

Chapter 24

They set me up in a house that's stood for many years but has never been lived in before. It's a very nice place, but it does bear the unmistakable signs of the Capitol.

Some things I don't mind, like constant electricity, hot water on tap, not to mention all the comfy furniture. Apparently, once the Capitol was sure I was going to live, they had Aurelia take charge of having my house furnished and freshly painted. I'm not saying I'm into all of the choices she made, but I am thankful it's more on the robust side. Really, I'm just glad that there isn't a ton of gold, or fluffy things laying around.

For the first few days, I didn't know what to do with myself. I helped Ma and Felix get settled in. We all had a room to ourselves, which for Felix was unheard of. I have more money than I know what to do with, so at first, I let Ma do all the shopping. She surprises the hell out of me with all she knows how to cook.

When I ask her about where she learned it though, she just says that, "All cookin' is essentially the same. Once you know the basics you really cain' go wrong, and I loooove me some improvising when it comes to my kitchen."

That made me smile. I know that she didn't mean *her kitchen* in the literal sense, because I have a hunch that she would've said the same thing back in the old shack where the kitchen was more implied than anything else, but I am so happy that she does actually have a kitchen now. She even makes meals to bring to our old friends and neighbors who helped us out when we needed it.

I had no more use for school since I was set for life, but we decided that it

was still best for the squirt to continue his lessons. He'll be expected to get a job one day to contribute to society, it's best to try and educate him as best we can.

Hopefully we can get him interested in anything that doesn't make him go down in that mine... and to be perfectly honest, he still has six chances left for his name to be called in the reaping. There's not much I can do if that happens. I don't even think I could take his place if his name were called within the next two years where I'll still be of age.

I wonder, though... my guess is that they wouldn't let me, way too much fun for the Gamemakers. I do know that every once in a while, a child of a Victor is chosen, but has a sibling ever been called before? And what of that flash of red I got from the president when he gave me my crown? Am I smelling another trap, or am I just being paranoid?

I see Felix and Brie every day after they get done with school. Brie obviously doesn't live with us, but she's over often enough that she might as well be. It's wonderful to be able to see her again, especially because I'm only calm when she's around.

I don't mean I'm particularly anxious, but after a few days of just sitting around the house with nothing to do, I start to get more than a little restless. I'm not used to having so much leisure time.

At first, I thought I'd catch up on sleep, but what little I get is full of nightmares. The only thing on television were stupid shows from the Capitol that no one other than people from there would be interested in. You also can't go more than fifteen minutes without seeing my face plastered all over the screen.

One morning I decided to go out for a bit, walk around and try to get some fresh air. It's a very different world once you leave the Victor's Village, and I have to say it kind of comforts me. For the first time I feel like I'm home. The real

home of District 12.

I decide to go visit the merchant center and see if there's anything I want. After all, I've got all this money, why not spend some on myself? Haven't I earned it?

What happens is more of a grocery shopping trip for Ma. I see things here or there that I think would be good for supper. I get some steaks from the butcher, some real herbs and spices, and when I walk past the bakery, a smell so heavy and mouthwatering wafts out, that I have no choice but to go in. I buy all kinds of different loafs of bread, and small sweetcakes that I can't help eating right there in front of the shop.

But then something catches my eye. There's a glass Window at the end of the street with brightly colored candies and sweets in it. Suddenly the cakes turn to led in my stomach and without really telling them to, my legs carry me forward toward the sweet shop.

In contrast to all the bright colors of the edible treats around the room, the atmosphere as soon as I enter becomes very gloomy and oppressive. I look behind the counter at a very stout, balding man whose face seems so sad that it resembled that of one of the bloodhounds down at the Justice building. It was the face of a man who aged forty years in one night.

The man lifted his head and looked at me when he finally realized I was there, and the tears that were already brimming and threatening to pour, now flowed freely down his face.

I just barely find my voice and can get out, "Hello, sir, my name is..."

"Oh, I know who you are." He says cutting me off mid-sentence.

With a speed that I would not have thought possible from him, he makes his way around the counter and towards me.

Suddenly I feel as if I'm in danger and my hand finds its way to grab a

knife that wasn't there. I brace myself for the blow that would surely come, but doesn't... Instead, I find myself lifted up into the air by this man in an incredibly strong embrace.

He presses his face hard into my shoulder, which very rapidly becomes warm and wet. He is now sobbing uncontrollably into it. His body shaking with every rack, all while still hoisting me off of my feet.

