

## Chapter 22

Out of nothing, I realize I'm able to think.

Is this what being dead is like? It's not so bad, it's like floating around in an endless sea of nothingness.

Then, images form around me. It's as if I'm sitting at home watching the old, beaten-up television play my last moments over and over. A thought enters my mind of why I'm not in pain. From this springs forth the realization that, not only did I not feel pain, I didn't feel anything.

Alone in the dark I find myself sitting on bare floor, watching the final moments of *The Fiftieth Hunger Games*. I know I should feel *something*. I mean, I did kill a bunch of people... but I also won... but the only thing that I come close to feeling is bored.

Suddenly, my eyes (my real eyes) open and everything is a blinding white. Then, slowly, things begin to come into being... but not completely. Shapes begin to materialize, but blurry/out of focus.

I still can't feel anything, but I try to bring my hands up in front of my face. Someone's hands respond, but they didn't seem like mine. For one thing, they looked too thin, but when I tell my fingers to wiggle, the hands of the mysterious stranger's wiggle. They're clean, unblemished with a soft baby pink color.

My mind concludes that these must be my hands, but so far, they're the only things in this plane of existence that I can recognize. I tell them to go forward but find that they can only go so far before they stop responding. I try to push them forward, but it's as if there is an invisible barrier, blocking them.

I decide to try and move my face to where my hands have stopped and

find that it can't go beyond either. Then, as if triggered by my actions, a sound started blasting and I register that I can hear. The sound is shrill, but oddly distorted. In response, shapes (human shapes) start to appear and move in front of me.

All of the sudden I seem to be sinking, but only so far. Then, all of the distortions drain away, and I can see I'm in a glass tube, similar to the one that launched me into the arena, but there was a lady in a white uniform in the world outside the glass. She's paying no attention to me, but rather, concerned with pressing things on the screen in front of her. All of the sudden, I feel a coldness seeping into where my left arm should be, then I'm once more removed from any concerns of this world.

The next time I regain consciousness, I find myself in the same sterile white room, but in a bed. I can certainly feel this time and am at least aware that I have a body.

To my left is the large glass tank they must've kept me in for God knows how long. I see the long, black tubes limply holding the face mask that had allowed me to breath. Dozens of clear tubes hung from either side of the chamber and with a grim thought, I realize each one must have been attached to me in some way while I was in there.

I try to raise my arms to inspect if I have any holes, but find I'm restrained to the bed.

Blind panic at the feeling of being trapped takes over and it's as if I am watching a rerun of my last bout of consciousness, but with much better clarity.

The nurse comes in, and I find myself yelling, "What's going on, where am I???"

She refuses to answer and taps away on her screen. Then the familiar cold seeps into my veins, and I am out like a light.

When I finally regain consciousness again, the first thought I have, after remembering where I am, is that whatever it is they give me to sleep is great, because I have absolutely no memories in between doses.

Then I see the colors. The room I'm in still has the base of bright white, but all around me are streamers, balloons, and a banner that says Congratulations Haymitch Abernathy!

Well, that's all fine and dandy, but where is everyone? I go to check the restraints at my wrists, but they've been removed.

I sit up straight and find even this is an effort and I become dizzy. I summon what strength I have and swing my feet over the side of the bed. I look down and see four, flesh-colored sticks poking out of an overly large hospital gown.

How long have I been out? I haven't been this skinny since I was younger than Felix.

My eyes flicker over to the door, and on it lies a full-length mirror. I make up my mind and walk over to it. The flesh of my bare feet screams at the icy cold floor. I walk over and stand in front with my eyes fixed determinedly downward. I gather my courage, look up and see an unfamiliar skinny caricature of a person pretending to be me with a dumb, gaping look on his face.

When it sinks in that the person gawking back at me, *is* me, I close my mouth in grim determination and tear the gown off.

I see an articulated skeleton framed in the doorway. I swallow back a gasp of horror and realize that, although I'm thin, I don't seem to have a scratch on me. Where there should be a giant scar running the length of my abdomen, there is only a flawless patch of skin stretched across feeble, but nonetheless alive, muscle.

As I stand there and asses my body, fully naked in front of the mirror, the

door quickly slides open and who else but Aurelia walks in, beautiful and radiant as ever.

"Haymitch, they told me you were fin... oh!" She gives a slight exclamation at this unexpected sight. She averts her eyes and with cheeks blushing very red against her gold accents she says, "Sorry, I didn't mean to um... Right..."

"Sorry." I say starting to blush as well while bending down to retrieve my gown, "Just checking to see if everything's still there."

