

# *HA YMITCH*

By Philip La Croix

# Part one: The reaping.

## Chapter I

It's a cold morning in the Seam. Clouds of fine mist appear in front of me when I finally remember to breathe. I sit on the ground with my back against the rotting, wood shack I call home. I whittle away at an old branch in my hands to warm them up a bit, as well as give me something to do. Many kids are grasping at whatever they can find today, in order to take the focus off the one thought running through their minds. Today was the day everyone in the district feared. Those who were between the ages of twelve and eighteen most of all. Today is Reaping Day.

As I hack away at the piece of wood, I look down and realize I've unconsciously made a spike. Even when trying to get my mind off the games, it seems they're in the very fabric of my being. I give a small, shrug my shoulders, and continue.

*Practice... I think.*

And why not? Even though I'm only sixteen, my name will be in the running twenty times, having the normal yearly entry of one mandatory per child, plus signing up for tesserae three more times for my mother and brother since I was old enough, to help support them.

My father died when I was eight, leaving my mother alone with two kids to survive in the Seam. He was quite a man though, taught me everything, when he wasn't tanning my hide that is. Some of the time you couldn't blame him, I was (still am, I guess) a very... let's say, rambunctious child.

I was always getting in trouble for messing with those around me. Especially the idiots I go to school with. Other times, though, I don't know why he did it exactly. He was a smart man, but an angry one. He'd usually take out his frustrations by throwing a knife at a tree, but I guess sometimes that wasn't enough.

The knife I'm using to chip away the branch, belong to him. He could work wonders with it, or any knife really. Taught me all he could before he was killed.

Like most of the men in district twelve, he was a coal miner. He worked there almost every day of his life until one morning, as he was taking one of the elevators down to the mine, the main cable snapped and it plummeted to the bottom, killing him and the nine co-workers riding alongside.

The news destroyed my mother and left my brother and I in a shock. I mean, one minute he's alive, the next *I'm* the man of the house. My mother already had a job. She'd make or repair a bunch of things (usually tool belts and bags for mine workers). Since the mine only provided one set of the clothes and accessories (other than tools), she was always in business.

She's tough as nails, but the people of District 12 are collectively poor and couldn't pay well, so she struggled to raise the two of us. We just made it the four years until I could sign up to get the extra rations the Capitol provided you in exchange for another slip in the ball of potential tributes. You can bet your boots that was the first thing I did the moment I was able.

Happy Birthday to me, right? A meager portion of extra food, and a bigger chance to be pitted against twenty-three other kids in a fight to the death.

Excuse me, forty-seven others. A few months back, there was a mandatory viewing of President Snow, reminding us this was a special year for The Hunger Games. This was the 50th anniversary of the games, which meant it

was second Quarter Quell.

The original makers of the games planned for centuries of them and had a little something extra for every twenty-five years that go by. Last time there was a Quell, the poor souls reaped in each district, were actually elected to go by their own neighbors.

The Capitol stated that this was meant, "As a way of reminding the rebels that they are responsible for the Hunger Games and it is their fault that their children die in the games every year."

This year, however, fresh new horrors await, because forcing twenty-four children to kill each other every year isn't enough.

A small boy dressed in white presented the shiny wooden box to the president. He opened it and took out the envelope. The entire nation of Panem watched as he unfolded the thick parchment and read, "On the fiftieth anniversary, as a reminder that two rebels died for each Capitol citizen, every district is required to send twice as many tributes."

*Great, I thought, as if the odds already weren't in my favor, now they've just doubled up against me.*

Thinking about it makes me so mad I stop paying attention to the pressure I'm applying to my knife. It slips and I cut my thumb on the opposite hand. My thumb quickly finds its way to my mouth in a poor attempt to soothe it and staunch the flow of blood.

"Haymitch?" My mother calls from inside. "Haymitch where are you?"

"Out here, Ma."

"Well get in here, it's time for breakfast."

Breakfast, yeah, that's a laugh. Barely a cup of warm water with grain in a poor attempt to resemble runny porridge. I'm not hungry but food is food, and in this district, you take it when you can find it. Plus, you never want to disobey Ma.

Not when she has a leather belt at hand and the risk isn't worth it, anyway.

I sit at the table where my brother, Felix, is already halfway through his rations.

"Woah, slow down big guy. If you eat too fast, you'll upset your stomach."

Felix looks up at me with a somewhat apologetic smile on his face and says, "Guess I'm just nervous."

"Don't worry, squirt, I remember my first year in the reaping ball. At least your name'll only be in there once."

A person's first year in the ball is a bit of a violent push into maturity by taking the weight of the world on your shoulders. Apparently twelve is the age for all little boys and girls to grow up. Some haven't entered puberty yet, but according to *civilized society* they're old enough to take a life... or give up their own.

I do my best to put on a brave face for Felix and eat my rations. When I'm done, I lean back in my chair, stick my stomach out as far as I can, and start rubbing it.

"Ah, that was a good one." I say with a smile on my face.

Even on reaping day, this never fails to get a laugh from him and I can see him start to relax a bit.

"What are you gonna do with your day off, squirt?" I ask.

"Philo and Rufus wanted to go see Albin Mirk. His sow just had Piglets!"

"You gonna go see if you can buy one?" I chuckle.

This brings an enormous smile on his face as he giggles out, "No, I just wanna go see the babies. Maybe Mr. Mirk will let me hold one."

"It's good to dream, kiddo." I say as I mess up his combed hair.

Felix laughs and, in a whine, says, "Stoooooop, I hate it when you do that!"

His hands immediately go to his head to try and repair the damage. "What are you gonna do with your day off, Haymitch?"

"Gonna go spend some time with Brie. She always needs a little more cheering up on days like today."

Felix brightens at the sound of her name and says, "Ooooooooooooo, Haymitch is gonna go see his Giiiiirl friend!"

I just smile at him and say, "Ah shut it, squirt." And rub his hair again.

Felix Immediately grabs the top of his head with both hands and begins to flatten out his hair, when my mother walks in and says, "You're not goin to go see that pretty, young girl lookin like that, are you?"

I look down and see my dirty brown pants, black from the cuff to the knee with coal dust. You couldn't help it; the stuff was everywhere. I then look at my dusty beige shirt. I suppose it was a nice cream color at one point in its existence... Who knows, maybe even white! It's so old, though, no amount of washing and scrubbing will bring it to its former (for lack of a better word) glory.

"This is how I always look when I see her, it's how she knows me." I say and give a little wink at Felix, who smiles in return.

"I don't want you wearing your good clothes until this afternoon, so be home in a few hours to get dressed and help your brother. But at least go brush your hair! Maybe wash that old chimney stone you call a face." She says eyeing me from top to bottom.

"Then I know she won't recognize me." I laugh.

I do eventually have to make myself presentable today and I'd much rather the reason be to impress Brie than the Capitol. I head outside and around back where we keep the wash tub when we're not using it. Next to the tub is a pale of water and a wash rag. I grab both and head back inside to the nearest mirror. Slowly I start to examine myself.

Ma was right! My skin's gone from its natural olive to a deep orangish-brown, along with a fine mist of black. Ugh! If that's what landed on the outside of my face, I don't even want to think about what I've been breathing in.

I take the washcloth, dip it in the water, and slowly start to chip away at the grime. After a while I begin to find a face hiding under all the muck. A nice face, I think. Strong, chiseled features, and of course the tell-tale, grey Seam eyes that my mother says, "can see right through you".

I can't be too hard on the eyes with the looks I get from girls at school. Besides...Brie likes it. She always said I was a looker. Unfortunately for me, she made it *very* clear that it would take more than that for her to forgive the fact that when we were both eight, I poured ink in her tea, turning her teeth black for a week.

I've always had a crush on her, but it took until I was about thirteen to figure out how to properly express it. It took another year just to get her to finally cool off towards me enough to give me a chance, but she's worth every effort. Just the sight of her is enough to set my heart racing.

After I finally finish my face, my eyes drift up to my unkempt, curly, black hair. I take a deep breath because I know what I have to do and the pain that comes with it. I dunk my head into the water, stand up, and start working my way through the tangled mess, wincing as I go. Eventually I'm left with a somewhat presentable head of semi-loose curls that drop just past my ears.

