

Chapter 12

The rain continues to pour as I trudge my way back through the forest. The ash starting to wash away, streaking off of everything in long black smudges.

I find a river flowing in my direction to take me on. Not of poisoned water but lava. I have no want for heat as I follow the warm glow radiating throughout the forest as the rain continues its relentless assault on the arena. I hear the hiss of water vaporizing as it hits my smoldering guide.

I'm confident the Gamemakers are going to lead me to the place that I seek. They want blood.

Well, they're going to get it, but it won't be in the way that they hope. It's time to take the bull by the horns.

The minutes drag into hours and seems like I've walked for miles. Finally, through the dark gloom of the cloud stifled moon, I see a natural archway where the lava cut through the forest into open air.

The little hairs on the back of my neck start to prickle as I think this could either be the edge of the arena I've been looking for, or more likely another trap.

I didn't want to think about what I was doing and allow myself the chance to turn back. Ahead of me was something I needed to do... something that I have to do if I harbor any hope of getting out of here.

I make my way towards the opening. Something very odd strikes me as I look down at the river of lava and realize it just stops at the edge of the forest. It continues to flow, and yet at the end... it just... stops.

They must be able to drain it somehow. Another unmistakable mark of the Gamemakers presence. I wonder for a moment what they do with the lava once under the floor, but now is not the time.

I work my way slowly and silently towards the trees at the edge of the clearing and peer out from behind one. At this precise moment the rain stops, clouds disintegrate like breath on glass, and the bright moon shines down into the arena once more. What it illuminates is like nothing I've ever seen before. There before me, about twenty feet out from the forest is a large, green wall.

For a moment I think this might be the edge, but immediately throw it away. It's pretty clear the Gamemakers are leading me this way, which means I'm headed for something they *want* me to find.

I look in every direction and don't see any sign of movement, just the green wall stretching as far as the eye can see. I decide to go in for a closer look and see the wall is made of plants. Large, thick hedges about fifteen feet high.

I go up to see if I can cut my way through. As soon as my hand touches the lush greenery, it's as if each of the individual leafy tendrils take on a life of their own, moving with serpent-like speed and motion. A few of the tendrils face me, bare a mouth full of fangs, and hiss at my disturbance.

I slash my sword and quickly cut the... for lack of a better word, "head" off of one of them. It fell limp to the floor, but then three more budded up in its place. If I want to get through, I'm going to need something a lot more powerful than a blade.

I move to my right along the hedge, away from the river, when I spot an opening not too far in the distance. Keeping an eye out for other tributes, I make my way towards it. Once there, I see another hedge ten feet behind the first wall that goes off in either direction.

It's a maze.

Yep... It's a trap, alright. A huge trap!

I have a hunch the mythical edge of the arena is probably on the other side. If I'm going to attempt to get through (and that's a *huge* if), I'm going to need

a plan.

I look around the entrance. The walls are at least ten feet apart, leaving plenty of room to navigate without touching the snarling serpent-like creatures that make them up. The halls in each direction, with their deep shadows from moonlight being blocked, give off an heir of forbidding I can't shake off.

Something on the ground catches my eye and I bend down to see. A streak of both unease and understanding rams through my body like a train. Half a pomegranate has been left for me on the maze's grassy floor.

He knew I was watching him... He couldn't have known where I was exactly, or else he would have attacked. Nonetheless he *knew* I could see him. If that was true, he must have known this place was here, or at least something like it. He wanted me to come to him so we could fight on his terms.

Well, well, old friend, either you're not as dumb as I thought, or a certain Capitol somebody is pulling your strings more directly.

Suddenly, the voice of Clay rings in my head, "I told you it was rigged."

I mull this over in my mind and I realize Minos or no (Capitol or no), the outcome is the same. I need to plan a way to get through this maze.

I look back at the mountain, still glowing red in the distance. I won't be able to see it once inside.

That's when I hear the thud of my very first parachute.

Without mind for anything else (yes, I admit I've lost my head in the excitement), I open up the drop container to find a curious little plastic circle with a small rectangular hole in the middle of it and a thin line splitting the opening. I lift up the plastic circle and see it opens up from the side. Inside I see none other than a genuine compass.

The sponsors want me to go in there too, even Azrael. Grimly, I wonder if any of them want or expect me to emerge from it again.

I shake it off. Obviously, they *want* me to win or why would they provide something to help me find a way through. I was already going to go in, why waste the money if they just wanted to see me die? Then the thought finally registers that I *have* sponsors and it lifts my spirits a bit.

I lift up the other little piece of plastic with the lens and point the compass towards the mountain. The direction it gives is North-East, so to keep in the same direction I've been going, I want to go South-West.