Tears start filling my own eyes at the thought of all this man endured. I don't know for how long he just holds me and cries, but with each passing second my heart becomes heavier and heavier until I feel as if I can't stand another second, and that's when I feel the large man put me down.

"I'm so sorry 'bout that, young Abernathy."

"Please, call me Haymitch, and don't be. I'm the one who's sorry."

"For what?" He asks incredulously.

"I'm sorry that I'm standing here instead of your daughter..." The words start to get clogged in my throat. "I tried to save her, but I just couldn't... It's my fault..."

"Now don't you be sayin' it's your fault. It wasn't your choice to be put in that arena, and it certainly wasn't your fault the Capitol come up with those crazy ways o' killin' people. That's no way fer anyone to die, let alone a child.

"But you helped my baby stay alive 'long as she did, you even made her last moments a little better, and I know she... she would've been grateful that..." He pauses for a moment to regain his control. "...that she weren't alone when she crossed over. She even smiled when you held her hand.

"Hang on a sec, lemme go grab the misses, she'll wanna thank you proper too."

Before I could say a word, he rushed up the stairs to grab his wife, leaving me alone in his shop. Before I knew it, I heard footsteps hurriedly making their

way down the staircase. A woman, blonde and with every mark of beauty on her, but she too looked like she had aged very rapidly all at once. Through her tears you could see those piercing blue eyes that also belonged to her daughter.

"Thank you, so kindly for all you did for our Maysilee. Please forgive the state of us, we knew we'd see you, but we didn't think it'd be so soon. We're still taken the loss pretty badly I'm afraid." She says while blotting her nose occasionally with a spotty handkerchief.

Maysilee's father comes to her aid. "We've been trying to get along with our lives best we can, but the house just seems so empty now with Mays's sister either at school or in bed mostly. Everything has to be so quiet when she is home, so we had to give away Maysilee's canary."

"You did?"

"Well ever since the reaping, the canary was a nice reminder of the times we had before she had to leave. Not long after Maysilee died, her sister started getting these really bad headaches. In order to help her, we decided to give the bird away to the girls' best friend... Pity though, our house used to be full of music, now everything is as silent as... well, you know."

The grave, I finished in my head, and nodded.

"I just wanted you to know how sorry I am for your loss."

"Oh, we know you are sweetheart." Her mother starts. "We know the way she looked at you that whole time and we could tell there was something there. A woman always knows." She finished with a brave attempt at a smile.

"I'm not exaggerating when I say that she saved my life multiple times..."

"And you saved hers." Her father says as if to put an end to the matter.

"Nevertheless, I wouldn't be standing here today if it wasn't for her. If there is anything that I can do to help in anyway..."

"Oh, never you mind, sonny." He says, once more stopping my words. "You

just come see us every now and again, we can have a good ol' chat in remembrance of her."

"That sounds great, I will. You must at least let me buy some of your wonderful sweets."

"Well alright, but not at full price! You'll be gettin' the friends and family discount, and I'll not hear word againnit!" He says.

Even this discount would probably hurt them, but at least they are letting me pay for it. I buy a bag load of brightly colored candies for Felix, and I buy myself a basket of chocolates they assure me was not only made by Mays, but the last one she made outside of the arena.

Later that afternoon, I present Ma with the haul of groceries, and she immediately goes to work on them. Either preparing them for tonight's supper or storing them for later use.

Felix's eyes light up at the bag of candies when I present them to him and gives me one of his great big hugs before shouting his thanks and taking them into the kitchen to share with Ma.

Through the open front door, with the late afternoon light bouncing off and making her glow, comes Brie. Wearing that special half smile that she knows drives me crazy. She comes up and gives me a big kiss on the cheek.

I walk her into the house, and we plop down on a large sofa in what Ma calls the family room, which is basically what we call the room where we all spend the most time together. She sits there with my head on her lap, fingers intertwined in my hair.

"So, what did you do today, Haymitch?" She asks.

I told her about my little expedition into town, how I bought some stuff for dinner, and then of course everything that happened at the Donner's sweet shop. I see a look of shock come across her face when I tell her what happened.

"Haymitch, are you alright with everything? I didn't expect you to have to deal with something like that so soon."

"I don't know if I'd ever have been ready exactly, but once I saw the shop, I couldn't help but go in. It seemed wrong not to."

"I know what you mean, but to spring it on yourself..."

She never really said much about the whole alliance with Maysilee. She didn't really indicate her feelings either way.

