

# Part two: The Games

## Chapter 6

We sit in silence for a moment as the prep team leaves and Violet, Clay, and Maysilee, stare at me. We all wonder the same thing: what exactly did he mean by he's not worried about me?

I'm too tired to worry about it and drag myself off the couch to head towards my room. Besides, no coaching meant that as soon as I was done with the stylists, I'd have the rest of the day before the interview to do whatever I wanted. That was just fine with me.

The next morning Aurelia knocks on my door to wake me up. I look over at the clock and see I got to sleep in. Normally they wake me up around six to have enough time to eat and meet with Azrael before having to be at the gym by seven.

It was eleven and feels like a special treat. My body's sore, but well rested. I really couldn't ask for better, knowing in a matter of hours I'll be set loose in the arena.

When I open the door, Aurelia comes in with a giant garment bag strewn over one arm. She walks over and places it gently on the bed then turns to me.

"I'm going to program your shower to run through the cleaning cycles necessary to get you ready for me. All you have to do is stand there. If you're feeling frisky, perhaps you can help it with the scrubbing.

"Once you're done, put on the shirt and pants and come see me for your hair and makeup. Simple enough?"

I immediately stand up straight, stiff as a board, raise my hand to my forehead in a mock salute, and say, "Sir, yes, Sir!!!"

"That'll do, Haymitch." She says trying to suppress a smile. She then heads into the bathroom to go about her work.

Once everything's set and I'm in the shower, I can't help but be reminded of the remake center as the green foam and other substances make another appearance.

At least I get to scrub myself this time.

When finished, I head into the bedroom and see the bright light cascading across the floor and bed, illuminating everything. I cross to pick up the black garment bag and hang it on a hook on the bathroom door. I unzip the bag to find a normal black tuxedo that doesn't look very exciting. Despite Aurelia's instructions, I can't help but put on the entire ensemble, aside from the tie... I haven't the faintest clue how to go about tying it. Once on, I stride over to the full-length mirror on the back of my door.

I'm impressed with what I see. Luckily it is a far cry from the disastrous costumes at the opening ceremonies, but the suit had a flair of its own.

Tiny, shimmering, grey specks have been woven into the fabric, giving me a matted sheen and sparkle when the light hits me. The effect conjures up the image of a cleaner, brighter version of coal dust.

I take off everything but my shirt and pants, place it back on the hangers, and go see Aurelia waits for me in her quarters, which is equipped with her own makeup studio. Once she's done, she helps me into all the accessories and ties my tie. She instructs me to leave the coat off until we depart for the interview.

"So, what are you going to do with the rest of your day?" She asks.

"I don't know, I was thinking of having someone send up a meal and a good book. Any suggestions?"

"You're going to read?" she asks incredulously.

"Yeah. I love it, but we don't have the biggest selection back home, mostly the ones the school has to offer."

"Goodness." She says. "Well in that case, I suggest 'Crixus and Sparta,' one of my favorites. It's a novelized version of what happened in the twenty-first Hunger Games."

"Sounds good."

She smiled at me, flapping those long golden lashes of hers, and my heart flutters.

"Enjoy, Haymitch. Just make sure you're ready by the time we leave for the interviews."

I thank her and exit the room.

They send me a copy along with a cart of food containing today's delicacies. I took both in my room and sat down in the study nook. I had everything I needed to stay comfortable for the remainder of the day. I took a moment to fully enjoy what may be the last peaceful moment I'll ever know.

I sit in silence, enjoying the story. Occasionally, I pause to nibble on something from the cart.

Crixus and Sparta was indeed about the event's that had taken place during the 21st Games. The title were the male tributes from districts one and two that year.

The career pack wasn't quite a tradition yet, but those districts were showing the first signs of moving towards what we know today. During training, Crixus befriended Sparta. The two were said to have been enormous in stature and had a lot in common.

They quickly formed an alliance and their bond delved into the realm of true friendship. The other tributes from 1, 2, and 4 (as well as a few from non-

career districts) formed an alliance of their own, but when they tried to include the pair, they offended them and the two gargantuans went their own way.

In the games, despite being as big as they were, they successfully carried out a series of covert missions, quickly and discretely taking out many of their opponents.

A group of tributes found a valley surrounded by cliffs on all sides except for a small passageway, through which they were able to enter and exit. The group kept their backs to the high walls and watched for anyone coming their way.

They were caught off guard when Crixus and Sparta climbed the hills surrounding the valley and rappelled down the cliff face and attacked the group from above and behind.

After a while, the only ones left were the two allies and the would-be career pack, which was down two five tributes.

Sparta came up with a plan to surround the careers and force them into a trap. They set large boulders on top of the cliffs near the entrance. The plan was to lure them to the mouth of the valley, then come at them from opposite sides to funnel them in.