"Good enough." I say to the person staring back at me from the mirror, and head out to go find Brie.

As I leave, I hear Felix yell to me, "Are you gonna go kiss her?"

"Nah," I say, "Gonna bring her back here first and make you watch." I turn and walk away and hear exaggerated gagging sounds behind me.

I walk out in the bright, shiny morning, along the fence until I reach the

small meadow by the school building, when I see her. Sitting down, knees to chest, up against a tree.

*Uh oh*, is my first thought as I walk towards her.

That is, until she lift's her head and notices me. Immediately a smile cracks her face and she gets up and runs towards me. She jumps into my arms and I hold her so tight it seems I might break her.

I put her down and she stands up on her tip toes to press her lips against mine. Immediately warmth rockets through my veins and I feel my own heat with hers. We seem to be locked together until we gather the strength to release.

"Hey, Beautiful." I manage to get out as I gaze at her. She's about a foot shorter than me, long, slender limbs with a beautiful, light-tan tinge to them. Her face is small and round, with beautiful, pouty lips, and the most adorable, dainty nose. All surrounded by thick, light-brown hair with streaks of sun-bleached blonde throughout.

How I ever finally got the attention of this lovely young woman, I'll never know; but I don't dare question it. This is the one time the odds were in my favor.

"Hey, handsome." She returns as she gazes up at me with those bright, hazel eyes and that signature half-smile of hers that gives her a look like she's biting the left corner of her lower lip, which drives me crazy.

I take her face in my hands, slightly caress her cheeks, and ask, "How ya doin, sweetheart?"

"Okay, I think. It's been a rough morning. Every year, my dad gets really quiet and just looks at me. It's as if every year he immediately accepts the fact that my name will be drawn this time, and just tries to prepare himself for the weeks to come. I can't stand it! I'm the only one left in the world for him and he expects to lose me at any second."

I shrug, and try to put myself in his shoes, "Maybe it's just his way of



controlling the situation. He expects the worst-case scenario, so that he'll either be somewhat prepared when it comes or incredibly relieved when it doesn't.

"Personally, I just don't think he has the heart to deal with losing you. To lose the best part of your life in an instant, especially when it's your child... I just can't imagine it, or maybe I just don't want to."

"Then why do they do it, Haymitch? Why would *anyone* bring a child into this world, knowing that for a large chunk of their life they have ever-growing odds to be sacrificed to the Capitol? It's not fair! None of us chose to be here, but we all inherit this responsibility. But it *is* a choice to have kids and continue the circle. How can anyone live with themselves knowing that they personally subject their own offspring to such a fate?"

I take a deep breath, purse my lips in thought for a moment, and say, "I don't know, Brie."

Which is a lie. Everyone knows why the districts still have kids. With nothing really better to do, a chance to escape the world around you, for at least a little while, with the person you love is a Godsend. It just comes at too high a price, and let's face it, no one really thinks about the cost until the return to reality. This isn't going to make her feel any better, though, so I just pull her to my chest and start gently rubbing her back.

She gives a little huff of a laugh and says, "Who knows, maybe everyone is just trying to increase our numbers to not only lower the odds of their child being chosen, but to gear up to take arms against the Capitol one day. No one would have to live like this anymore and we can end this needless cycle."

"You're starting to sound like my father." I say remembering how he would say such things and make my mother uncomfortable.

"Sounds like your father had the right idea." She says with her face still buried in my chest.

I start to feel my shirt dampening as she struggles to continue. "I'm tired of feeling like this, Haymitch. I still have three chances left to be picked. Even if I manage to make it past that, what if I have a kid someday? That'd be worse!

"What if I have more than one? That's seven years of torture for every child I have. And that's the *best-case* scenario.

"No one should have to live like this, Haymitch. We're being punished for something that happened over fifty years ago. Over fifty years! That's not inheriting the sins of our fathers, but our fathers's fathers! They call the games a celebration of the end and remembrance of 'The Dark Days,' but doesn't the fact that we participate in this mean we're actively making sure they continue? Instead of letting the wounds heal, the Capitol makes us reopen them every year, spilling fresh blood."

"You're right, Brie. They don't want the dark days to end. They know fear is a way to control, and how many people do you know that are afraid of the dark?"

She looks up at me with those large hazel eyes, now streaming with tears, and says, "Oh, Haymitch... I'm just so scared. Don't let them take me. Please!"

Not for the first time, or even the hundredth, I pull someone I care about close to me and tell them It's going to be alright. Even though I know the opposite to be true.

Nevertheless, I say, "They're not going to take you. Not without having to go through me first!"

I feel her start to relax a bit as she continues crying. But really, what can I do? If for some reason she gets called, am I going to rush forward and say, *Over my dead body?*

I'm sure the peacekeepers will be more than happy to oblige me on that. It's not even like I could volunteer to take her place, it doesn't work that way.

They need girl tributes just as much as boys.

I lift up her chin with the crook of my index finger and say, "I'm gonna get you through this, and tonight we'll share a big laugh. I even have something special for you to mark the occasion."

"What is it?" She asks.

"Nothin much, but it comes from the heart. I'll give it to you after the reaping."

Then I notice her pink lips in that half smile again and suddenly my own are ravenous for the taste of them. I pull her in close until we're again joined as one. It gives the sensation of a fiery liquid passing through one of us and into the other as we remain interlocked, waxing and waning with the motion of our lips, our tongues, our whole bodies. The rest of the world melts down around us as the fire burns through, and we are consumed by it.

Suddenly, I feel the need to come up for air and realize at some point we made our way to the ground and are now lying on the grass. How long have we been here?

A streak of panic runs up my back as I look desperately around for the nearest clock.

"What's wrong?" She asks still lying on the grass now flattened by our presence.

I see the clock hanging from the school and say, "It's one fifteen, the reaping's in forty-five minutes, we have to go!"

Immediately the mood in the air changes. She gets up quick as a flash, brushes off her dress, grasps both of my hands in hers, and says, "Right, hurry and help Felix, I'll get dressed and meet you there."

"Sounds good."

We linger just a moment, eyes and hands locked. Then, we slowly part

and prepare for the ceremony.

## Chapter 2

"Haymitch Abernathy!"

My insides give a giant lurch as I hear the ominous sign of my full name from my mother the moment I set foot in the door.

"I thought I told you to be home early to help your brother!"

"Sorry, Ma." I say with the sorriest look I can muster. "I just got caught up with, Brie. I'm here now and I'll get him ready."

Ma's always been a stern woman. Normally when I don't make it home in time for something, I find her waiting with one of the belts she's made to "break it in," but today she finds leniency. I guess she thinks the pressure of what's to come is punishment enough.

So, instead of beating me she yells, "You better get both of you ready and in double time! So help me, if he is late you're gonna wish they *had* called your name when you get home!"

I grab Felix's hand and take him over to the bed we share where Ma's lain out clothes.

"C'mon, squirt, you heard the old lady, get dressed!" Even though Felix is only four years younger than me, he has yet to reach puberty and is about half my size. He stumbles his way to the bed and I help him strip off his dirty rags and into the white button up and brown britches clearly meant for him. When he's buttoned in, I slide the miniature suspenders over his shoulders and straighten them.

"You don't look half bad, half-pint." I say resisting the urge to mess up his hair again. "Looks like *you're* gonna start bein' the heartbreaker of the family soon."

"Better watch out, I'll be coming for Brie." He says with a smile running across his face.

"Well, I couldn't lose her to a better man." I wink at him. At this he gives me a big hug.

After, I turn him around and say, "Go show Ma."

He runs off to do so, and I glance at what she's laid out for me. It's a nice outfit, a denim blue button up with beige pants and a dark blue blazer. It was my father's old clothes he wore to special occasions. How it must have tortured her to rummage through his things.

Gingerly, I pull each one on in turn. I turn to the mirror and am a little taken aback by what I see.

There, in the small rectangular window, is the spitting image of my father. I'm not sure how I feel about this, so I just try to shake it off and go grab the squirt.

