

Part III

Victor's Folly

Chapter 20

The remainder of the night passed almost uneventfully. Around the end of my shift at what I judge to be about two in the morning, the squirrels showed up yet again, but the constant gnawing and chittering that come from them don't bother me in the least. For the first time in a long time, I finally had something that I was actively looking forward to.

I continue scanning our hut but keep finding my thoughts drifting to the coming morning. What was on the other side of that hedge maze? Will it contain the answers I'm looking for? And perhaps the most important question of all: what *was* I looking for?

I don't know. There just had to be an edge to this place, it can't just go on forever... can it? If there is an edge beyond the hedge, what then? Would I use it to try and find a way to escape? Possibly if there was anywhere to go, but what then?

I suppose if all I found was the edge, it'd be a good idea to have my back to the wall where no one could have the slightest possibility of sneaking up behind me. If anyone wanted me, they'd not only have to find me, but have to come at me from the front.

The sounds of the furry onslaught wakes up Maysilee and she tells me to go to bed and she'll start her watch.

Maybe it's an irritation at being disturbed by the squirrels, but there is a definite edge that's crept into her voice, but when I ask if she's alright she answers with a quick, "I'm fine."

I find it hard to relax enough for sleep to take me with thoughts of the coming day still dancing in my head. Right when I'm just about to dose off, however, I'm surprised again.

In an altogether different tone, really rather sweetly, Maysilee asks, "Haymitch, would you mind if I ate some? I'm starving!"

"Nah, go for it."

We have plenty of food from what we've gathered over the past few days, maybe she'll be a little less snappy with a full stomach. I know all too well how that can put a person on edge.

Finally, my brain relaxes enough to carry me off to sleep.

The next morning comes, and I awake to see that she has gone through two soup cans that now lay empty on the floor. I don't really mind, but it is rather unusual that she would eat so much without me. This thought is almost immediately driven away, however, because when she spots that I'm awake, she brings a bowl of soup towards me.

"Morning." She says brightly and places the bowl in front of me. "I expect that you want to get started so I took the liberty of getting breakfast ready for you."

"Thanks." I grunt, starting to wolf down heaping spoonfuls of stew.

I notice the slightly crestfallen look that has passed over her face, and I add, "That was really thoughtful of you, and you even picked my favorite." Living with Ma not only taught me to know when I'm in dangerous territory, but how to try and navigate back out.

"Really?" She asks smiling again. "Well, I'm glad you like it."

It really made no difference to me, food is food here, but it feels as if something rather nasty was narrowly averted.

After finishing my breakfast, I say, "I want to go somewhere pretty far away, it'll probably take half the day to get there. Let's pack up everything, in case we can't make it back."

"Might I ask where we're going?"

"There's just somethin I need to find out."

We spend the next few minutes gathering all of our supplies and splitting it between us. When we set off on the long journey, the early morning light still creeps through the trees.

We make our way back through the forest, but when we reach the spot where she saved my life, she pauses to reflect on the occasion.

I really want to get to the end of this long walk, and I don't need reminding of every little time I came within an inch of death.

"Do you mind if we keep moving?" I ask.

She just looks at me with a look of mild suspicion on her face and asks, "Why? Where are we going?"

"Like I said before, I just need to check something out. I've got one of those hunch feelings."

"Oh yes, let's go wandering for miles in a place swarming with things that want to kill us, just because Haymitch has a hunch."

I answer with a glare.

Almost ashamed she says, "Sorry, I'm just cranky. I know you've got our best interest at heart. Would you mind if I ate a little? It'll probably make me feel better."

I feel my face soften. "Sure, but we can eat and walk. We've still got to get through the maze."

I'm really starting to become weary of her prickling up all the time, and why does she seem to be constantly hungry? I shrug my shoulders and turn to move on, explaining both away with the thought that she's probably having a "hollow day," where no matter how much you eat, you continue to be ravenous throughout the duration.