I give a small non-committal laugh to try and lighten the situation.

After making certain I've covered myself, she answers, "Well, I hope you found everything to your, um, satisfaction."

Her face was still beet red. I guess seeing me naked when prepared to judge me like a piece of meat was one thing, but accidentally sprang upon her was another.

"Actually, now that you mention it, I do seem to be out of sorts. I know it's been a while since I've actually looked at myself in a mirror, but I think I may have missed a few things."

She looks at me for a moment as if deciding what to say. "Well, I'm afraid I'm merely on watch duty. Azrael had to give an interview about you, to reassure the public that you are in good health, due to the long period of silence surrounding the subject. He said that if you were to wake while he was away to bring you strait to him."

"Why couldn't he just wait here?"

I'm surprised to hear the touch of hurt I hear in my own voice.

"Well, he's a very busy man, you know. Although it *is* standard procedure to have an ex-Gamemaker be mentor when a district lacks one, It's the first time they've actually had a victory, everyone wants to hear him talk about it."

That makes sense, the only reason a district would be in need of a mentor

is if it was from a district that hardly ever won. In the forty-nine years of Hunger Games prior to mine, District 12 had only had one victor, and the stories say she didn't stick around long enough to be a mentor. I guess there are a lot of things about these games that will cause a stir throughout Panem.

Still, I can't help but notice that Aurelia had called it a victory for him. Yeah, he helped, but I'm pretty sure I did most of the work. Twice as much, in fact, as *any* other victor in history.

"Let's get going, he wants to see you as soon as you're ready." She pauses and looks at me for a moment. "There's a closet over there with some clothes for you. Go put them on, and I'll go make a call to let Azrael know you're coming."

"Ok." I say, slowly making my way over to the closet.

I can feel her watching me for a few moments before I hear her add, "Would you like me to call for a service chair, or would you prefer to walk?"

In response to this, I make it look like I'm working a little harder than I actually am, imitate an elderly man's voice, and say, "I'll manage, young missy."

When I reach the clothes hanging in wait, the smirk is wiped off my face when I see an exact replica of the clothes I wore in the arena.

I'd heard somewhere that this was a traditional practice. Meeting the team in the same clothes as they had watched you in for the weeks prior as if to make sure they could recognize you. Had I not just found it hard to recognize myself, I would've thought this a stupid reason.

Still, I don't like the idea of putting this back on. It's almost as if I put them on again, they're going to put me right back in the arena.

After I finish dressing, Aurelia leads me to the elevator. Apparently, I'm back at the training center. She takes me down hallways that are unnervingly empty, until we stop in front of a door.

"OOOOOOH this is so exciting! We're all going to be reunited, are you

ready?"

"Ready as I'll ever be."

Aurelia presses a combination into a small keypad next to the door, and it slides open. Through the opening I see Azrael bathed in light while talking into a camera.

He turns his head and sees us, then to the camera, "As a matter of fact he just walked in."

The voice of Caesar Flickerman emanates from the camera in his showbiz manner, "He did?! Well, bring him on, let's talk to the newest hero of Panem!"

The camera actually starts to move in my direction of its own accord. Azrael stops it with his hand and brings the spotlight back onto himself, "Sorry, Caesar, but rules are rules. Everyone has to wait for the crowning ceremony, as usual."

In his usual, overly-dramatic way, he says, "Oh, Azrael, you're breaking our hearts! Can you at least tell us when that will be?!"

You can practically hear him grabbing at his chest in agony.

"Well, let me have a little chat with my young ward and we should be able to nail down a date for you."

"Then what are you waiting for? Go! Don't keep us waiting for a second longer than absolutely necessary!"

"You've got my word, Caesar, bye for now."

He gives a wave as the anthem starts playing from the camera, which sends the ghost of a shiver down my spine. Then the light goes off, and the camera powers down.

Azrael's face is now looking at me, split in a beaming smile.

"Haymitch! Way... to... go!!!"

He reaches his hand forward and I grasp it in return. In response, he yanks

me in and embraces me with our arms still clasped between us.

A stifled snuffle is heard behind us and both our heads turn to see Aurelia failing to hold back tears.

She notices the looks we're giving and says, "Right, I'll just go grab the rest then, shall I?"

Without waiting for an answer, she turns and makes her way back down the hall. When he releases me, he places both hands on my shoulders and gives me a once over with the look of a concerned parent.

"How are you, how do you feel?"

"Ok I guess, but it was a bit of a shock to see what I look like."

After spitting this out, I notice that since his first look at me, he hasn't been unnerved in the slightest. He must have seen me enough to be used to it by now.