Another little warning bell continues, however. The compass is going to help me greatly in helping me find the direction I want to go, but it doesn't help me keep track of where I've been. That's when idea strikes me, and I whip my backpack around to start rummaging.

I pull the large spool of the thin wire out and examine it. I'm sure I'm supposed to use this as a weapon, but oh well, today it's going to help me get through the maze. Together, the compass will tell me which direction I need to go and the thread will show me where I've been.

I go to the nearest tree and pluck two sticks from its branches, one large, one small. With my knife, I cut a small amount of wire off and tie the protruding end of the wire from the spool around the middle of the large stick. Then I plunge the sharp end of it into the earth at the opening of the maze. I place the small stick through the middle of the spool and tie each end of the severed wire to both ends of the stick to make a handle of sorts.

Perfect, now I can move easily through the maze, and if (or really when) I run into trouble, I can drop the spool and pick it up when I'm ready to resume my course.

A thought does pass through my mind to wonder what the intended purpose of the wire might be. Originally, I thought that it would be for setting traps or snares... but that doesn't really make sense since they were discouraging

that during training. Maybe it was meant to snare my fellow tributes. I doubt that it was ever intended to be put to this use.

I take a deep breath and take my first steps into the trap Minos has set for me. A few steps in, another thought occurs. I go towards one of the walls, deciding to provoke one of the tendrils that make up the hedge. I'm surprised when I get within a foot of the walls, every strand in my immediate vicinity lunges forward in an attempt to pull me into what would surely be a feeding frenzy.

Whoa... definitely stay away from the walls. With my sword, I slice upward along the protruding tendrils, severing many of their snake-like mouths and watch as they fall dead to the floor, while simultaneously three more pop from each neck. Each new head more ferocious than the last. This renewal also extends their reaching distance.

I back up a little to keep out of striking distance, but with the tip of my sword I pull the severed strands towards me.

Some of the tendrils strike out at my sword not knowing, or caring, that it wasn't a part of my body, just doing all it could to cause damage.

Once I dragged the strands out of striking distance. I lift up my blade and examined one. No liquid seemed to be trickling down my steel. Although I can't be sure, this might indicate that the fangs were vicious, but not venomous.

I cut off the immediate tips of each strand that housed the fangs. Then I tie each strand together to form a long string I use to fasten the compass to the guard of my sword, so that in order to look at it, I just had to raise my hand.

Sword in one hand, spool in the other. I'm ready and make the first of many turns in this massive maze.

I don't have to go far before I have to start making more turns. One after another, left or right, I do what I can to keep going in my chosen direction. Every

once in a while, I hit a dead end and have to head back to the last junction.

Time wears on as I make my way deeper into the maze. The first morning light creeps in the sky overhead and seems to wake up the maze itself as it comes alive with sounds of what I think might be insects along with the movement of the individual tendrils that make up the walls.

The moisture from the rain starts to turn into a low fog that hugs the ground. I'm not cold underneath my jacket, but it runs a chill up my spine.

This is as good a time as any to put my shirt back on. I pull it out of my pack, peel off my jacket, and as I start to replace my garments, I hear it. That thundering, trampling gate I know so well. From the sound of it, he's still a bit far off, but the fact that he's in here was confirmed.

Well, I know he's here, but does he know I'm here? Hopefully not, and I can maintain an element of surprise.

Left... right... left... left... right... With each turn I get deeper into the maze, and something in the air seems to get thicker. As if the air itself is gaining a dry charge of sorts, growing until it has to burst.

I take another left and see a small clearing at the end of the hallway, which I'm guessing is the middle of the maze. Cautiously, I drag my spool towards the opening, and peak out into it. I look around and don't see Minos anywhere, but I've found his camp. There's a tent propped up right in the middle of the clearing with the smoldering remains of a fire next to it.

I guess the cat's out of the bag... at least of sorts. He knows someone's around. He must've judged he just had enough time to gather his pack (or whatever he uses) and go. Just to make sure, I lift the unzipped flap on the tent to confirm he's not in there. He's left a few things inside, but I just barely get a glimpse before I hear it. He's... laughing.

Instinctively, my head pops straight up and pivots frantically, trying to

locate the source... but I see nothing but greenery.

"Know your there, curly, even if I can't see you."

"You do, huh? What are you, psychic now?!"

"Smell you..." he says and continues laughing.

Smell me? I know I haven't exactly bathed since I got into the arena, but can he really smell me?

"You took so long, I started to think you weren't coming. What happened, you get held up?"

"No, I just wanted to make sure I was nice and purty for you first. Why don't you come out? It's not polite to keep a guy waiting."

"In good time, curly. I want to savor this. You were nice enough to come to me, are you that eager to die? Sorry to disappoint you, but I promised to give the audience their money's worth."

Promised, I think, promised who?

