

Dream Sequence (Chapter 35 ½)

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Author's Note:

If you'd like to read this bonus scene as you're reading the book, you can do so after Chapter 35.

35 ½. Follow

“Come on!” I skidded to a stop, and my running shoes sent up a plume of dust. The forest seemed to hold in every ounce of heat and humidity, and sweat leaked down my face and neck.

I looked back. Levi was limping along while Maksim tried to help him.

“What are y'all doing?” I motioned for them to hurry. “Guys. We don't have much time.”

Maksim sent a fleeting glance my way and tugged on Levi's arm. They pushed forward into a jog. Well, Levi tried to jog, but he was still limping.

A blur of movement drew my attention past them. “Look!” I pointed. “Maksim, they're catching up. We have to go!”

Maksim's eyes widened. He didn't say anything, but he did pick up the pace. Levi did his best to keep up.

Thick forest spanned on either side of us, and the canopy of leaves blocked all but a few slivers of sunlight. The light dimmed, the slivers growing fainter and more golden. Was it sundown already? It sure did look like it. As we huffed and puffed our way along the trail, our shoes crunching on the dirt, time itself seemed to evaporate, like the last grains of sand sliding down into an hourglass.

BOOM.

The blast erupted from somewhere behind me, and chunks of dirt landed against my back. I ducked, shielding my head and quickening my pace. “Guys, come on!”

A set of shoes crunched behind me, their pace matching mine. I risked a glance.

Maksim raced after me. Levi was gone.

My foot touched an irregularity in the ground, and I nearly rolled my ankle. I focused forward. “Where’s Levi?” I called back.

BOOM. The next blast slammed into me. I stumbled forward as dirt rained down, pieces of rock spraying my back. “Don’t stop running,” I called to Maksim.

The echo of the mine blast settled into nothingness. I managed another glance, and my center tightened. Maksim was gone too, and panic gripped me. He’d set off the mine.

“Oh, God.” I faced forward and kept running. The mines were on the trail. They had to be. Worse, the last slivers of sunlight were fading. Soon, I wouldn’t be able to see at all.

“You’re going the wrong way.”

The familiar voice danced into my ears and stole my breath. I shot a look to my left. Dad was running alongside me, and my feet stuttered.

His hand closed over my arm. “This way,” he said, veering right and pulling me with him.

“No!” I shoved my heels into the soil, bringing us to a stop. “Dad, wait. The mines.”

“You must trust me. Trust that I know.”

“Know what?” I panted, wishing the humidity would dampen the fire in my lungs. My attention drifted to the blown-up sections of trail behind us. Movement stirred from that direction.

I gasped. “It’s Levi and Maksim. Maybe they’re okay.”

Dad's grip drew me backward. "Do not go return to the place from where you've come."

"But we can't just leave them." Tears leaked into my voice. "Please, can't we—?"

"I can help them, and I can help you." He released my arm. "Follow me."

Sweat blended with the tears sliding down my face. I wiped away the slush and nodded.

Then we were both running.

He ducked beneath a low-hanging branch. I tried to mirror him. My feet stuttered, and I slowed. As the gap between us widened, the slivers of sunlight flickered and faded.

I thought I must be imagining things, but as I picked up speed—as the gap between Dad and me closed—the golden bits of light returned and even brightened a little bit.

"Focus," Dad called. "Keep running. Do not slow down."

I ducked my head and pumped my arms.

He angled left, dodging a tree.

I traced the same path. My feet stuttered again, and the gap between us widened. "Wait!"

He continued weaving through the undergrowth smoothly, effortlessly, as if he'd been made to run in this forest.

I stumbled, stepping on twigs and tree roots, leaves and moss. "Dad!"

"Focus," he called. "Don't slow down."

My stride lengthened—but then the toe of my shoe caught on something solid, and I tumbled forward. *Oof!* My face landed mere inches from a fallen tree.

I pushed up, leaves plastered to my forearms. Soil coated my palms. "We're going to set off the mines," I whispered, rising to my feet. I nearly choked on a fresh batch of tears.

"We won't," came that familiar voice. Dad was standing over me. "I know the way."

I lifted my gaze and found his hazel eyes staring back at me. He seemed so sure,

confident. “How do you know the way?”

“All you have to do is trust me.” He offered his hand. I took it, and his fingers wrapped around mine and gave a reassuring squeeze. “Can you do that?”

“I’m trying.”

“That’s good. Keep trying.” He pulled me along until we were moving at a near-sprint. My leg muscles quivered, but I did my best... and that was when I noticed the slivers of sunlight, which were getting bigger and brighter the harder I ran. Before, they’d been sunset gold; now they were a washed-out, mid-afternoon yellow, almost like time had reversed and we were gaining daylight instead of losing it.

The thought disoriented me. I stumbled, and the light waned.

“Keep your focus on me,” Dad said. “Watch how I run. Notice where I step.”

I watched every step he took, how he moved, what he did. The bits of sunlight grew until they seemed to burn through the canopy of leaves. “I’m doing it. Dad, I’m doing it!”

“Good.” His voice reached me as a whisper, but one that echoed around me and reverberated through me, as if through my very being. “Keep going.”

I straightened, picking up my knees and pumping my arms. I felt like a deer navigating familiar terrain—until a needle-like pain stabbed my temple.

I ignored the sensation.

The pain sharpened, pressing harder. My stride wavered. *Keep going!* But I couldn’t. The pain tore straight through my concentration.

Harsh voices broke the stillness. The pain intensified, spreading through my head. I moaned, reaching for the spot where the stabbing radiated. “Kat,” came Dad’s voice.

“Kat!” came another voice. It was deeper, the timbre of a baritone, and it was not at all

calm. “Kat, wake up!”

I stopped running and wheeled around. “Maksim?”

The sunlight dimmed, flickering...and went out. Cakey blackness surrounded me, and then an unseen force slammed me to the ground. I yelped.

“Kat!”

“Tie them up,” a man growled. “Ensure they do not escape.” The cool, sharp voice sent a shiver through me. It belonged to Ștefan.