Suddenly, I'm spooked again as she drops a can to the floor and says to whatever sponsors may be listening, "I don't suppose you could send us any chocolate? I could *really* go for some about now."

I pause, wondering if that would be all it took to see another parachute make its way towards us, but nothing happens and we press on.

When we finally reach the maze, she stops and crosses her arms.

"I'm not going in there."

"C'mon, it's not as bad as it looks. Just stay away from the sides."

"Why?"

"The hedges themselves are mutations, but if you don't come within biting distance..."

"Biting distance?!?!"

"Yes, but there's plenty of room."

"But you said this is a maze, right?"

"Yes."

"Well, how are we going to keep from getting lost?"

"For one... I have a compass, and you see that?" I point to the scorch line, still visible in the ground. "That's from my first encounter with the explosive thread... It's how I knew what it was when we saw it in the swamp. It'll lead us straight to where I want to go and back out again if it comes to that."

This seems to be enough for her, because when I start heading in, she follows but stays very close.

After a bit of walking, she asks, "Why are we doing this?"

I decide not to answer her. She's still moving forward. I guess it's just nerves. This place is really creepy with lack of direct sun light.

We make it to the clearing, and she gives a start at the still erect tent, sitting in the middle.

She ducks back into the hall, but I gently place my hand on the small of her back and say, "It's ok, that's Minos's camp."

"You sure?"

"Pretty sure." I say with a smile.

"Well, I don't like it. It's giving me the creeps."

"Don't look inside it, then."

"Why?"

"I mean if you really want to, be my guest, but if you think that the outside's creepy, then spare yourself what's inside."

"Do you think someone else might be using it?"

"If they are, then they have to be just as crazy as he was. Watch your step around the back of the tent. There's a hole there."

I needn't have worried though, by the way she stayed away from the tent, she gave the impression she believed it would spontaneously grow fangs and lunge at us.

"C'mon." I add as we reach the other side of the clearing, "We're halfway through."

"HALF-WAY?!?"

I ignore her and keep moving.

We continue on, following the burns the thread left, but the lack of sound and direct light starts to work on our nerves. She keeps asking why we're doing this, but I keep moving.

Finally, she seems to have had enough and says. "That's it, Haymitch, I'm not taking another step until you tell me why we've decided to trek through this god-forsaken place."

Through clenched teeth I reply, "Because it has to end somewhere, right? The arena can't go on forever."

"What do you expect to find?" She asks.

"I don't know. But maybe there's something we can use."

I start moving forward again, almost not caring if she follows me. She does, however, and we put each other's bad mood down to the situation at hand.

It's around mid-day when I spot the huge marks left on one of the hedges from where I threw the spool.

"Now what?" She asks.

In answer I pull the blow torch out of my pack. It hisses as I ignite and focus the fire into a jet of blue flame. I hold it out towards the hedge. At first the hissing tendrils make their way towards me until they feel the intense heat.

There is something oddly satisfying about the way they squeal in pain for a moment and then pop like a crackling fire, and finally go silent as they become engulfed.

After a few minutes, I start seeing daylight poke its way through from the other side. I continue burning away the hedges until I've created a hole big enough to fit through.

Once through, it's as if we've stepped into another world. A complete barren wasteland as far as the eye can see. Just rocks and dry dirt with cracks going every which way.

A brief feeling of my stomach dropping comes over but soon replaced by curiosity. Something... anything has to be here.

We walk on a little way until we come to the edge of a cliff. We both creep

up and look down over the side of an immense drop, with nothing but jagged rocks waiting below.

Maysilee starts saying something, but I don't really hear her. I say something out of an auto-response, but it seems to work, because she stops talking. I just keep staring off over the edge. The thought of being a caged animal settles in on me again. The rest of the world dissolves as I pace back and forth, skirting alongside the cliff.

