



Chapter One: Game Time

Ruby was being hunted. The thrill of it ran through her veins like fire, making her skin prickle and her muscles tense as she darted from bush to bush. Their paper leaves tickled her face, and she paused to pluck a bright pink silk flower from one of them. It was soaked in perfumed oils, and she smiled as she rubbed it over her tracksuit.

Good luck tracking my scent now, she thought.

Nevertheless, she looked around, alert to any movement. Cartoon bluebirds smiled down at her from flat cardboard trees. And rising beyond the fake forest in every direction was the crowd, row upon row of people, watching in silence.

Fifty thousand spectators were crammed into the stands of Netherburg Stadium, but it seemed that every one of them was holding their breath. That told Ruby the danger was close – the hunter was closing in, and they were waiting for him to strike.

The soft hoot of a wood pigeon came from the trees behind her. Not daring to blink, she cupped her hands around her mouth and returned the call. A second later, a small figure in red stepped out from cover. It was her teammate, Akako – fifteen, with a compact, muscular frame, her black hair packed in a bun. She signalled to Ruby in a rapid series of hand gestures.

Any sign?

Ruby signalled back. *No, but—*

She didn't have time to react to the huge shadow that reared up behind Akako. Yellow eyes blazed in its depths, there was a flash of white teeth, and two large grey furred hands plucked Akako from her feet. In barely a second, she was gone.

Ruby turned and ran. The crowd leaped to their feet, roaring with excitement, but not even their combined voices could drown out the low, animal howl from the trees behind her.

She ran faster, vaulting onto a narrow balance beam across a water trap, then leaping to grab a rope that hung from a nearby tree. She swung across a web of netting spread on the ground to trip the unwary, dropped, rolled and burst out of the forest into a circular clearing.

“Ruby!” The team captain, Roselyn, was waiting for her. Even in the middle of a game, she looked glamorous – eighteen years old, willowy, with ash-blond hair and an unflinching gaze. The exact opposite of Ruby, who was small, wiry and pale, with black hair scraped back from a wide forehead. “Where is he?”

“Behind me,” Ruby panted, backing away from the tree line.

“And Akako?”

“Out,” said Ruby. “What about Voss?”

“He got her too,” said Roselyn. “But not before we both got our flags up.”

They reached the centre of the clearing, where four flagpoles stood. Red flags flew from two of them. The others were bare.

“Mine makes three,” said Ruby, unfolding an identical flag from a pouch on her belt.

“I’ll raise it,” said Roselyn. “You keep watch.”

Ruby handed her the flag and turned to scan the trees. Nothing stirred, but she knew the hunter had to be close. He would be watching.

Three flags, she thought. We can still win this.

Tooth & Claw was a simple game. A team of four runners had to negotiate the arena’s obstacles, reach the clearing in the centre, and raise their flags without being caught by the hunter. Five points for each flag raised, and five more for each player who made it back through the forest to safety. They only needed twenty points to win, and her flag gave them fifteen already. If she or Roselyn could escape the forest, the final five points were theirs, and so was the championship. The soles of her feet itched with anticipation.

“Any sign of him?” asked Roselyn as the flag reached the top of the pole. The crowd cheered wildly in support.

“None,” Ruby replied. “But he’s here. I know it.”

The two girls stood back-to-back, unblinking.

“We’ll split up,” said Roselyn. “He can only catch one of us.”

“I’ll go north,” said Ruby.

“I’ll take south,” said Roselyn. “On three. One...”

“Three!” yelled Ruby, sprinting for the underbrush. She dismissed the faint twinge of guilt at not waiting for Roselyn’s countdown – the scoring line was calling her. But so was the hunter, and even as she took her first steps, some instinct warned her that she was heading into a trap. She veered hard right, now running east. At the same instant, a huge shaggy shape erupted from the bushes to the north, fangs bared. She felt its claws brush the back of her ponytail as it sailed past her. She powered on, not daring to look back.

As she reached the cover of the trees, she heard Roselyn scream. Then came that terrible howl again, and another almighty cheer from the crowd.

Five points left, she thought as the blood hammered in her ears. *I have to do this.*

She was the last player standing. The hunter was on her tail, but she had a head start. That would be enough as long as nothing—

Her foot caught on a hidden trip wire, and she landed flat on her face. Panic squeezed the breath from her lungs, and she rolled to one side an instant before the hunter surged past in a whirl of teeth and claws.

The crowd fell silent again as Ruby sprang to her feet and came face-to-face with him. The big bad wolf.

He padded back and forth on all fours, as large as a lion, his muzzle dripping saliva and his yellow eyes gleaming with triumph.

“Hello again, Ruby.” His voice was as deep and thick as mud.

“Alarick,” she replied. “Looks like it’s just you and me.”

He reared onto his hind legs, seven feet of muscle wrapped in salt-and-pepper fur. “The best of the best,” he said. “That’s why I saved you until last.”

“You didn’t save me for anything,” she shot back. “I’m just too quick for you.”

He smiled, revealing more long, curved teeth. “We’ll see.”

The edge of the arena was barely twenty metres behind him. So close! Ruby feinted left, darted right, but he dropped to all fours again, flowing as quick and smooth as oil to block her. He snapped his jaws and laughed.

“Too obvious,” he said. “Try again.”

Her frustration sparked into anger – he was toying with her. “I meant what I told you earlier,” she said. “I’m going to win this. For Marceline.”

His smile faded. “She doesn’t need you to settle her old scores.” He raised his head to survey the crowd for an instant, and Ruby wondered if this was her chance to slip around him. But he was cunning, and she knew this was almost certainly a trick.

Sure enough, the moment passed and he locked eyes with her again. “Give me your best shot,” he said. “It’s time to pay my dues.”

A growl built in his throat, and Ruby dropped into a sprinter’s crouch. This was it. Alarick would lunge and she would spring clear. But which way? Get it right, and she could reach safety before he had time to turn and catch her. Get it wrong, and the five points went up in smoke.

She tensed...but the attack never came. Instead, Alarick's growl turned into a wet gurgle, and he put his paws to his throat. Was this another trick? "Just come at me," she snapped.

He didn't answer but reared up again, staggering from side to side. The watching crowd gave a murmur of disquiet.

Ruby made up her mind and bolted, expecting Alarick's paws to close around her at any second. When they didn't, she risked a look back. He turned to her with wide, desperate eyes. She stumbled to a halt.

"Alarick?"

With a last, choking cough, he toppled onto his back.

Ruby stood, frozen in shock until a trio of medics – two humans, one wolf – hurried past her. She stumbled after them as they set about checking Alarick's pulse, shining a penlight into his eyes, and starting chest compressions.

This couldn't be happening. She had spent months – years! – training to beat Alarick. And here he was, staring blindly at the sky as a trail of white foam oozed from his maw onto the turf.

"Is he all right?" she asked, realizing what a silly question it was as soon as she said it. She didn't need the chief medic's weary shake of the head to know the answer. Alarick was dead.