I walk over to where Ma's trying to put the finishing touches on Felix. The same thought must've occurred to her, because when she looks up and notices me, it's like the world stopped on a dime and tears sparkle at the corners of her eyes.

"You look good, Haymitch. Your father would've been proud to see the young man you're growing into."

"Thanks, Ma." I walk over and hug her. Then I turn to Felix and say, "C'mon, Squirt, we'd better get a move on! You don't wanna be late for your very first reaping day, do you?"

Then I look back to my mother and say, "See ya later, Ma."

"Make sure you show him where to go and behave yourselves!" She calls after us.

I walk Felix down the street and make our way towards the Justice

Building. When we arrive, we file into the crowd of hundreds of other children, lining up to be accounted for.

"See the little kid's over there, Felix?" I point to a crowd of tiny humans, he sees and nods. "Go stand in line with them to get signed in, then follow them to your section. I'll see you after, okay?"

"Okay, Haymitch. Good luck!" he says to me with a smile and a thumbs up.

"Good luck yourself!" I say to him as I leave to join my classmates.

I catch a glimpse of Brie in the crowd but can't go to her because they're splitting us up along gender lines as well.

I catch her eye and she gives me a smile. I smile back and raise her a wink. This just makes her laugh and slowly shake her head.

"Name!" I hear from a rather annoyed voice, jerking me back to reality.

I look in front of me where a man in the all-white Peacekeeper uniform is sitting at a fold up table with a large book in front of him.

"Haymitch Abernathy." I say trying to imitate the same annoyance. This doesn't get a rise out of the Peacekeeper, but as I extend my index finger, he grabs it and squeezes hard as he pricks my finger with the needle, then yanks it down and smushes it on the page next to my name.

Back to business as usual as he releases my hand and says, "Move along."

I take my place among the other boys and look up at the temporary stage they set up in front of the justice building. Front and center is a large podium with the seal of Panem. To either side are the glass balls sitting on pedestals. One for the boys, one for the girls.

Further up stage are three chairs, two of which are occupied. One by the mayor of District 12 (a staunch, balding man named Virge Anwar) and a blue-haired, completely pale skinned woman by the name of Orla Dayo; looking entirely out of place, dressed in an exuberant shiny dress, with blue lipstick and

eyeliner to go with her hair, this woman is the embodiment of The Capitol.

The third chair was empty of a human presence, but taken by a faded, orange scarf coiled like a snake, the head of which draped on a framed picture of a young girl that looked as if it were torn off a stage poster.

In the forty-nine previous games, District 12 has only had one winner. They never talk about her in school. I guess there was a lot of controversy around the circumstances of her victory. But there isn't a man, woman, or child in all of 12 who doesn't know "The Ballad of Lucy Gray."

The official story is she died shortly after she won. Apparently, she tried to make a break for it and was shot by a Peacekeeper. But legend has it she still roams the forest just beyond the fence line. Whether alive or dead, nobody knows. Probably just folk-tale nonsense. In this district, you gotta hold on to any hope you can.

Slowly, the mayor gets to his feet and approaches the podium. "Ladies and gentlemen, if you can all just be patient for a few moments we'll begin shortly."

He gestures to the back of the crowd where a few stragglers try to sign in and assume their positions. While they do so, the mayor begins his long winded, required, speech about the Dark Days and the Treaty of Treason that we've all heard many times before, both from the previous reapings and in the classes at school that aren't about coal mining. When he finishes, he quietly shuffles his way back to his seat.

Looking somewhat annoyed, Orla Dayo makes her way to the podium. She puts on what would be a convincing smile, had she not looked so peeved on her way up, and in her notable capitol accent says, "Thank you Mayor Anwar for that marvelous introduction."

The mayor shows no sign of remorse, instead sits there with a blank look on his face. It's clear, whatever ties he has to The Capitol, he is in no more favor



of the games than the rest of District 12.

Orla decides to press forward, "Hello once again ladies and gentlemen, and happy Hunger Games!" She pauses for a moment to allow for applause but is answered by silence.

"As you all know, today is a very special day, marking the beginning of the second Quarter Quell. In celebration of this, I have the pleasure of picking *four* lucky young tributes to accompany me back to The Capitol, where they will compete for the crown of the Fiftieth Hunger Games." She gives a tiny throated giggle and continues, "Well let's get started, and may the odds be ever in your favor!"

She looks to her right at the adjacent glass ball and says, "Ladies first!"

She selects the first slip of paper and draws it towards her face. I barely have enough time to hold my breath when she reads, "Violet Eardwulf."

Everything is silent for a moment when a tall, black haired, seventeen year-old girl, with dark skin, slowly but steadily makes her way forward. I admit I don't know much about this Violet. She's a year ahead of me at school, and never talked to me. The most note I've taken of her is how stunningly beautiful she is.

However, I do admire her in this moment. She walks toward the stage with graceful strength, her head held high, ignoring everyone, as she takes the long walk out of her district for the first (and most likely last) time.

She reaches the stage where Orla holds out her hand to her. Violet walks right past and stands by the mayor who is on his feet before his chair. She's started her strategy by not letting anyone watching mistake her for a weakling. For District 12, the Games have begun.

I selfishly relax for a moment until I remember there's one more name left for the girls. As if the thought summoned it, I look at Orla, who already plucked

another name from the girl's glass ball and reads, "Maysilee Donner."

I let out a blast of air and begin breathing again with one brief moment of celebration in my head. The name wasn't Brie's and she's safe, at least for another year.

But then the name registers. I know Maysilee. She's in my year at school. My eyes scan fervently over the girl's crowd until I spot her. There she stands, tears brimming, next to her two best friends.

We call them the triplets, even though only two of them (Maysilee and her sister) are actual twins. All three share bright blonde hair which is somewhat rare in District 12. They spend so much time together that you'd swear they were all attached at the hip. The other two are in no way holding back their tears as they grab hold of Maysilee, as if by doing so she wouldn't have to leave.

The Peacekeepers start to move towards her when she finally breaks free and makes her way toward the stage, her blonde curls swaying in the breeze. She's almost hard to look at because glaring light bounces off every inch of her. Her bright hair, white dress, and something gold shimmering just above her left breast.

Yes... it was that gold pin she always wore. Some sort of bird, I think. That was one of the ways to tell her apart from her sister because you'd never see Maysilee without it.

Once she's taken her place next to Violet, Orla presses on. "There. Two lovely young ladies chosen." Then to them, "I bet you're just tingling all over in anticipation."

*Yeah, but not in the way you think.* The thought brings a dark shadow of a smirk to my face.

"I know that you're excited, but we can't get a move on just yet. We still need to choose two strapping young men to escort you. Let's see..." She says in

her disgustingly cheery manor.

She sticks her long fingers with enormous painted nails into the boy's ball like a bird of prey, swooping down with her talons.

The time of worrying for Brie is over, now the next pang of fear shoots through me as the thought that Felix could actually be chosen fully blooms.

Wouldn't it be just my luck if by somehow, out of the hundreds of other names in that ball, *his* singular slip would be the one she chooses.

Then my mind starts to spiral. *Oh God... What if through some perverse chain of event's it was both of us? How could I face it?*

I start to feel a cold sweat break out on my brow. Orla's snatched the slip containing the name of the poor sap that'll be the third in this quartet of melancholy. I brace myself for the worst-case scenario.

"Clay Terra." Another selfish breath of relief comes as a shaved headed, eighteen year-old boy steps forward. His face is vaguely familiar, but I can't place why. I've seen him around to be sure, but something else is nagging at me.

I shake my head to keep myself from chasing the thought. I've more pressing matters at hand. However, it's bittersweet comfort to know that at the very least it's now impossible for both Abernathys to be called.

Three down, one to go. I'm starting to feel really good about my chances... and then it happens.

The absolute unthinkable comes to fruition when I hear from far off, as if in another world, Orla call out, "Haymitch Abernathy."

## Chapter 3

I hold on to one concept as my body moves forward, but my mind drifts in and out of reality.

*Stay stern, don't be stupid, others are watching.*

Thoughts whizz by in my head. What is going to happen to my family now that I'll be gone? What will Brie think? Flashes of past Hunger Games...