Then, they would release the stone blocks holding up the boulders by yanking the ropes attached to them. The boulders would fall to the valley floor, trapping the careers inside. From the top, the two could pick them off with a large cache of spears they acquired.

They split up to lure the careers in.

Unbeknownst to them, the careers had a plan of their own to track them down. Sparta did his part and got two of the careers in place. It became clear to him, however, that the remaining three had killed Crixus.

Sparta was so enraged at the loss of his friend, that he became blood

drunk. He found the remaining three and barreled towards them without thought or fear. Panicked, the three tributes ran to the other two, and took cover in the valley.

Sparta had enough sense left to finish the plan. When he stood at the mouth of the valley, the titan grabbed a rope in each hand, and with a terrifying grin, pulled both as hard as he could and sprang backwards.

Despite the loss of Crixus, the plan succeeded. The five careers were trapped, and Sparta, who once again climbed to the edge of the cliffs, appeared at the top with the basket of spears.

In a large, booming voice he announced that they would have to fight each other to the death. The last one standing would have the honor of fighting him for the crown.

The tributes refused.

Without a moment's hesitation, Sparta picked up a spear and threw it straight into the chest of one of the tributes. The boy flew backward with the force of the powerful blow and died instantly.

The choice was clear, fight to the death for the chance of beating Sparta, or be speared one by one like fish in a barrel.

Without a word, they began to fight.

There were three boys and a girl left. The girl was the strongest and they knew it. The other three turned on her immediately. Despite their best efforts, she slew two with her sword.

It looked as if she was going to win, but as she went in for the third death blow, the last boy dodged, causing her to miss and smash her sword on a rock.

The final boy grabbed the spear out of the chest of the fallen tribute and stabbed it through the base of her neck. She fell forward, choking and impaling herself further, until she came to rest on the ground.

Sparta took his cue and jumped with no regard or weapon, straight down into the pit and came out of the fall unscathed. The large form of Sparta towered over him as he tried to flee. As he tried desperately to scramble up the wall, Sparta grabbed him by the ankle and threw him across the floor. The boy retrieved the spear from the girl's throat and threw it. Sparta caught it out of the air with a twirl. He spun around until he was facing the boy and smashed the spear over his knee.

He advanced towards the final tribute, who in a fit of pure desperation tried to kick Sparta in the groin.

Sparta snapped his monstrous thighs together, trapping the boy's leg. Then he knitted his hands together above his head and brought them down straight on the boy's knee, which broke with no resistance and bent the opposite direction. Sparta released his grip and the boy fell to the ground, writhing in agony.

He left the boy to wallow in pain, only to return with a large rock in his hands. The boy stared up at him in terror, knowing he'd reached the inevitable. Sparta raised the rock high above his head and brought it down with all of his might, putting him out of his misery and claiming the title of Victor.

After finishing the story, I direct my full attention to the dinner cart.

I place the book gently off to the side and pull the cart directly in front of me. When it comes to an abrupt stop, I hear a clink from the bottom of the cart beneath the cloth covering it.

I lift the cloth to see that someone, by accident most likely, left a glass bottle filled with an amber liquid, along with drinking glasses on the underside of the cart.

I've had enough experience around alcohol with Pa to figure that's what this is, but I've never really seen it before, not this color anyway.

Whenever Pa had it, it was that clear stuff that burned my nostrils. I don't think they have this kind in District 12 at all. This stuff was the high-end Capitol liquor.

What the hell, I may never get another chance to taste it, why not give it a go? I grab the bottle and one of the glasses and carefully pour a good amount of liquid in it.

I look at the shimmering swirls that swim in gently dizzying patterns as the light passes through. I put the glass to my lips and notice it has a smokey, wood aroma and I hope it tastes as good as it smells.

I open my mouth and let just a tiny amount past my lips. It touches my tongue and runs through my mouth like liquid fire.

I'm not too crazy about the taste but maybe it's better in larger doses. I place the glass to my lips again, opening a little wider allowing more to flow through, when I hear Azrael pound on my door telling me to hurry up and get out here so we can get going.

This takes me by surprise and I accidentally allow much more of the liquor into my mouth than I meant to. My body reacts on its own and swallows it all in one massive gulp.

The liquid burns everywhere on its way down and I start coughing violently. It stings my mouth and nose making it hard to breathe as I try to take in fresh air to clear it. I can feel my face turn red and my eyes start to water.

After a few moments the feeling subsides, and I get myself under control. I feel much better and all that's left is the warming sensation of my throat and stomach.

One thing is for sure, I don't think I like liquor.

I grab my coat and set off for the interview. Once we get down to the floor, I start to feel... funny. *Ha-Ha* funny. My head starts swimming, but I feel relaxed.

