

Chapter 10

If the darkness was supposed to bring relief, then someone should tell the butterfly venom, because it very clearly didn't get the message. I've no idea where I am. I feel as if I'm floating in and out of existence.

Along with indescribable pain, there's just a sense of falling further and further into the dark.

Suddenly I hear the voice of my father.

"Look at you." The voice proclaimed. "Only a few days in and you've already let them get to you. Honestly, I'm ashamed to call you my son if you've given up this easily."

I glance at my surroundings. The blackness has morphed into a burning, jaggedly crushed elevator. Bodies strewn on the floor surrounding me. I look closer and they're all people I know. Violet, Clay, Maysilee, Gregor, Adalind, Maple, even little Calder. They're scattered around me staining the floor, staring up with accusatory glares.

"It's too late for them, Son."

I spin around to face the voice. The charred, broken, corpse of my father stands with pity showing through the marks of his last moments.

I ignore his last words and scramble from body to body, shaking and pounding on them, demanding they return to these lifeless husks.

I hear laughter. I look up. Grinning from within the flames are the faces of the rest of my fellow tributes. The largest, with booming, horrific laughter, is right behind my father. His nose ring shimmering amidst the dancing flames.

My father lunges toward me and slaps me across the face with a force that goes right through me.

"WAKE UP, HAYMITCH! I didn't spend eight years shaping you to have you fall to pieces at the slightest bit of bad luck."

Anger fills me as the sting of the blows (mental and physical) resonate within. "Bad luck?! You call paying for *your* mistakes, getting selected to die like a pig to slaughter, having to watch child after child die, being almost eaten alive, pursued by a large, one-track minded brute, envenomated to the brink of death or insanity, a 'bit of bad luck?!'"

"Stop whining, Son. Despite everything, you've risen to the occasion and pushed... albeit clumsily... past all thrown at you."

Great, he's come back from the dead just to criticize me. Apparently, I didn't get enough of that while he was alive.

"You've got what it takes to stay alive, Haymitch, but you have to start thinking clearly. You're moving in the right direction but raise the bar! You've been running this whole time, start pushing back!"

"You pushed back and look where it landed you!"

"They snuck up on me. With you it's different. They're being blatantly obvious with you, and what's more, you know it!"

"Look, Son, you're over thinking this whole thing. That was your biggest problem growing up. All you have to do is be the little pain-in-the-neck I know and love. You've caused more trouble than I care to admit by the time you could walk. Now's the time to use it! Wreak a little havoc. You were always able to goad people, the only difference is now you have to play for keeps."

Something finally clicks. Even now, I haven't *actually* killed anyone.

I always knew I'd have to cross that line eventually, but I don't think anyone really thinks about it until it's staring you in the face. If I'm going to make it out of here, I have to let myself become what I need to survive, *a victor*.

The light of understanding flashed behind my eyes, and what passed for a

grin slithered onto my father's face.

"That's it, son, now do what you *have* to!"

I glare past him at the smug face of Minos, still laughing within the flames.

I grab the knife from my belt and charge. I jump on a raised bit of rubble and push off towards the face with my knife held high in both hands. The smile of that burning face turns to surprise as it sees me coming.

I sink my knife deep into it... and I pass right through.

The disembodied face melts away and I'm plunged into darkness again as the sensation of falling returns. When it stops, I find myself back in my real body.

My eyes are closed as I rediscover my machinery. I find I can feel again, that is, I'm aware that I have a body. With this realization comes waves of soreness from every inch of me. I try to open my eyes. It feels as if each lash has its own anchor tied to it.

Once open, my eyes take in a bright green and brownish blur. I blink to help them focus, each time it gets a little easier as the layers of crust brushes off from the movement. I find myself staring into the ceiling of my cocoon.

I start trying to move and by the feeling each creaking joint gives, my guess is that I've been out for over a day or more.

I gather my mental force and begin to lift my hand, seemingly uprooting it from the floor. My arm feels as though it weighs a thousand pounds as I bring it up to my face and place my thumb and forefinger on either side of my nose to massage my eyes. I feel tiny beads of grit loosening themselves from the edges of my eyelids.

Oh God... how long have I been out? I manage to push the upper half of my body upright and rest on elbow-locked arms.

I still have a large pounding in my head, but then I feel something odd

underneath my left palm. I shift my weight to the opposite side, close my fingers around it, and bring it up in to view.