Then another feeling grips me, a burning hot rage from deep inside starts to engulf me and gives me something to focus on. Rage against the fates that allowed my name to be chosen, at the unfairness of it all that this is even happening, and against The Capitol for making it so.

Suddenly I'm on stage with the other tributes. Out of nowhere I hear my father's voice in my head.

"Well, Son, you've got yourself into another mess. Only thing to do is to use that brain I gave you and get the hell out've it."

Back when I was about seven years old, my father and I were walking along the fence in the Seam, when we came upon a patch of trees right next to a medium sized hole in the fence between District 12 and the unknown elements beyond.

It was an odd scene, at least to me anyway, because a rabbit was dangling from its neck by a rope. It looked like it'd been there a while because it was stiff. Its head had been crushed in, like it'd been hit against the tree with a huge amount of force when it was flung up into the branches. My curiosity peaked, and I wanted a closer look.

My father said, "Don't go near it, Haymitch. Someone decided to set a snare for that little guy for some extra meat. Best leave it be."

"I don't want to touch it; I just want to get a better look."

As I said this, and before my father had a chance to say more, I took another step towards the rabbit. That's all it took. One moment I'm leaning in, the next I'm dangling upside down from my leg looking towards my father.

"Part one of today's lesson, Haymitch, where there's one trap, there are probably more. For every danger you see, there are about ten more you don't."

"Yes sir." I said, then wait a moment for my father to continue.

After waiting several seconds, I asked, "Can you get me down now?" I extend my hands toward him, but he didn't move.

"Well you see, Son, that's part two. If your stupidity gets you into trouble, much like what's happened here, you have to use your brain to get out of it; as an apology for not using it in the first place, which is what wound you up in this mess."

"What do I do?" I asked trying to keep the panic out of my voice.

"That you have to figure out for yourself. Just stay calm and think." He sat down on the ground to watch the show. "Oh, and by the way, your face is already beet red. I'd say you've got about fifteen to twenty minutes before you pass out. Which is an even bigger problem because if you stay like that too long... you'll die."

At the mention of this, I felt the thudding in my head grew faster and stronger.

I think he saw it, or at least read my expression because immediately he said, "Stop! Don't panic."

"Panic is the worst thing you can ever do and will ensure the situation get's the best of you. Relax, take a deep breath... and *think*."

I tried to do as he said, but the pressure in my face steadily built. I closed my eyes, took a big breath, and slowly let it out.

Maybe I could bend upwards at the waist, try and grab my leg, then pull myself upwards on the rope. I decided to give it a shot seeing as how it's the only thing I can come up with.

Slowly, I started working my way up and the pressure in my face built tenfold from the exertion. I got hold of my fastened right leg and tried working my way upward.

It's slow going, but I worked my way up inch by inch crunching myself into a ball until I finally got hold of the rope. I then extended my legs out to straighten my body. This puts me into an almost horizontal position and gives the blood a small amount of time to leave my face.

*Okay, I thought, halfway there.*

Now I just had to work my way up the rope to relieve the tension on my foot. I took another breath and tried to work my way up, but my body's in such an awkward position. My small muscles were already starting to tire from just getting this far.

I started inching myself up until I worked into another ball, this time my head facing up. I was just about to have my right foot underneath me and thought all I had to do was stand up on to reach the branch, when my fingers slipped, and I fell back to square one.

I looked at Pa, who's now laughing heartily. This was probably the best entertainment he'd had in years. Maybe this is the whole reason he decided to have kids, to take sick pleasure in their misfortunes. My spirits fell at the sound of his cackling and I was just about ready to give up.

Again, he must've been able to read my face, or worse my thoughts, because he said, "What are you gonna do, Son, just stay like that for the rest of your life? Where there's a will, there's a way.

"The universe has a strong will, and it wants you to stay in that tree. You

must have a stronger one to get down. Don't be stupid! You have the will, and the way. You're so focused on an overly difficult plan, you forgot to mind your surroundings and use the tools at hand...

"Don't get me wrong, for a moment there I thought it was going to work. I suppose if you have the strength to try the whole thing over again, it just might. But there's a much simpler way to go about it. Just stop and take in your whole situation, the answer will become clear to you.

"There is *always* a way out, you just have to have the patience to see it and the strength to carry it out."

I hated this. He already taught me to learn from my mistakes. If there's such an easy answer, why couldn't he just tell me and I could remember it for the next time something like this happens? He won't, though, I know. It just wasn't the "Abernathy Method."

*Ooooookay... Simple answer... Simple answer... Take in whole situation... Rabbit in tree, Haymitch in tree. Upside down, hanging from a rope. If I relieved the tension on the rope, I could slide it off my foot. That's how I got to my first solution. The surroundings and tools at hand... What tools?*

I looked over at Pa who's now preening his nails with his knife, with a stupid grin on his face. Then suddenly it hit me. I literally smacked my head with my palm for being so stupid. My knife is in my back pocket.

Pa *always* has me keep it on me. I carefully pull it out of my back pocket to make sure it didn't fall and stuck the handle in my mouth for safe keeping. Slowly I worked my way up again as I did before until my fingers grasped my shoe. I grabbed the knife with my free hand and, without thinking, dug the blade in.

The rope snapped free... and I plummeted to the ground.

My back hit first, then the U shape of my body sharply unfolded on the

ground, all of which (especially my head) smacked hard before coming to rest.

I don't think I passed out, but I was definitely disoriented and in a hell of a lot of pain. My head was swimming and suddenly I felt a hard tapping on my right foot, bringing me back to reality. Well at least I could still feel in that leg.

I uttered a moan in answer.

"Good," he says, "Y'aint dead. Congratulations.

"Allow me to introduce you to part three. Always think things through. You were so excited when you figured out the simple answer that you forgot all actions have consequences.

"If you took an extra moment to think things through, you could've made sure to put most of your weight under you before cutting the rope, or even just swing yourself just a little to the right."

He pointed, and I turned my head. I almost smacked my head again when I saw the giant pile of leaves just to the right that I entirely missed by bare inches.

"Now you won't always have time. In those situations, think as fast as you can and deal with the consequences. But if the situation allows for it then, for the love of God, *think* and think *hard!*

"Now get up. The fourth and final part of your lesson today is if you're gonna be dumb, you gotta be tough. Walk it off, and no whining."

Now, almost a decade later, I'm caught in another snare. This time, not by some desperate person with hungry mouths to feed, but by a collective group that has more than enough, as well as an insatiable blood lust.

Oh well, just have to be smart and get myself down again. Somehow, though, I think this time it's going to require a lot more energy and a heck of a lot more thought. This time I'm not just fighting by myself, but a whole group who all want that one chance to get down.



Everyone is going to want it. I just have to want it more.

Orla keeps droning on to close the ceremony and I tune her out while trying to keep the scowl on my face. At the very least until I'm led inside the Justice Building.

Peacekeepers bring us all in and break us off one by one going down a long hallway. Each time we get to a door, one of us is locked inside and the rest move on. I'm the last in the group and get led down to the furthest office. They open the door and after I walk in, they close it hard and a lock slams home.

It's dead silent as I take in my surroundings. It probably isn't much by the way of capital standards, but it's much fancier than any room outside this building, at least in District 12. There's a large desk sitting in front of a window on the far wall. Tall, fake plants in the corners and a large, plush couch along the wall. I walk around until I reach the other side of the desk and see pictures of a family I don't recognize next to the computer. This must be the office of one of the head Peacekeepers.

Do they normally use actual offices for this, or is this only because there are twice as many tributes as there normally are? Probably the latter. It seems that all throughout the districts, maybe even all of Panem, no one was ready for this.

The door flings open, and Ma and Felix are pushed in. They fling themselves towards me and embrace so tight that it's hard to breathe.

Ma is the first to let go and I finally get a good look at her face. Tears are gushing down her cheeks and her jaw is trembling. I don't quite know how to handle this because she's always such a hard woman. The only time I've ever seen her cry was right after she received the news that Pa died.