With a small wisp of a laugh he says, "Well I'm not gonna lie, I watched you grow pretty darn thin during the games."

"I'll bet, but not this thin, how long was I out?"

"Two weeks." He sees the widening of my eyes and says, "Here, why don't we sit down."

He points to two armchairs angled towards each other.

We sit, and he continues, "Well if you remember, you did end the game with your intestines hanging out. They had to scoop you out like the others because you were in no condition to use the ladder.

"When they finally got you medical attention, you'd already lost a lot of blood. You honestly had us all worried there for a while, kiddo. You took forever to finally finish her off after she damn near filleted you.

"During the games you seemed to be trying your hardest to stay alive, then after you finally win, it was almost as if you were trying your hardest not to come back to us."

"Well, it's not like I had a say in the matter." I say with a touch of defiance.

"I disagree entirely. You've fully shown how much you want to live. I think that if you hadn't wanted to so badly, you would've certainly been a goner. Seems you just had to finish off one last opponent." He ends with a wink and a light punch to my shoulder.

Something that's been tugging at the back of my mind finally surfaces and my mind goes to Brie.

"Thanks for sending the wood carving, but how were you able to get it to me?"

He sees the alarm this brings to my face and says, "Don't worry, she's fine! I reached out to your family when you were..." He shifts a little uncomfortably now. He clears his throat and continues, "Having your little episode after what happened to Maysilee."

My brow furrows at him calling it that and he pretends not to notice.

"I knew I had to do something to get you out of your funk. We were down to the last two tributes, and I knew that if you didn't snap out of it, when you were found either by Chanel or whatever the Gamemakers had in mind, you might not be up for it.

"Anyway, your mom told me to ask Brie and voila! As for actually getting it to you..." Self-satisfaction wafts onto his face. "Well, you don't work as a Gamemaker for as long as I have without acquiring a few strings to pull if ever the need arises."

"So, where is everyone?"

"You took so long to come back to the world of the living that we couldn't exactly sit and wait for you the whole time. We all had things to do, places to be, but now that you're up and moving..."

His sentence was finished by the door opening and Aurelia, Cyril, Orla,



and the entire prep team make their way in and exclaim their delight over seeing me and how wonderful it was that I am finally up and about.

Once these sentiments were over, and too my dismay, they would talk about nothing but the games.

"I can't believe that you survived those butterfly stings, I was in the middle of eating lunch, and I was so worried for you, I couldn't take another bite."

"The way you were able to outsmart all those competitors... You kept me on the edge of my seat every day. I think it might have given me an anxiety complex. I even made an appointment with my therapist next week..."

"I was *screaming* every time you pulled out those binoculars and didn't realize what they were! I was just as surprised as you were about the thread though."

All the attention and endless chatter about how I either murdered or outlasted forty-seven of my fellow tributes must have been etched clearly on my features; but after what seemed like an agonizing amount of time to me, Azrael comes to my rescue.

He clears his throat to get their attention.

"Yes, yes, it's all very exciting, but in case you hadn't noticed, the boy needs a lot of work before he's camera ready." This draws a small chuckle from the prep team. "I think the first and foremost thing is to stuff him till he's full to burst!"

With this proclamation, we made our way back to the District 12 living quarters, where a large number of Capitol dishes are waiting for us.

At his first mention of food, I realized I was starving, but shortly after we begin the feast I find a hidden wall in my stomach. I stare longingly at the Large perfectly cooked bird at the center of the table, the pies, puddings, and baskets of many different types of bread, elegantly placed all around the table. The spirit is

willing, but the body can't keep up.

When I mention this, an argument breaks out about how to proceed. Many say to pace myself accordingly, but the rest say that I need to push through and eat as much as I possibly can. Azrael even threatens to pour the gravy boat directly into my mouth and I can't quite tell if he's joking.

"It's your own fault." He says, "You're the one who had to spend two weeks completely immobile and being fed intravenously. Now we have to put that meat back on your bones as fast as possible so we can get you ready for your Victor's Night!"

He sees that this does little to cheer me up and adds, "The faster you get through all of the closing ceremony obligations, the faster you can get home." He emphasizes with a wink.

That's right, I hadn't really thought about it. My mind is still trying to grasp my entire situation. I get to go home! The thought of seeing Ma and the Squirt fills my heart with joy, and then the thought of getting to see Brie again melts it. This does cheer me up, the thought of home, of finally breathing free air for the first time since my name was pulled out of that stupid glass ball.