I shake my head to clear it, I have more pressing matters to attend to. Off in the far corner of the clearing, I see the other opening leading out into the back half of the maze. That must be where I his voice is coming from.

I walk slowly up to it and see the hall goes in both directions. I decide to take a right and just as I hit the next intersection, I hear his fast, lumbering tread again coming right at me.

Reflexively, I stick my sword out in front of me and, quick as a flash, Minos barrels into my outstretched arm, knocking my sword from my grip with as much ease as swatting a fly.

Clutching my right arm, I beat it in the opposite direction.

Left... right... left... right... right...

A thought registers and I have just enough time to curse myself because in all of the commotion, I dropped the spool.

No spool, no compass, I can get by without one of them, but not both. I have to head back.

Right when I turn, I hear him running again and it sounds like he's right behind me.

I turn, but not fast enough. Instead of him hitting me full force, however, he just manages to catch my shoulder and send me sprawling into the fogged floor.

I look up into that nose-rigged face accompanied by a mouth now split in a triumphant grin. He glares at me as he raises my sword high above his head with both hands as if in offering to the Gamemakers, who are surely readying my cannon.

When he brings it down, however, it's not in a strike, but smashes where the pommel meets the blade over his knee. The sword snaps in half and lies in pieces on the ground.

He stands there, gazing down on me with a look as if he knows he's just taken my only salvation.

Oh right, I think. He still thinks that the sword is my weapon of choice. What he doesn't realize, and what I see, is that the real portion of my deliverance, is now lying on the floor between his legs.

I slowly make my way to my feet, and stare into his face.

"Alright, big guy, let's finish this."

He swings a meaty hand up as if to grab me by the throat, but I'm too quick. I lung downward, through his legs, scooping the compass up as I go, hoping against hope that it's not broken.

The sudden shock to his legs, along with his own forward momentum, causes him to lose his balance and stumble right into a hedge wall. Suddenly the air his alive with the sound of his screams and the hiss of surrounding serpents.

I'm back on my feet and take a quick look at my opponent before barreling past him. One glance was enough to see that he was tangled and hooked into the wall for now, but he wouldn't be for long.

I pull my knife as I continue running down hallway after hallway, trying to put as much distance between me and him as possible while I scramble to try and think of something. Some way to try and finish him off.

The sounds of him clambering through the maze resume once more but amazingly, it sounds like he went the wrong way.

I continue on. Right... left... left... left...

Then bam, I smack right into him. He must have been in here long enough to figure out the layout and knew how to head me off. With as much speed as I can muster, I bring my knife up to try and cut his throat. He grabs my wrist and redirects my momentum, and my blade slices upwards and across his cheek instead.

With my wrist and knife in one of his hands, I try and knock his concentration by punching with my left. He catches my other hand, however, and smiles like he's toying with me.

I take advantage of his arrogance by jumping up, using my arms as a swing, and ram both legs into his stomach until I feel his grip slacken, and my legs push me away from his body.

He's a good six feet away now, so I decide to throw my knife straight at his head. His hand comes up to block it, and I'm stunned at what I see.

The blade has forced its way through his open palm and is now jutting out from the back of his hand.

I stand and watch in a daze as he grabs the handle of the knife with his right hand, yanks it free, and tosses it. He looks down at the gaping hole in his hand as the blood flows freely. The sight seems to send him into a blind rage,

and he charges at me. I have just enough time to turn and start running when he head-butts me square in the back, my pack's zippers let go. The contents spill out everywhere and I'm forced face first to the ground.

The air is pushed from my lungs with both impacts. I try to gasp, but my throat has clamped shut, allowing for no passage whatsoever. Little spots before my eyes pop in and out of existence.

Vaguely, I become aware that he's got my left arm in both of his and is now pulling it up and away from my body. The pain registers all at once in a searing, white-hot force, along with a trickle of warmth running down from where his injured hand grasps my forearm.

With a great thud, his leg comes down on my back and starts the air flowing again, but the pain explodes. All the sudden, I hear a scream and vaguely register it's coming from me.

He means to tear off my arm with his bare hands. The pain grows and grows until I feel something in my shoulder let go. The thought fills me with a dread that he's succeeded, and he let's go; seeming to have felt it too. The release brings a small bit of relief and something golden off to my right sparkles, catching my eye.

He starts making his way to my other arm, removing his leg from my back. I roll out from underneath him, grasp it underneath me in my good arm and get to what would be all fours if my left arm wasn't just dangling limply and unresponsive.

I wait for him to get almost on top of me. Then, in one swift motion, I twist around and push off with both feet and right hand. I spear upwards, driving the jagged tip of the golden horn straight into his chest. I keep my momentum going until it forces him backwards onto the ground, gripping and re-gripping the horn, forcing and twisting downwards for what feels like ages; until finally, the

cannon fires.