Even then, she didn't show that side to us. I just happened to see it when she left the door of the room she escaped to slightly ajar.

Then I remember the look on her face this afternoon when she saw me in my father's clothes. This must be like she's losing him all over again.

The sight of her tears weakens the dam I have restraining mine. They're threatening to make an appearance, but I refuse to yield. So, I bend down to Felix's level and stare at him eye to eye.

"Alright, listen up, squirt. You're the man of the house now. I need you to protect Ma, and make sure to listen to everything she says. Okay?"

He's wiping his tears away trying to take after my example and stay strong.

"I'll also need someone to look after Brie while I'm away. Can you do that? I'm coming back, so don't even think about stealing her for yourself."

This cracks a smile on the little guy's face and I see a flicker of something, possibly hope, behind his eyes. I let him hope, because no matter what happens, I'm going to fight like hell to get back.

I stand up and face my mother again. "I'm sorry, Ma. I know it'll be hard, but do whatever you can to keep Felix from signing up for extra tesserae."

"I promise to do all I can, Haymitch. Don't you spare one thought for us while you're out there. We'll be fine. You jus' concentrate on gettin back to us!"

"Yes, Ma."

Then, without warning the door flies open and a Peacekeeper swoops them up and slams the door again on my solitary confinement.

With a nervous shake about me now, I pace up and down the room because I know what's coming next, and in no way am I prepared for it.

Ready or not, the door slowly swings open as the peacekeeper gently usher's her in. She always had that way about her. With the slightest smile, she could soften the hardest heart. Even this abrasive enforcer treats her like the delicate flower she is.

Once inside, he gently closes the door behind him, and Brie stands there,

looking at me with those large hazel eyes. I want to say something, anything. I want to run to her, hold her tight to me and kiss her as if I'll never let her go. But my eyes remain lost in hers and my tongue glues to the top of my mouth, and my feet rooted to the floor.

She glides her way over, her eyes never leaving mine. She brings her hands up to my face and tips my head down to face hers. She isn't crying, but her eyes tell the story of her grief. There's more sadness behind those glass ovals than I have ever seen in my life.

Then, as if magnetic, our lips move toward each other until at last, and possibly for the last, they meet.

It isn't a motion of passion, or desire, but as if she's taking all of her feelings that have gone beyond words and channeling them to work their way through me. It feels as if a lifetime passes by in the blink of an eye, and we release.

"Haymitch Abernathy."

A sting runs through me as my full name is called for the third time that day, none of which were good.

"You come back to me. You hear? You can do this, I know it. If ever I've seen a victor for District Twelve, it's you!"

"I will!"

The words tumble from my mouth without permission.

"Haymitch, you can do this, you're smart, strong, resourceful, the list goes on. You've always kept your wits about you through everything. I have no doubt that you can do so through this. Now swear to me, *swear to me you will.*"

I take her hand in mine and say, "I'm coming back, Brie. I swear." A thought rushes into my head and I add, "While I've got you here, I might as well give you your surprise." I reach down into my trouser pockets and pull out the

gift I made her.

I bring it up grasped in my hand with the braided twine necklace spilling from my fist.

"I wanted to give it to you in celebration of making it through the reaping, but I guess it'll have to be a going away present instead."

She holds up her hand and I place it in her palm. Tears start streaming from her eyes as she looks at the wooden, heart-shaped pendant with both our likenesses carved into it. Our wooden, smiling faces the echo of the happiness we shared only hours before.

Her eyes study the pendant, then lock onto mine. She's searching for words, but none come, and she clutches her new treasure to her chest.

The door opens again and the Peacekeeper steps in to retrieve her. He gently places a hand on her back and starts nudging her toward the door. Just before he closes it, separating us for what may be forever.

She stops, looks back, and in a hurried voice she says, "Haymitch... Stay alive!"

## Chapter 4

I'm left in the office a little while longer until I hear the high-pitched, bubbly voice of Orla as she knocks on the door.

"Oh Mr. Abernathy, it's time! We must be off now, so let's get a move on."

The sugary sweetness in her voice leaves me feeling sick, but I walk over to the door. I swing it open to see the clown-white face with bright blue hair and makeup staring right at me, the sight of which is somewhat unnerving.

"There you are, darling, we simply can't wait another minute. Time to move those gorgeous eyes to the train station."

I follow along through the hallway, out the back door where a beat up looking car is waiting for us and drives us towards the dingy wooden structure that is the train station.

The dramatic contrast the actual train makes to the building is funny. Something so sharp, clean and new, sitting in a cradle so dark, dirty, and old. Everywhere else were cameras.

Cameras, cameras, and more cameras, focused on the silent group of teenagers marching to their doom behind a leading lady who looked as if she belonged in a circus; a strange, pied piper with a fresh band of victims. What will the others think when they watch the recap?

Then I answer myself. *Doesn't matter, no matter what they've trained or prepared themselves for, I doubt they're ready for the likes of me!*

We cross over the platform and the others climb in. Before I step on, I take one last look at my district, knowing the difficult time I have ahead of me to get back. I take in the whole scene while simultaneously trying to ignore the cameras.

The instant I board, I cross over into a land of luxury. Rich colored wooden panels with stone counter tops, all adorned with food.

Bright exuberant dishes with fresh-baked pastries, hot meats of all different kinds, pastas, soups, fruits, veggies, and desserts!

An entire table dedicated to sweet treats. I despise every one of those who've never known a life without these things, but as long as I'm here, I may as well take it for all it's worth.

After helping myself to a plate of anything I could fit on it, I start looking around, munching as I go. Clay and Violet do the same, but Maysilee's sitting on a couch at the far end of the car. I find myself walking over to check on her. She's sitting curled up with her head buried in a pillow, her golden locks spilling over it.

"It's Maysilee, right?" I ask.

She looks up suddenly and swivels her head violently around as if she has momentarily forgotten where she was.

Then her eyes narrow on me as she says, "Yes..." and in a somewhat chilly tone, "You're Haymitch.

"Guilty as charged, I'm afraid." I offer a small chuckle.

Something's different, suddenly it hits me that her pin is gone.

"I've seen you around school sometimes with those other two blonde girls. I hope you don't mind me asking, but I notice you're missing your trademark pin. Did you lose it?"

"No," she says, "I gave it to my sister as a goodbye. Something she can remember me by. We've been with each other since before we were born. I don't think we've ever been apart. This is going to be rough on her."

"Sounds like you've already given up."

"So, what if I have? The odds aren't exactly in my favor here. How am I

supposed to outlast forty-seven other people?"

"Where there's a will, there's a way,' as they say. And even if you're right, isn't that more of a reason to live up the time you have left?" I ask, offering her to partake from my platter.

"I guess I'm just not hungry." She replies.

"...Said no one from District Twelve, ever." I snort.

"Ugh, just leave me alone." She buries her head into the pillow again.

I shrug my shoulders and decide it's time to introduce myself to the dessert table, when Orla Dayo starts tapping on a champagne glass with a knife.

"Excuse me ladies and gentlemen, as you are undoubtedly aware, District Twelve has no living victor. In light of this fact, you will receive a Capitol appointed mentor once we arrive. We should reach our destination tomorrow morning. Until then please enjoy the refreshments, and each of you has your own room down towards the back of the train. You'll find that *your* room will be marked with your name. Any questions?"

"I have one!" A deep booming voice says at a table. I look over to see Clay staring down Orla.

"Yes? What is it Mr. Terra?" Orla asks politely.

"This appointed mentor. Has he or she ever been in the games?"

"Oh no," she says as if this were an obvious fact. "The appointed person will be from the Capitol, not from one of the districts."

"Then how are they going to be able to help us if they have no idea how to win a game in the first place?" I hear in the elegant tone of Violet from across the room.

This is the first time I've heard her speak, and her voice perfectly matches her outward appearance.

"I assure you Miss. Eardwulf, the appointed person will have worked

closely with the Gamemakers for years and know many, if not all, of the usual sponsors. Relax, you're in better hands than you think."

I can't help but laugh at this statement. How can anyone who probably never went in want of a meal their entire life, help four complete strangers win a *Hunger Games*? Well, we'll deal with that problem when we get to it. Meantime, I see a chocolate souffle that's just screaming my name.