We spend the better part of the week filling me up as best we can and they take me down to the gymnasium each day to do some exercises the doctors gave to get me back into shape.

The gym is so quiet. Particularly because the last time I was in here, I shared it with forty-seven other kids. Every time I notice how empty this place seems, a cold chill runs up my spine. It's as if the faces of the others who trained in here with me were now staring, wondering what made me so special to be the only one to return.

I remember being able to lift a substantial amount of weight the last time I used this station, but they only hand me five- and ten-pound pieces of

equipment this time and even that is a struggle at first.

When I'm finally deemed ready enough for Victor's Night, the prep team spends the day trying to fix what damage they could to present me as a completely healthy individual. I don't have to do that weird bath they gave me in the remake center, but they clean my body up as best they can and add what feels like heavy coats of makeup to try and fill out my face.

Aurelia comes in with basically the same tux that I had worn for the interviews, but this time it has a layer of pads in my shoulders, chest, and even the seat of my pants.

"What's this?" I ask, "Did someone donate their own butt to the cause?"

Aurelia is not amused and tells me to stop poking it and put it on. The situation makes me think of Clay and how funny he would think the fake posterior was. Suddenly, I'm no longer amused.

That night, I'm brought underneath the stage by my whole squad, many of which have actual tears in their eyes telling me things like: "Go get 'em!" and "Enjoy it, this is *your* night."

They all stand on their designated spots beneath the stage, each portion of the team to be risen in their own time. First to ascend were the prep team, and a round of applause starts to make itself known through the air, then grows considerably louder as Orla and Azrael make their appearance.

Finally, the platform upon which I stand raises me up like the one in the stockyard did to lift me into the arena.

I have enough time to release a huff of air and think, *here we go again*.

Just before the trapdoor opens and I emerge onto the stage, a fog machine goes off and I am surrounded in a thick layer of the stuff. When the platform comes to a stop the fog becomes flooded in light and I step forward.

At some point during my ascent the crowd must have gone silent when

they realized the main event was coming. For a moment, it's as if the entire nation was holding its breath, probably wondering if it was really going to be me who would step out of the fog and onto the stage. When my appearance finally registers with the audience, the entire crowd goes ballistic.

Loud, roaring cheers fill the air, at first unrecognizable, then as one they all chant, "HAYMITCH! HAYMITCH! HAYMITCH!..."

I don't hear any clapping, but I look around on the stage and see all the members of my team smiling and doing just that as the crowd continues their cries of my name. All, except for Azrael, have tears in their eyes.

Azrael takes a moment to pause his applause, gives a little bow and uses his hands to gesture up the stage where a large, throne-like chair waits for me next to a monitor and another chair opposite, currently unoccupied. Standing in front of it was Caesar Flickerman with his dark blue suit that twinkles with its many lights and his green hair and makeup.

I make my way over and shake his hand. He indicates my chair and we both take our seats, but it still takes a few moments for him to get the audience to settle down.

Caesar begins to crack his usual jokes to get the ball rolling, but I can't help remembering how things were at our first meeting. I remember not wanting to be a part of this, and a sudden re-emergence of that feeling starts to boil over inside me. I let him talk and only answer when he asks something directly.

I just keep looking at the blank television screen sitting in between us. The empty black hole that will soon make me relive my time in the arena, and the deaths of forty-seven other children.

What is wrong with these people? Isn't it bad enough that I had to go through this once? They cheer for me because I'm the one that came out alive,

but that could've easily been any one of them. I almost proved as much with how long it took for the axe to come back.

The anthem plays, the lights dim, and the dull black eye sitting between Caesar and I comes alive with the seal of Panem. I feel myself sinking deep into my chair (my throne, I suppose) trying to prepare myself to re-enter the arena for the next three hours.

The recap opens with a smash cut of all the reappings. No name is left out, so that's what it's reduced to, their name and a closeup of the tribute on stage. Except, that is, when they get to District 12. They do the same for Violet and Clay as they did for the rest, but curiously, they show more of not only my reaping, but Maysilee's as well.

It's as if a golden arrow shoots through me when I see the triplets hugging and crying together as Maysilee forces herself to break away and make her way towards the stage. Hair, dress, and pin, all shining the sunlight into the camera.

Then I hear my name again and see the intense look on my face once more. I can't help but wonder if I have it now. I don't dare check the monitors though, in fear of losing it if I do.

Next came the chariot rides where everyone looked so stupid, myself included. When they show the closeup of our carriage, I see the horses and suddenly I'm hit with another arrow as image of a dancing, bloodied hand pops up on the screen in my head.