I laugh to myself as I look at all the others and see they all look like their trying not to puke.

Everyone's dressed in fancy, over the top, outfits. I guess we're no exception. Clay is in the same suit as me, and the girls are dressed in gowns to match. Their outfit isn't very flattering and definitely doesn't leave much to the imagination.

We're all told to form a huge line in order of districts with girls first. I, once again, am dead last. There are television monitors everywhere and we watch as Caesar Flickerman introduces us to our adoring public.

"Good evening ladies and gentlemen. As you know, we are on the very eve of the Fiftieth Annual Hunger Games, celebrating the second Quarter Quell. You've watched these forty-eight young men and women transform in front of your very eyes from the rough-cut stones plucked from the masses on Reaping Day, into the polished gems that appeared before you at the opening ceremonies just days ago. They've been working fiercely since, to become as lethal as possible for tomorrow, and you saw the scores the Gamemakers assigned.

"But tonight, we'll be getting up close and personal with each individual to give you a tantalizing taste of who they really are. As you know this portion of the pre-game ceremonies is already a long process, with each tribute only allowed the bare minimum of three minutes to show you a glimpse of their true selves. This will be an even longer process due to twice the normal amount of tributes.

"With that in mind, we ask that you stay patient, and let's get right into it. First, we have the lovely Chanel brought to you all the way from District One. Come on out here Chanel!"

So it began, an agonizing, painstaking process to give each individual their equal right of airtime that was so short, even if you were somehow able to be



memorable, any points you earned were lost: drowned by the rest of the program.

Each tribute flashes their face and clothing to try and win a few glances from sponsors. With each new tribute, the growing unease of the audience becomes more and more noticeable.

Caesar does his best to put on a brave face and push forward, using his natural talent to connect the audience with each tribute through the use of a cunning wit or tugging on heartstrings.

The audience, however, becomes more restless as time and tributes pass. People started shifting in their seats at first, then the talking and shouts comes as time and alcohol drag on. At the end of this huge, snake-like string of tributes, there's me.

This was both a curse and a blessing. With being the absolute last to go, I didn't have to worry about being lost with the input of more information into an already overstuffed mind.

Maybe it's the alcohol talking, but I really don't care what these people have to say. I'm not drunk, at least I don't think, but I can definitely feel something. I'm a little foggy and just don't care about anything in general.

Here I am, about to be pitted in a fight to the death for the enjoyment of an audience who doesn't even have the decency to listen and get to know these people who they're so willing to sacrifice. I start laughing at the lunacy of it all. At least tomorrow, for better or worse, it'll be the beginning of the end.

My stupor was cut through for a moment when little Calder took the stage. Despite the gentle prodding's of Caesar, he either wouldn't or couldn't talk. To each question Caesar asked, he'd just answer with his enormous, crooked grin and stare through his thick lenses, or his whole manner would sink into a depressive posture showing his decent.

I couldn't help but feel for the little guy who was surely going to die, possibly even tomorrow. Despite my best efforts, a single tear escapes the corner of my eye. Maybe a sponsor will take pity on him in the games and either give him an edge or at least make him a little more comfortable as he waits for the inevitable.

The feelings shot into me are immediately purged when the next idiot takes the stage. We're at the end of District 8 and still have four districts with four tributes each to get through.

After what feels like a lifetime, we finally arrive to District 12. Violet is asked how she managed to get her score of ten, putting her head-to-head with the current favorite of The Capitol, Minos.

"Well..." She began. "I know that I can't tell you directly, I guess you'll just have to wait and see. I guarantee you won't be disappointed."

Next was Maysilee. Despite the revealing cut of her dress, she came off as the sixteen-year-old girl that she was.

"I know that you must be a very popular girl at home Miss Donner. Is there anyone in particular you will be fighting for throughout your duration in the arena?" Caesar asked.

"I would definitely say that my family is who I'll be fighting for, but mostly my twin sister. She's been with me my entire life, and I don't believe that's changed. I feel that, in my heart, she'll be fighting right alongside with me."

To my surprise, the audience was listening and the truth of her words rings in their ears as they let out a collective "awe" in response.

Maybe their attention was snapped back when they realized we're on the final district. Once Maysilee finishes, Clay takes the stage. He looks kind of funny in his fancy suit being as big as he is, and the fact that he has a buzz cut only added to his displacement. This "gem" as Caesar put it, was still in the

rough, but he has his shining qualities.

"So, Mr. Terra, I see you're a rather large man. Will you be relying on your strength in the arena to get you through tomorrow?"

For a moment, Clay looks out at the audience, as if confused at what he should say. Beads of sweat begin to swell on his forehead.

Finally, he stammers out, "Uhh, I'd say that my size and strength are definitely things people will have to look out for."