Before I can dig in, however, Orla starts in again, "I believe it's almost time for the Capitol to air the recap of the reappings, if you could all just follow me into the next car, we'll have a look."

Even my insatiable hunger couldn't get the best of my curiosity to get a glimpse of my competition. We all follow her forward through the train until we reach a large screen in front of several well-padded chairs and couches. I choose one of the couches, and to my surprise, Maysilee sits down on the opposite end. Guess I didn't annoy her too badly. I shrug and look at the screen.

Caesar Flickerman is on, flashing his disturbingly white teeth and in his trademark twinkling, blue suit. His hair's different. Every so often he gets a new doo to keep up with the tastes of the times. This year's model is bright green with matching lipstick and eyeshadow.

I try to pay attention to as much as I can, but it becomes very apparent, very quickly, that remembering all these tributes is next to impossible. There are simply too many. Instead, I just make mental notes of those who catch my eye. Mostly, I tried to keep in mind the tributes from Districts 1, 2, and 4. These tributes will no doubt make up the career pack; forming a temporary alliance of all tributes from those districts in order to thin out the herd of others, before turning on one another. So, they're probably going to be my biggest headache.

Six of them are eighteen years old, these are the ones who were prepared to volunteer this year. The other six are of varying ages due to either short



supply of volunteers, or simply who were thought of as ready (or close enough). One was an eighteen year-old from District 2 named Minos. Huge, bronzed skin character who looked like he could run right through a brick wall. It was a little hard to take him seriously, though, because he had what I think is called a septum piercing. Which means he has a giant, bronze ring dangling between his nostrils.

*That's one heck of a fashion statement, I think.*

But the Capitol has way worse. Then again, what is District 2 but an extension of the Capitol's already long arm.

There are a few other notable tributes as well: A short dark-haired boy from District 5; Gregor I think was his name. Wasn't much to look at in the way of size, but he and the two girl tributes from 7 have one thing in common that to ignore would be a fatal mistake.

They have the fire of survival burning white hot behind their eyes. It's a dangerous look and I have seen it before. I see it for one final time when the reaping for District 12 gets replayed and I'm staring into my own eyes.

I don't mean to brag, but a chill goes down even my spine when I see myself look directly into the camera and my eyes stare right through to my very soul. Suddenly I am eternally grateful for the sudden rage I felt this morning, which was certainly the way I was able to glare with such intensity.

I definitely won't be marked as an easy target, but now I'm wondering if I might've over played my hand. I don't want people to assess me as too big a threat either. I want everyone to forget I'm there if possible. It's the threat you can't assess that's the most dangerous.

Finally, the anthem plays signaling the end of the program and Orla shuts off the screen.

"Alright everyone, don't stay up too late, we have a big day tomorrow.

When we get into the train station, you will be introduced to your mentor. From there you will be brought to your stylists where they will make you all beautiful for the opening ceremonies tomorrow night. Sleep well, Darlings, ta ta!"

She makes a wave like movement with her hand as she trails it behind her until she's out of sight. The rest of us do our best to carry on.

Aside from a few awkward attempts at small talk, none of us really open up. I even try to talk to Clay, I can't help feeling like I remember something about him. But when I try to strike up a conversation, he gives me short, monosyllabic answers, sometimes in the form of grunts.

So, I just decide to move on and try and stuff a little more food in me. I guess it makes things simpler, the less you know about someone, the easier it is to kill them later. Only one winner will be crowned and if I want it to be me, I can't rely on anyone else anyway. I'm on my own.

I stuff myself full to burst and go to my quarters. Each tribute has been given a room roughly the size of the entire train car, save the hallway on the side to allow people to travel around them. Once again, I'm dead last and pass through three cars before I get to mine.

I open the door that has the plate with my name engraved on it and see a well-furnished room with a magnificent bed right in the middle. Off to the right there's another door and discover I even have my own bathroom, complete with running water. This is way better than sharing *everything* with Felix... Still, I can't help but think of the little squirt. Will he be ok without me?

I jump straight in the middle of the bed and feel myself sink into it. I almost let the feeling of luxuriousness carry me off, when out of nowhere it hits me. The entirety of the day's events fall on me like a ton of bricks. Suddenly I feel as if I'm up in the tree again, staring at that dumb rabbit.

Then another rabbit starts gnawing at my memory. Not a dead one, or

even a live one for that matter.

I'm reminded of an ancient fable my father told me as a bedtime story called "Watership Down".

It was my favorite growing up. It was all about this rabbit named Hazel, and his adventures from escaping certain death from the destruction of his first warren, to traveling out with a squad of others he suddenly found himself the leader of. They had stories of their own about a mighty rabbit called Ella Hrera and The Black Rabbit of Enlay.

I hear Pa's voice telling me on the verge of sleep, "All the world will be your enemy, Prince with a Thousand Enemies; and when they catch you, they will kill you... But first they must catch you..."

He used to tell me those stories every night. Did he do it to try and prepare me in case I ever ended up in that godforsaken arena? Or for something else? ... Something more?

I chase the thought until I slowly and quietly drift off into nothingness.

The next morning, I wake up to a very powerful knock for a woman so small. I suppose she just knows what she's doing after all these years of escorting tributes. I know if it were up to me, I wouldn't be up until probably noon. I look over at the digital clock next to my bed which says 6:00a.m.

*Uggh, why so early?*

"Wakey wakey Mr. Abernathy, It's time to get up."

"I'm up! Lord knows why... and the name's Haymitch."

"We will be pulling into the train station in about an hour and I want you to be ready. We've got a very strict schedule to keep." Almost as an afterthought she adds, "Mr. Abernathy."

I rub my palms up and down my face trying to wipe off the residue of sleep. When that isn't enough, I go into the bathroom, turn on the shower, and

dunk my head under the cold water.

That did it.

I didn't know they had a temperature setting for dead winter. Although I'm wide awake, this is definitely not my favorite way to wake up.

I rummage through the drawers of the dressing area and pick out an extraordinarily comfy, black, long sleeve, cotton shirt and left the two buttons under the neck undone. I also grab some brown slacks and a pair of leather boots. Once fully dressed, I head back towards the dining car for breakfast. I'm starving once more.

I reach the elegantly adorned room with the many dishes laid atop a long table this time, instead of the free form buffet of yesterday. I look down to see Maysilee and Violet sitting across from one another at the far end, eating and trying not to look at the other.

*Oh great, another awkward meal.*

I decide to work my way through some eggs with a delicious, spicy sauce on them, some bacon, and these little fish that taste like bacon. I had no idea that there was a fish that tasted like bacon, and when I asked about it, the attendant said it was a kipper.

I work my way through and just shoved a roll in my mouth when I notice the other two are gaping at me.

I look up at them and with a mouth still full of roll I say, "What?"

They both offer a small, awkward smile and avert their eyes to something else. Then, Orla comes walking in with Clay. Apparently, they were talking in the next car.

Clay takes a seat opposite of me and Orla begins another speech. "Good morning, Ladies and Gentlemen. I hope you all slept well and are enjoying your breakfast. We will be arriving at the Capitol in a few moments. When we get

there, your mentor will come aboard and introduce himself. You will then be escorted to the Remake Center to prepare for the opening ceremonies. We have a long day ahead of us, so eat up!"

We all take our cue and resume eating. I guess the rest finally figured out that there's plenty of time to be nervous later. I hadn't noticed it was dark, but out of nowhere light floods into the room.

Orla exclaims in pleasure, "Oh goodie, we're out of the tunnel, which means we're here!"

I get up and go to the window to have a look. Tall buildings shoot up everywhere and it seems like each are hanging banners displaying the seal of Panem. We start to slow down as we come into the station, and it is a madhouse.

People packed shoulder to shoulder, crammed into every available inch. I use the term "people" lightly, for most of them you wouldn't think it at first glance.

Wigs of every size and color, dresses doing the same. Some of these people have altered their body permanently with tattoos and skin dye. Every single one of them wearing makeup.