I still have to blink frequently to clear my vision, but eventually the bright blue mass begins takes shape. It was the crushed body of one of the butterflies. The size with the wingspan was as big as my palm. Even though it has the shape and wings of a butterfly, the body looked like a large wasp.

Another mutation. Not surprising given the very un-butterfly-like speed and stings they possess. I keep turning the little bug over, almost expecting to see a little stamp on the side that says, "Made in the Capitol," or "Gamemakers INC."

As I start moving around again more sensations begin to register; a ravenous hunger and a painfully dry thirst. I reach for my pack and pull out my remaining water bladder and my stores of dried beef.

Eating and drinking is a torture because once either touch my lips, an indescribable sense of pleasure overtakes me and I know I have to force myself to stop.

My supply of beef isn't too bad, but my water stores are dangerously low and I'm going to need to find a way to replenish them soon.

I replace everything in my pack, and my body screams at me to allow it to go back to sleep, but I've had enough rest for the time being.

I gather my belongings and prepare myself to open the hatch, not sure of what I'll see.

When I slide up the door of Maysilee's basket, I let in a (not entirely unpleasant) assault on my senses. Fresh air flies in on a breeze. The smell of wet earth fills my nostrils. I get a good look at the light surrounding the tree and am pretty sure it's morning.

I shimmy my way out of the basket, and as I do, I notice something strange about the small branches it's weaved from. Not only had each of the individual

stick been robbed of its leaves, but they were covered in little scratch marks... or were they teeth marks?

I doubt that the butterflies did this, my guess is that my furry little friends tried to have another go. Luckily either the branches were too thick and tightly woven, or they found something better elsewhere. I give a little pat on the basket in thanks. I definitely owe Maysilee one now.

As I try to push past the pain to get down, I look at my arms and see pock marks of stings and dark red-brown crusted bite marks and wonder what the rest of me looks like. I somehow manage to make my way down the tree and onto the damp grass. It must've rained again while I was out.

Questions start to fill my mind. How long have I been out? How far of a head start does Minos have? Perhaps the most important one of all, how many tributes have died since I was last in the game?

The uncertainties pile up in my head and get me nowhere. The important thing to do now is to form a plan. I have to kill Minos, but since I don't know where he is, I have to stick to my original plan and try to find the edge of this place. When we meet again, hopefully he'll be kind enough to give me another heads up.

First things first. I walk myself to the nearest gap between trees and locate the mountain. Far off in the distance I see its snow-white tip. I set my back to it and once again start my trek in the opposite direction.

I barely walk ten minutes before I feel the absolute need to drink again. I try to push past it, but my mind is already starting to cloud up and pulse with a growing headache. I can't ignore it so I pull out my water again and take as little as I can. Even with my ability to pull away before swallowing the whole thing, I'm left with what looks like only a few mouthfuls. I have to find some more drinkable water and soon. All the more reason to catch up with Minos.

If he has any brain at all, he'll know by now that the natural sources are poisoned, which means he has to carry a source with him... if he hasn't died already.

Somehow, I doubt he has. If I can catch up with him, the outcome of the fight will either solve my water problem temporarily or permanently. Either way, it's got to be done.

I just get the cap back on to start moving again, when out of nowhere the ground starts to shake. My hand instinctively goes for my knife, as I whip around looking in all directions. All I can think is, *what now?*

The shaking subsides but still I can't see anything abnormal. I decide to head back towards the cornucopia a little ways until I find a spot high enough to use for a vantage point. I don't have to go far to find a very large tree poking up above the others.

I move towards it, when the ground starts to shake again, this time more violently and accompanied by the roll of thunder. As I get to the base of the tree, I look up and see that all the branches are moving frantically. Climbing a moving tree feels like trying to crawl up the body of a live animal. More than once, I have to stop to grab hold of the trunk and keep myself from falling.

When I make it up to a suitable height, I find a place in the branches where I can sit comfortably and lock myself in. I have to snap off some of the smaller branches before settling in. When everything is said and done, I sit on a large branch with my torso between two smaller ones I can hook my arms around to steady myself.

I'm just about to reach for my binoculars, when the most violent shake yet sets off. It's accompanied by what feels and sounds like a huge explosion.

My eye's scan the horizon and it only takes a second for the cause to make itself known.

The mountain I've used to keep direction has just exploded in a mushroom shaped black cloud with large tendrils of a bright red inferno spewing fourth, shooting up, out, and down the mountain; or should I say *the volcano*.