I didn't think she would be jealous or anything, how could you over a situation like the one we found ourselves in? And it's not like we kissed or anything. Still... there are a lot of things I don't understand about girls.

"I want to do something nice for them, ya know... But there's nothing I can really do that says, 'Hey I'm sorry your daughter saved my life, then died, please take this as a show of my thanks...'"

She gives me a glare and says, "Haymitch Abernathy!"

It's like another arrow, straight to the heart... *really* starting to not like my own name.

"I'm sorry, I just wish there was something I could do."

"Well, maybe there is."

"If you've got any suggestions, give 'em here!"

"Why not get Maysilee's sister some medication to help with her headaches?"

"I don't think they sell anything in the district that they haven't tried already."

"So, look outside the district. You still have Azrael's number, right?" She says and then flashes me my favorite smile.

I decide that she's right, and after dinner I give Azrael a call. I've never used a phone before, luckily Aurelia be seemed to know this and placed a card

next to the phone with illustrations and directions how to use it. The call went through, and he picked it up on the first ring.

"Hello?" His voice said on the line.

"Azrael?"

"HAAAAAYMITCH ma boy! I was wondering when you'd finally give me a ring. How's the new house working out? The Fam enjoying it?"

"It's great! A lot better than the old homestead." This brings a nice chuckle out of him.

"The family are also enjoying themselves. Ma's keeping busy in the kitchen, and I bought a big bag of sweets for Felix today."

"That's great! Glad to hear you're starting to enjoy the 'victor lifestyle.' Pretty much anything you want is at your disposal."

"Yeah, Azrael, that's kinda one of the things I wanted to talk to you about. Is there any way you can get your hands on some pain meds? Something that would help with really bad headaches?"

"You're having headaches? How often? Have you been to see a doctor, I could have them send you one and..."

"No no no. You misunderstand, I'm fine, but the meds are for a friend of mine who's in a lot of pain. Is there anything you can do to help?"

A long pause stretches over the miles between us and then, "Listen, Haymitch. I don't know what people have been telling you, but it's not that great."

"Wha..."

"You're definitely not the first Victor who thought about doing this kind of thing, and you won't be the last, but I've got to tell you, you *don't* want to go down this road!"

Suddenly things fall into place, and I understand what he means.

"Azrael."

"Haymitch." He answers without skipping a beat.

"I promise you that the meds won't be for me. I know it must've sounded weird with the whole, 'I have a friend who...' thing, but you have my solemn vow that they are really for a friend and that I will not touch a single bit!"

"Really? Then no problem, I'll have to your doorstep by tomorrow. Sorry to sound like I did, but I know all of the victors, I've seen what can happen when one chooses to 'experiment.' I care about you, kid, I really do."

"I know, and I care about you too! Thanks for helping me, I know the whole family will really appreciate this."

"No problem, Haymitch, and if you need anything else, let me know. And don't be a stranger! Now that I know you can use a phone you have no excuse. You and I will be seeing a lot more of each other in the years to come, so if I still haven't made it clear since the first time we met: You're stuck with me, kid."

We both laugh, exchange our goodbyes, and hang up.

The next day, I find that Azrael has been true to his word, and a small box containing vials of morphine arrives. I waste no time in taking the box over and giving it to Maysilee's family. Their tears of gratitude for what I'd done to ease the life of the daughter they still had, followed me out their door and down the street.

I decided to try taking Azrael's advice in not only trying to find ways to enjoy being a victor, but also stay in touch with him as much as possible so that we could discuss the upcoming events and try to find my "talent."

Every victor is supposed to find one to grace the entirety of Panem with; now that we don't have to work or go to school. He suggested wood carving and that was the closest thing we have found to date, so I said I'd give it a try.

Things go on like this for a little while, trying to fill my days with anything

that would keep me busy. I'm always tired, though, due to the fact that I can't stop having nightmares.

Two weeks after my crowning ceremony, was the first of our monthly parcel days. Once a month for a year, because of my victory in the Games, the Capitol sends parcels of food and medicine. In honor of the first parcel day, the mayor decided to hold a party in front of the Justice building in the town square to celebrate, and I'm to be the guest of honor.

Something keeps nagging at the back of my brain though, and for the life of me I can't seem to figure out what it is. For some reason I keep imagining the voice of my father, but I can't hear what he's saying. I try to push the feeling to the back of my mind, but for some reason it still makes me anxious.