I'm becoming frustrated as I try to make sense of it. Back and forth, back and forth. I feel like I'm starting to wear a line into the earth beneath me with each pass. I even feel a small rock dislodge and fall over the side. Still, I continue back and forth. Until movement in front of me catches my eye.

I go over to inspect and see it was the small rock moving back away from the cliff, as if it was afraid of heights.

I stand there, I don't know for how long, just staring at the rock.

As if struck by lightning, an idea hits my brain. I look around and pick up another rock, roughly the size of my fist. I look out over the cliff, and I hurl it out as far as I can.

I wait for a few moments, just standing there. Right about the time I start feeling as though I'm the world's biggest idiot, I see it.

I stretch out my right hand and the rock flies straight back into it. I hold the rock out in front of my face as what I'd just witnessed sinks in.

I feel something deep within me begin to bubble up. It starts as small spurts of giggling, but quickly snowballs into what can only be described as maniacal laughter.

That's when I hear the scream.

The noise, loud and high, pierces the air and brings me out of my train of thought and into the real world again. It was Maysilee.

I look around, but I can't see her anywhere. I frantically search my mind for the last moments I remember seeing her, as I run towards the only direction she could've gone; back into the maze.

Suddenly, a scene plays before my mind, as if I was watching on a screen, like the rest of Panem surely had.

I hear Maysilee say to my back, "That's all there is, Haymitch. Let's go back.

"No," I hear myself answer, "I'm staying here."

"Alright. There's only five of us left, may as well say goodbye now anyway. I don't want it to come down to you and me."

"Ok." I hear coming from my turned back, and she walks away.

Right as I come to the hole I burned, I see a bunch of webbed, three toed footprints that start right in front of a completely untouched bit of earth, as if they just popped into existence and headed into the maze.

More screams float their way towards me, and I rush headlong as fast as I can to reach her.

When I finally turn a corner, I see a flock of bright pink birds, each about three feet tall, with skinny legs, long necks, and stretched, pointy beaks surrounding her.

I grip my knife as I run towards them, but even from a distance, I see it's too late. I let out a loud cry of my own to try and get them to turn their attention towards me. A few do, but the one directly next to the blood drenched figure sprawled on the ground, pays no heed and skewers it's needle like beak through her neck.

That one is my first target. One quick slash of my knife severs its head clean off. The others flap their wings in agitation and the air is alive with the concussion of the sounds it makes. My knife slashes wildly in every direction,

until every pink feathery body is either dead or fleeing.

I turn back to Maysilee, twitching on the floor, grasping her neck in both hands. One look at the large pool of blood she is laying in tells me she's not long for this world. I kneel beside her and grip one of her hands.

She returns my squeeze as she asks, "Haymitch?"

Trying not to choke on my words, I utter, "Yeah, it's me. I'm here."

"I know it sounds silly, but..." She pauses as she chokes up another stream of blood. "I really had a good time with you. I'm sorry that we couldn't have spent it back home."

I look down at the beautiful face somehow shining through the fly welts and the bright crimson flowing freely from her neck and mouth.

I feel ashamed to only be able to answer, "Me too."

The words sound hollow to my own ears, but she either doesn't notice or doesn't care.

Those bright blue eyes focus intensely at me for just a second as she chokes out, "Good luck, you're gonna need it." Her face cracks open with what will be the last grin she ever makes.

It doesn't fade away, however, though her eyes lose their focus and look beyond me. She takes her hand off her neck, while still gripping me tightly with the other and I see it almost dancing in the air in front of her.

She asks, "Aren't they just... so beautiful, Haymitch. They're so big, but so majestic. They just might be my most favorite thing in the whole world, I never thought I'd be able to be this close to them."

It dawns on me that she's seeing one of her beloved horses and is reaching out to stroke it. The smile becomes even wider for just a moment but contained an entire lifetime.

Then the hand that was lost in a tuft of long course hair pauses, and falls

to the ground. Her other hand, still gripped firmly by mine, goes limp and cold.