They all look so funny and are screaming at the top of their lungs, waiving violently at the train. I look ahead and there's a platform roped off from the screaming hoard with a walkway leading up to it. Both of which are covered in a red carpet. On the platform there's a man with straight black hair swept back and down to his shoulders, standing in front of a microphone. The train pulls to a stop with the door right in front of him. He says something on the mic that I can't make out, waves good-naturedly and turns toward the train.

Before I know it, I'm called away from the window (or rather we were, because as I turn, I see the others had followed my example of getting a look outside) by a loud noise of Orla clearing her throat. Next to her stands the man

who was addressing the crowd. For the first time I get a look at his face. He has a dark beard cut short and his skin has a slight tan to it, but looks as if it's more a shade of orange than anything natural. Encasing him is a very sharp deep purple pinstriped suit.

"This," Orla says with an air of grandeur, "Is Azrael. He was a head Gamemaker for quite a few years but has since retired. He has graciously accepted the role of your mentor for the games this year."

"Good morning everyone. I hope you enjoyed the trip, because today we start work.

"Let me make one thing perfectly clear. I'm not here to care for or coddle you. Whether you think so or not, you are now big boys and girls who can take care of yourselves. My job is to make sure you put on a good show. When you die, and die you might, I guarantee through one way or another, it will be to the sound of thunderous applause.

"For this next part, I only speak to one of you, though you each have the potential to be that individual. For surely one among you has the guts to step forward to claim what is rightfully yours: wealth beyond anything you've dreamed of and the immortality that springs from glory. At the least, three of you *will* die. With my help, you will have the chance to rise from the ashes of your fellow tributes and be reborn a victor!

"With the next few days, I'm going to turn you into survivors. Listen to me, do exactly as I say, and you will have your chance at immortality."

Well... he certainly doesn't sugar coat anything, but at least he knows how to light a fire under you. He looks at each one of us dead in the face as we digest his words. When he gets to me, (although very subtle, it certainly didn't escape my notice) ever so slightly, his right eyebrow raises.

He gives a small throated huff of laughter and says, "Alright, enough

wasting time. I'm going to take you to the remake center where you are to do whatever your stylists tell you. They're going to make sure you look good for tonight. Hopefully, you can leave an impression on the mob."

HA! Who does he think he's kidding? Every year it's the same thing: we'll be in some sort of coal miner's get up and won't be noticed in at all. The only difference for this year is that there will be twice as many of us to not remember. I keep my mouth shut, however, and we start walking towards the door of the train.

When it opens, it's like someone jacked up the volume on a tv to the highest setting. I have to resist the sudden impulse to cover my ears. Luckily, we're able to move forward on the roped off, red-carpeted walkway; but the crowd lean in to get closer.

The walkway's just wide enough to allow us to pass, but these weirdly dressed individuals are all yelling for us, some even by name! Clawing at us to be able to say they were able to touch us. I try not to show on my face the utter revulsion I have for these people.

It seems like a lifetime, but we finally get past the crowd and into a large van. An attendant opens the door for us and Azrael stands on the opposite side waiving us in.

I look at him and with a serpent-like grin on his face as he says, "They want you, all of you. Enjoy it but play hard to get. It will only make them want more. To get more, they have to pay. And that, ladies and gentlemen..." He says as he hops into the van himself, "Is how you get sponsors."

With that, he slides the door back into place and we set off for the remake center.

It's a short drive apparently, because as soon as I start getting comfortable, the driver announces we're here. He parks the van by the side of a tall building

where a group of Capitol looking people pounce on us as soon as we get out.

Each one grabbing us, touching our faces and yelling absurd things among themselves.

A man with bright orange hair has got Violet and Maysilee each by a cheek and says, "Oh you have such potential, I will be able to work wonders."

"You can't have both females, that isn't fair. leave some for the rest of us."  
Says a man with green curls and lipstick.

One woman is completely bald and her tattooed eyeliner sprouts from the tops of her eyes and spreads like a curly spider web up and around the top of her head.

She's running her fingers through my hair and says, more to herself than to me, "This hair is simply adorable. A little on the dirty side, but I can certainly fix that. Oh, I wonder if they'll let me put feathers in it. Grey feathers to bring out those gorgeous eyes."

Feathers? Is she for real?! What on earth do feathers have to do with coal mining?

A dark-skinned man with pink everything has ahold of Clay's forearm squeezing it as if judging a piece of meat, and says to the girl, "Oh you're right that would look stunning, and look at this wall of muscle here. I know Aurelia oversees the boys, let's hope she okays your feathers and maybe they'll let me cover this one in scales, he would look so fierce!"

I catch Clay's eye and mouth the word, "scales?"

He just looks right back at me with an identical expression and mouths, "Feathers?"

The thought becomes too much for either of us and we start laughing, loud and heartily.

Finally, Azrael shouts, "That's enough! Thank you for your enthusiasm,



but you all have a head stylist to report to. They have the names of whom you'll be working with. Everyone group up, and find your assigned tributes."

The crowd separates themselves into two groups. There are two head stylists and one group get the girl tributes, and the other the boys. At the head of these groups are the main stylists Cyril and Aurelia. They address their people with both instruction and words of encouragement.

Finally, Cyril, a tall, lanky man with dark skin, a flamboyant air, and short, curly hair died pearl-white, steps forward and says in a long drawling voice, "Ladies if you would, please follow me, we will get you started. We have tons of work and not a moment to spare. Please..." he says gesturing with one hand and pulling out a white handkerchief from his tight, dark, sparkling suit, to his mouth and nose and says, "Right this way."

Don't flatter yourself buddy, in no way are we thrilled to work with you either.

Then Aurelia steps forward and I have a thought I'd never thought possible. This woman from the Capitol was attractive... *really* attractive. Her skin was soft and a silky cream color. Her eyes are large orbs of a piercing blue, a body with curves in all the right places, and everything else (from the accents of her clothes to her makeup and hair) looks as if they're made of pure gold.

I shake my head and try to make sense of my thoughts. She's obviously only a few years older than me (probably early twenties), so the age gap isn't too tremendous. I've never been one for avarice. Yes, it's true I'm poor, and everyone longs for what they think will make their life better, but I guess the real attraction here is this woman screams temptation.

She steps right up next to Clay and me, lightly touches us on the shoulder. I'm six foot and Clay is even taller, so this is no small gesture for such a tiny figure. Still, we both stand our ground.

She gazes up at us and says in a light, breathy voice, "Please, gentleman, come with me, and we'll get started on your rejuvenation."

She leads us inside a building that screams clean. Everything smells of cleaner and disinfectant. Even the lighting is a pale, fluorescent white. She leads us past the front desk and down a long hallway until she reaches our door. She instructs the six other men and women to wait outside for a few moments while we get ready.

She opens the door and shows two large, empty tubs waiting for us. We're instructed to remove our garments and get in, then press the green button. Once inside, she closes the door, leaving the two of us to our own devices. Clay and I look at each other to check reactions. He shrugs and starts to undress. I give a small chuckle and follow suit.

We give each other as much privacy as we can by averting our eyes. I focus on my tub, then I hear him sliding into his and he gives a sharp yelp.

"What? what is it?" I ask suddenly ready, as if we were being attacked.

"Nothing, it's just the metal of the tub... It's so *cold!*" He emphasizes with a loud birrrrrgh.

"Thanks for the heads up!"

"No problem, I just wish someone extended me the same courtesy!"

I slowly lower myself down on the tubs surface. Clay wasn't exaggerating. Hundreds of tiny needles shoot cold straight up my spine as the metal touches my bare flesh. We sit there for a moment looking around until I spot the green button on the side of the tub.

I tell Clay of my discovery and he says, "Quick, push it, hopefully it'll start pouring some warm water or something."

"Here's to hoping!" I say and firmly push the button.

No water, or anything else, starts to fill up the tub, however. Instead, the

door flings wide open and the six members of the prep team come flooding in.

So much for privacy.

They divide themselves in half and come to our sides. A man and two women are suddenly staring down at me, contemplating what to do first. I'm not shy, but I can't help but feel weird as they all inspect every nook and cranny of my body.

