atmosphere is full of the sound of crickets and frogs, with the occasional splash of one submerging itself.

The ground surrounding the pond rises up on one side and creates an overhang from which the long, fluffy, grass hangs provocatively over the water. On the floor, there are spots of bright bluish green lights. I bend over to get a closer look, and it seems to be glowing off the mushrooms that pop up all over the floor.

Glowing mushrooms... can't say I'd ever thought I'd see that in my lifetime. If there's one positive thing I can take from this arena, if I make it out, it's the amazing things I've been able to see along the way. Things that I know people back home can only dream about.

I look up, let my eyes settle a bit, and take in the whole scene. It looks like a visualization straight from a fantasy tale. I half expect to see a fairy or a wood-nymph to spring up and sprinkle magic dust over the place. Maybe if I go fishing in the pond, I'll catch a magic catfish that'll offer me three wishes in exchange for being set free.

After these thoughts of a happier existence play their way across my mind, I hear my father tell me to wake up and all at once I remember where I am, and why I'm here.

I spot a thicket off to my right, so I grab Maysilee's hand and pull her toward it. I extend my palm towards her. Immediately in answer, she places our Capitol binoculars in it.

I start scanning the tranquil scene for our rouge tribute.

At a glance, this place seems like it would be an ideal place for a picnic, but once I start taking a closer look, I know we're in trouble.

There are definite signs of our friend around. Some are things you'd expect: a fire pit with dying embers, what appears to be a blanket on the ground. Trinkets here or there of food preparation and storage, like an empty can or wrapper casually tossed wherever they land.

Then there are the things that really make me worried. There are patches of the fluffy grass stained a dark maroon, dead frogs and animal skulls strewn about.

Then there's something over by the makeshift fire pit I try to make out that, for some reason, worries me more than anything else I've seen in the arena so far. It's a string of ovals, each about half the size of a palm. I feel the explanation of it scratching at the back of my mind. I'm just about to put my finger on it, when I feel something wet and cold fall onto my hand. I look up, expecting to see rain making its way down from the canopy, but am horrified at what I find.

I see dozens of the tiny golden squirrels in the trees... but not in the way I'd expect... they're all dead. Each one of the lifeless little corpses has been tied upside down and are now dangling from the branches in mock tribute to the poisoned fruit.

I look down to see the raindrop on my hand and discover it's a dark crimson. With complete revulsion, I wipe it off on my pant leg. Then an idea hits me of what's hanging by the fire. The binoculars find their way to my face. Sure enough, I now see the distinct swirl pattern in the middle of each oval leading to a hole in its center.

Ears... *human* ears, strung together on some wire. The binoculars slowly slide out of my hands and clunk to the ground.

Reading the look on my face, Maysilee asks, "What?!"

In a firm but low whisper, I turn to her and say, "We have to leave... *Now!*"

The most dangerous word to spring forth in Panem since mutations, now sears itself into the front of my mind.

"We have a ferran in the arena!" I say, trying to keep my voice steady.

Her face drains of what color it had.

Ferran is the term given to a tribute that has turned completely savage. It's said that certain minds can't cope with the situation of being thrown into the arena. In order to preserve their life, something inside them snaps and almost every ounce of who that tribute was before they entered the games is locked away, or perhaps completely erased from their brain.

You hear about them every once in a while, and they never recover... at least not that anyone knows. Even though they develop an intense ferocity and a taste for bloodshed (sometimes even for the blood itself) they never seem to last too long in the games. Before they leave, however, they use their newfound talents to find creative and brutal ways to kill others. Death by ferran is never described as quick and painless.

Most people think of these unfortunate souls as the tribute version of a mutt. Created unintentionally by the Gamemakers with only one thing rattling around in their minds: *kill*.



I look through the binoculars again to scan for any signs of body heat and a clear way out. We are not ready to face a threat like this.

Maysilee places her hand on my arm and begins to shake it, "Well then, what are you doing let's go!"

I'm just about to start moving towards the exit, when two red hot dots shine through the binoculars in the forest before me. A chill runs up my spine as I the thought registers that these shapes are too symmetrical to not be part of one creature.

As casually as I can manage, I lower the binoculars, try and shift my body, and gaze so that I'm facing off to the left of where the dots were. I want to check out what I saw with my own eyes, but not give away that I saw them.

I try to ignore Maysilee frantically trying to pull me out as I glance off in the trees where they were. Sure enough, although it's just for a second, I see a pair of bright, golden, eyes staring at us. Then, as quickly as they appeared, they blinked out of existence.

Maysilee stops shaking my arm and asks, "What?"

In just above a whisper I say, "Don't look to your right?"

"Fine, I won't. Can we just get out of here now??"

"No."

"Why the hell not?!"

"Because we're being hunted."