Then came the interviews. They squish all the interviews together. Flashes of faces and a word or two, but nothing more than a memorial, a name on a wall like so many on the side of the Justice building back home.

That is, until they get to me, where Caesar asks me about the competitors being one hundred percent more than usual. Then I see myself answering that they'll be one hundred percent as stupid as usual... but that wasn't the case, was

it? I can think of two people who were able to use cunning, even if for one of them it came from a primal instinct rather than just brain power.

After the interviews, the whole of Panem and I find ourselves being lifted into the arena once more as we watch from little Adaline's tube as she emerges into the bright sunlight and the picturesque scene before us. A shot of all our reactions pans across the screen. I'm somewhat embarrassed at the look I have on my face, but at least I wipe it off almost immediately.

An aerial shot shows just how massive the arena was. It must have gone on for miles in each direction from the cornucopia.

The gong sounds and only one dot from the huge ring of tributes starts sprinting towards the horn. There's a closeup of me getting to the stash and grabbing all the supplies I can and sprinting towards the woods. They show my face when I look back and the large unbelieving grin I have when I realize that the idiots were still just standing there.

Then comes the blood bath. I am forced to watch what I didn't stick around to be a part of. Along with the fighting, came interspersed shots of tributes finding out the hard way that everything was poisonous.

It turns out Violet had gone straight into the fray after all. She'd gotten her hands on a couple of spears and made everyone pay for each inch they took. In the end, someone threw a knife, and it caught her in the back of the neck.

Then more shots of tributes succumbing to poison. There was even the shot of me almost taking a bite of that apple. Even now, although I obviously didn't, I feel the audience holding its breath until I drop the apple and leave it for the squirrel, after which they all let out a sigh of relief.

I can't help but laugh. Now I know what's wrong with these people. They're all sheep. Stupid little sheep who eat, sleep, watch, and think everything that the powers that be want them to.

I get to see a bit of the things I missed throughout the games and find myself giving a little prayer of thanks that most of the careers followed the majority of tributes that went up the mountain.

Then I get to see from the audience's perspective my little run in with those stupid squirrels. A thought hit's me that they didn't show my return to the horn and the little scrap with Minos. Surely, they had to play it when it was happening... didn't they?

They also show me talking to Clay in the fallen pomegranate tree, but again, omit the run in with Minos, rather they just show me going in that same direction, straight into those blue butterflies.

Maysilee is also getting her fair share of screen time. They show how she was able to grab that small pack of supplies before bolting in my direction, and how she figures out how to turn her blowgun into a deadly weapon.

Then the volcano erupts, and they show the deaths of twelve more tributes, and how the rest had to take refuge in the woods. I find out that Clay *had* been able to move, and quite fast, but not quite nimble enough to avoid the lava cracks.

They do show Calder's death, but not my circling back or intervention with him. It just looked like he'd been bitten to death. You just see me moving off in that same direction until I reach the maze. This time they had to show one of my interactions with Minos, but it was so short, it was little more than me stabbing him and being forced to turn around because I couldn't get past the hedges.

The next shot is of me circling back into the woods where the three careers were waiting for me. I see myself taking down the first two then almost dying at the hands of the third. Then of course Maysilee makes her appearance. They show pretty much everything that happened to the two of us after that, just

in a more condensed version. Right up until she dies while I hold her hand.

There is very little footage of me for a while. Guess they also didn't find my "little episode" very entertaining.

Instead, they show the girl tribute being absolutely demolished by Chanel, then the last remaining tribute from 3 being eaten alive ever so slowly by those fluffy, little buggers. A shiver runs up my spine because I can still hear the chattering sounds, they made.

The next footage is split between the two of us, how we are making our way obediently towards one another, and the momentary look of shock on both our faces when we stumble into each other. The fight is played in full until I am sliced open in the middle and have to make my way towards the cliff.

There are a few shots of us enacting what looks like the worlds slowest chase. As soon as I reach the cliff, you see her throw the axe and I immediately collapse on the floor. It missed me by bare inches, and I didn't even know. Now all you can see is me convulsing on the ground and her trying to stop the flow of blood from her eye socket.

You see that I say something, but it comes out as little more than a gurgle, then a grin shines through the side of my face that isn't buried in the ground.

Chanel sees and hears all of this and cocks her head a little in amazed bewilderment. Then, right on cue, the axe finds its way back and sinks itself into her skull. She slumps to the ground, and I like to think the last thing that went through her mind (other than the axe I mean) was to ponder what could have very well been my last word.

Did she hear me? I don't know, but I like to think she did, because it distracted her just enough for the axe to its job.