"Eloquently put! Is there anything else you'd like to add?"

In the final moments of his interview, he finally gets his bearings as he said, "Yes, there is. I have a little something up my sleeve, I don't think anyone is going to see it coming."

I hope he does! At least his Paranoia will be put to good use.

Then, it's my turn. I took my place in the spotlight and found my feelings of indifference haven't changed.

Caesar extends his hand for me to shake and gestures to sit down. Up close, I notice cracks appearing in his makeup, and his green hair starting to rebel and fray with random strands going this way and that. It appears that even the infallible Caesar Flickerman, found the power in these numbers more difficult to handle than initially thought.

I think he just might've read what was on my mind, because the first question that he poses is, "So, Haymitch, what do you think of the games having one hundred percent more competitors than usual?"

Without a blink, I shrug and blurt out, "I don't see that it makes much difference, they'll still be one hundred percent as stupid as usual, so I figure my odds will be roughly the same."

At this, the audience laughs hysterically. If they only knew just how much I hated them. This thought brings a slight smile to my own face.

"You are a very strapping and attractive young man, I'll bet the ladies just faint in front of you back home, is there a special lady in your life that you are trying to get back to?" He asks.

"As a matter of fact, Caesar there is." I answer.

"Ah, I knew it. Will you be so kind as to tell us about her?"

Without hesitation I answer a curt, "No."

Another crack appears in the thick layers of makeup that seem to be holding this man together, but he quickly recovers by putting on a fake heir of solemnity and saying, "Ah yes, the strong silent type, I respect that. With all the different tributes making their way into the arena tomorrow, we're bound to see many amazing things, is there anything special that you will be adding to the mix?"

"What I will say, Caesar, is that no one, in the Capitol or the districts, has ever seen the likes of me before. I honestly wish them luck. They're gonna need it."

To my astonishment, the entire crowd begins to cheer violently. One person after another, actually stands up, until the entire audience is standing and clapping. Don't these people recognize when they are being insulted? I hate them, and apparently, they love me for it.

Finally, my time expires and all of the tributes take the stage to take their final bows. I notice, once again, Minos has taken it upon himself to try and stir me down. I laugh it off and we all bow to the sound of thunderous applause.

Then Minos does something that catches my eye. Well... *he* doesn't exactly, something about him does. I look over during the bow and see a small square of white paper fly out of his pocket and flutter down to the stage.

I see it, and Minos sees me see it, but he doesn't waste time in picking it up. He follows the line now starting to move offstage. We all follow, and when I get

to the place where he stood, I bend down, grab the paper (which felt surprisingly thick to the touch) and quickly shove it in my pocket.

Once offstage, we're taken back to our respective floors. There's no talking among us other than the praise from the team on how well of a job we did. It falls on deaf ears because we're all tired and emotionally drained.

On top of our stress-weakened, tired bodies, we're all suddenly plunged into a ravenous hunger, as if all the want of food vanished in anticipation of the interviews and had come flooding back in full force. Yet the silence continued as we threw ourselves whole-heartedly into our dinner. Once finished, Azrael decides to give us one final pep talk.

"It's been quite a ride this past week. Although I've known you for a brief period, I'm grateful to have been able to help you thus far and plan to work hard to continue to do so in the weeks ahead.

"For those of you strong enough to do your part and stay alive, I promise to do *my* part to help keep you that way. No matter what happens, I'm proud to have known you. Try and get some sleep boys and girls, it will probably be your last chance for a decent amount."

With these grim words, everyone starts off to their rooms. As I make my way to the staircase, I hear Maysilee call my name.

"Yes?" I say.

"Good luck to you as well, *you're* gonna need it."

I look at her for a moment, then remember my words in the interview and we share a laugh.

"I'll see you out there?" She asks.

"I'd say the odds are in your favor." Then we part.

Once I get into my room, I strip off my suit and put on more comfortable clothes to sleep in. I'm just about to pile my suit in the container where I put the

rest of my dirty clothes, when I remember the paper.

I pull it out and find it's a larger sheet folded into fourths. I carefully unfold it and am immediately perplexed at what I see.

There, in the middle of the paper, was a candid picture... of *me*...

Where did he get this and what could it possibly mean?

My first thought is that he pulled it from the reaping broadcast, but soon throw that theory out for two reasons. One, I wasn't wearing my reaping clothes, but rather the normal soot-covered rags meant for every day. Two, the angle was all wrong for it to have been from a television camera. This picture could've been any random day *before* I ended up in this mess.

The conspiracy theory conversation I had with Clay earlier springs to mind, and somehow doesn't seem nearly as farfetched anymore. I'm filled with the notion that Clay might be right and the Capitol was gunning for my blood.

Alright, I think... but first: they must catch me.