In hardly more than a whisper I say, "Go with them."

I kiss the back of her blood-soaked hand, then lay it across her chest as her cannon fires.

I stand up and I feel something break inside me. I go completely numb.

Suddenly, I just stop caring about everything... anything... Without knowing how I got there, I find myself sitting at the edge of my cliff, just staring off into the distance.

I don't know how long I sit there, staring off into the blank abyss. It seems as though time becomes irrelevant. Vaguely, I register another cannon firing off in the distance. Is it another tribute, or is my mind starting to play tricks on me?

Then a conversation from earlier in the day comes to mind, as I hear Maysilee say, "You wonder off in your own thoughts a lot. You should keep an eye on that. One day you'll get lost in there and your mind will walk you straight into trouble."

It's my fault... all my fault. I wasn't the one to kill her, but it's because of me she's dead. Will I ever be able to return home now?

I'm brought back to my senses momentarily, when I register yet another cannon. I jump a little, and notice the day has grown late, the last warm rays of sunshine spread across my vacant face. I'm starting to feel like I'm going crazy. Am I drifting in and out of reality, or are the walls about to fall away to reveal that I'm back in that burning elevator with only the dead to keep me company?

Suddenly, I'm ripped from my thoughts as I stare at a star strewn sky displaying the seal of Panem. Small comfort is brought to me when I see the succession of faces and know that at least, my mind wasn't lying to me about this. The first two portraits consist of the remaining boy from 3, the girl from 5, and then it happens. The bright stare of the eyes I saw shining through rivers of

blood, now sparkle down from the heavens as she takes her place among the stars.

Then another voice, not Maysilee's, starts to echo in the back of my brain. It's the voice of my father as he says, "Just one more to go, Sonny Boy."

I clamp my hands over my ears in response, as if I could block out a voice that's coming from within. Even though the voice of my father leaves, I'm bombarded by many others. Maysilee, Clay, Gregor, all reaching out from the unknown realm of the dead and sinking, lodging themselves, deep into my mind.

Sleep is no help, at least, I think I eventually fall asleep. The voices continue as I'm plunged into the burning elevator. This time the lifeless corpses look up at me with dull eyes as their voices continue.

I only vaguely register I'm awake after clenching my eyes so tight to shut out the world that when I open them, I see the sunlit cliff before me. I lay there, cramped in the fetal position, just trying not to hear or feel.

I continue to spiral downward as the voices keep up their onslaught. I feel as though one of the huge boulders I hid among is now sitting on my chest.

Suddenly, I see movement out of the corner of my eye. I don't move, or even directly look at it. I just watch it gently float down to the ground with side of my eye.

Something slides into place in my brain as my arm reaches out of its own accord towards the silver parachute.

I pull it towards me, dragging the cargo across the ground. My hand drops the parachute and fumbles around behind it, until it grasps what feels like a wooden circle.

When I hold it to my face and see the happy faces I had carved reflecting a past life, something inside me jerks back to life. It was the slap in the face to

remind me why I'm here and what I've been constantly fighting for. I stare at the carving I made for Brie.

How did Azrael get this? Was it volunteered freely, or taken by force? Where was Brie at this moment? Was this just a way of getting me out of my slump, or was it a warning? I have to get out of this arena!

I sling the thin string around my neck and tuck it in my shirt so it touches my chest. Then I fly to my feet and look around. I have no idea how long I've been there, but judging by the marks on the ground, I'd been thrashing around quite a bit. Maybe this was a warning to get me on my feet again to find Chanel. Maybe too much time has passed. Even though the real sport of the arena comes from watching the final two combatants rip each other apart, if I stay in one place too long they'll find some means of pushing us together.

I have to find Chanel and do it on my terms, if possible, to give me the best chance of getting out of here alive. I make my way over to the hedge and stare at the opening for a moment.

Suddenly, the arena seems much bigger with the knowledge that there is only one other person in it.