

Sixty seconds, that’s how long we’re required to stand on our metal circles before the sound of a gong releases us. Step off before the minute is up and land mines blow your legs off. Sixty seconds to take in the ring of tributes all equidistant from the Cornucopia a giant golden horn shaped like a cone with a curved tail the mouth of which is at least twenty feet high spilling over with the things that will give us life here in the arena. Food, containers of water weapons medicine garments fire starters. Strewn around the Cornucopia are other supplies, their value decreasing the farther they are from the horn. For instance. Only a few steps from my feet lays a threefoot square of plastic, certainly it could be of some use in a downpour. But there in the mouth I can see a tent pack that would protect from almost any sort of weather. If I had the guts to go in and fight for it against the other twenty-three tributes. Which I have been instructed not to do.

We’re on a flat open stretch of ground. A plain of hardpacked dirt. Behind the tributes across from me, I can see nothing, indicating either a steep downward slope or even cliff. To my right lies a lake. To my left and back, spars piney woods. This is where Haymitch would want me to go. Immediately.

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I hear his instructions in my head. “Just clear out, put as much distance as you can between yourselves and the others, and find a source of water.”

But it’s tempting so tempting when I see the bounty waiting there before me. And I know that if I don’t get it, someone else will. That the Career Tributes who survive the bloodbath will divide up most of these life-sustaining spoils. Something catches my eye, there, resting on a mound of blanket rolls is a silver sheath of arrows and a bow, already strung, just waiting to be engaged. *That’s mine,* I think. *It’s meant for me.*

I’m fast I can sprint faster than any of the girls in our school although a couple can beat me in distance races. But this forty-yard length, this is what I am built for. I know I can get it, I know I can reach it first, but then the question is how quickly can I get out of there? By the time I’ve scrambled up the packs and grabbed the weapons others will have reached the horn and one or two I might be able to pick off, but say there’s a dozen, at that close range they could take me down with the spears and the clubs. Or their own powerful fists.

Still I won’t be the only target. I’m betting many of the other tributes would pass up a smaller girl, even one who scored an eleven in training to take out their more fierce adversaries. Haymitch has never seen me run. Maybe if he had he’d tell me to go for it. Get the weapon. Since that’s the very weaponthat might be my salvation. And I only see one bow in that whole pile. I know the minute must be almost up and will have to decide what my strategy will be and I find myself positioning my feet to run, not away into the stir rounding forests but

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toward the pile toward the bow. When suddenly I notice Peeta, he’s about five tributes to my right, quite a fair distance. Still I can tell he’s looking at me and I think he might be shaking his head. But the sun’s in my eyes, and while I’m puzzling over it the gong rings out.

And I’ve missed it! I’ve missed my chance! Because those extra couple of seconds I’ve lost by not being ready are enough to change my mind about going in. My feet shuffle for a moment confused at the direction my brain wants to take and then I lunge forward scoop up the sheet of plastic and a loaf of bread. The pickings are so small and I’m so angry with Peeta for distracting me that I sprint in twenty yards to retrieve a bright orange backpack that could hold anything because I can’t stand leaving with virtually nothing.

A boy I think from District 9 reaches the pack at the same

time I do and for a brief time we grapple for it and then he

coughs splattering my face with blood. I stagger back repulsed by the warm, sticky spray. Then the boy slips to the ground. That’s when I see the knife in his back. Already other tributes have reached the Cornucopia and are spreading out to attack. Yes the girl from District 2, ten yards away running toward me one hand clutching a half-dozen knives. I’ve seen her throw in training. She never misses. And I’m her next target.

All the general fear I’ve been feeling condenses into at immediate fear of this girl this predator who might kill me in seconds. Adrenaline shoots through me and I sling the pack over one shoulder and run full-speed for the woods.

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I can hear the blade whistling toward me and reflexively hike the pack up to protect my head. The blade lodges in the pack. Both straps on my shoulders now I make for the trees. Somehow I know the girl will not pursue me. That she’ll be drawn back into the Cornucopia before all the good stuff is gone. A grin crosses my face. *Thanks for the knife,* I think.

At the edge of the woods I turn for one instant to survey the

field. About a dozen or so tributes are hacking away at one

another at the horn. Several lie dead already on the ground.

Those who have taken flight are disappearing into the trees or into the void opposite me. I continue running until the woods have hidden me from the other tributes then slow into a steady jog that I think I can maintain for a while. For the next few hours I alternate between jogging and walking, putting as much distance as I can between myself and my competitors. I lost my bread during the struggle with the boy from District 9 but managed to stuff my plastic in my sleeve so as I walk I fold it neatly and tuck it into a pocket. I also free the knife it’s a fine one with a long sharp blade, serrated near the handle which will make it handy for sawing through things and slide it into my belt. I don’t dare stop to examine the contents of the pack yet. I just keep moving, pausing only to check for pursuers.

I can go a long time. I know that from my days in the

woods. But I will need water. That was Haymitch’s second instruction and since I sort of botched the first I keep a sharp eye out for any sign of it. No luck.

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