Then, like a breath of fresh air, I remember I don't care. If they want to look, let 'em. I have a feeling they aren't even thinking of me as a human being anyway, more like a blank canvas on which to work.

The man starts fiddling with the controls on the side of the tub and suddenly this warm green foam starts filling in.

Apparently, they did the same to Clay, because I hear him say, "Agh, what the heck is this stuff? It stings, and stinks to high heavens!"

"Stay strong, Clay." I say. "This is where they torture us for information!"

He answers with bellowing laughter and says, "Oh don't worry about me, you just keep your own mouth shut. It'll take a lot more than this to break me!" He emphasizes this last remark with maniacal laughter.

One of the stylists snaps at us, "Oh, please you two. It's not that bad, will you please just be quiet and let us work?"

Everything's silent for a moment until I hear Clay mutter, "Spoilsport."

This causes me to give a snort of laughter, which was a bad idea because a large portion of the foam goes straight up my nose. This sends me into a spout of violent coughing and sneezing.

When I look up at the man who reprimanded us, he has a look on his face that says, *serves you right*.

Three times they submerge us in some sort of foul-smelling concoction. In between each, they scrub us with what feels like sandpaper and broken glass.

Then they bring out a laser and start shooting the lower half of my face. They burn every hair off and I wonder if I'll ever be able to grow a beard again.

After one final rinsing in cold water (the purpose of which I guess was to get every pore on our body to scream shut) the tub is drained and they start filing out the door.

The man who worked on me turns and says, "Aurelia will be with you shortly."

Clay shouts, "Whaaaat we're done? Can't be, I still have a layer of skin left." He looks at me, gestures towards them with his thumb, and rolls his eyes.

One of them answers with an indignant huff, and the door slams shut behind them.

"Well at least that's over." He says sitting upright in his tub.

"I wouldn't say that just yet, that might have only been the beginning."

Just then a thought occurs. We're sitting here stark naked and a woman, whom I know I find attractive, is about to walk into this room.

Self-control don't fail me now.

As if the thought summoned her, Aurelia gently opens the door and slides into the room, clipboard in hand. In her breathy voice she says, "Gentlemen." She nods to us and to my horror adds, "Please stand."

Clay almost breaks the sound barrier as he shoots up for inspection, evidently, he was either not ashamed, or wanted to show off to the lovely lady, chin up, chest out, fists on hips.

I stand in what I hope is a more dignified manner. She just looks us up and down with those blue and white orbs. Every once in a while, she makes a note. All the while, I keep willing myself not to *rise to the occasion*. I manage to keep this resolution, but my body betrays me in another way when she asks us to slowly turn all the way around.

I do, but as I start to move, I feel a burning heat start in my feet and quickly spread upward until my face and forehead are on fire. I can only imagine what I look like as my whole body turns bright red. Either she didn't notice, or didn't care, because she makes no sign of acknowledgment, which makes me feel a little better.

After what seems like an eternity, she looks down at her paperwork and says, "Alright gentleman, I think I have what I need, there are robes on the far wall over there, you may put them on."

Without a moment's hesitation, I walk over and put on my robe.

"Well, I didn't expect to have such muscular, strapping, young men this year, but I'm very glad we do. It works with Cyril and my designs perfectly."

What does that mean?

Unfortunately, it didn't take long to find out, because Aurelia leaves and is back in almost no time at all with two miner's helmets, one in each hand. She hands them off to us and tells us to change into them.

Change? Into what?

"So, we're going to be wearing nothing but a mining helmet?" Clay asks almost at the same time as I think it.

"Oh, heavens no. If you just look inside the helmet, you'll see the rest of your ensemble." She says with a notable smirk.

I guess for Clay, being naked for these people was one thing, being naked for the whole of Panem was another. We reach inside and pull out what look like very tiny sets of overalls. Like the kind of minors outfit a mole would use if it decided to wear clothes.

"Uhh... I don't think we're going to fit in these." I say while I hold mine up to my face which is roughly the same size.

"Don't be silly." She says, "Of course you will. They are made of a very

pliable fabric. They can stretch to fit almost any form. It's what you would call, 'One size fit's all.'"

I still find this a little hard to believe, but I expand the back opening with no resistance and start sliding my legs into the tiny overalls. All at once though, they aren't so tiny as they slide effortlessly up my legs and encase my torso. After we slide our arms into their proper place, she comes towards us and adjusts certain parts of the fabric to lay in just the right places. As it turns out, the chest portion is just barely supposed to cover our nipples and the pants only go down to just above the knee.

When she finishes, Clay says, "At least we're not naked."

"Might as well be! Take a look at yourself, it looks like someone just painted a pair of overalls on you."

"I'd rather not... If I look anywhere near as stupid as you, I don't want to know!" He says, laughing his head off.

"Enough!" She says while shoving the helmets back in our hands. "You look fabulous! Now put those on and follow me."

She leads us downstairs to the back portion of the building, where the other tributes start to congregate next to their chariots. This year, since there are twice as many tributes, there are enough chariots and horses to match. Aurelia leads us to the two chariots strapped on to the large, coal-black horses.

Clay and I start to have a good look around, both at our chariots and surroundings. I'm relieved to see that most of the other tributes, no matter their district, look just as stupid as we do.

Not too far away, I see District 7. With them, among their prep team, I see a woman... well I don't know if that's the proper word exactly, because she didn't really look human at all anymore. She had undergone a bunch of surgeries to make herself look like a tiger. What won't these people do in the name of

fashion?!

My attention was removed from the tigress by a loud wolf whistling coming from beside me. I look, and sure enough it's Clay who's gaze points toward the center doors from where we had emerged. I follow his line of sight and my eyes land on Violet and Maysilee who are walking towards our pair of chariots. They are in the exact same outfit as Clay and me, yet somehow it was even more revealing. The stretchy fabric clung tight to each and every curve the young ladies had to offer. I knew that Violet would fill the outfit well, but to my surprise, Maysilee (although quite a bit shorter) matched her curve for curve.

This was new information to me because she'd always worn either loose fitting clothing or little girl dresses. I had no idea what perfect form lay beneath.

None of this mattered, however, because the mining overalls looked just as silly on them as they did on us. I think I might have looked just a little too long at Maysilee, because as she approaches, she starts getting a little red in the face.

I say quickly to break the tension, "Ah, I'm sorry you have to look as dumb as we do, but at least none of us have to be alone in our humiliation."

This cracks a smile on her face, and we all start to relax. Then Cyril and Aurelia walk up close to us after finishing discussing their choices for the big day.

"Alright ladies and gentlemen, it's time to mount up. Clay, Violet, I want you in the first chariot. Haymitch, Maysilee, you'll go in the second. Now put on your happy faces and get a move on. Remember, you're supposed to be excited for this so please act like it." Cyril says in his own version of a pep talk.

It's plain to see that not one of us is excited for any of this, but I put my anger aside for the moment, thinking I can use it later when we make our parade down the center of the Capitol. Why do these people think we can possibly be excited to be marching to our deaths?

I gingerly place my hand on the small of Maysilee's back and guide her toward our chariot. She stops and strokes the mane of one of the horses.

"I've never seen a horse before. Not in person anyway. I've grown up admiring them in pictures or watching them on screen. I never thought I'd get to see one with my own eyes before. I had always hoped! Though, if I knew I'd have my wish granted this way, I probably would've stopped liking them a long time ago."

The horse she was petting bobbed his head up and down as she scratched underneath his long hair and when she stopped, he nuzzled his nose into her chest in gratitude. This made her laugh with delight, and it made me smile knowing that she could still take pleasure in her childhood wish being granted in such a backhanded way.

Then a voice came over the loudspeakers informing all tributes to mount their chariots. Before the announcement had been made, the room had been loud with conversation. Now you could hear nothing but the clip-clop of horses as the first few chariots started to leave the building. I suppose that was the final nail being driven home, letting us know that this was indeed really happening.

Maysilee and I took our places and grabbed the metal bar in front of us for support. Before we knew it, the horses started moving forward and we were on our way.

Once out of the mouth of the tunnel, we were struck by how bright it was outside even though the sun had gone down. Lights shining down everywhere to illuminate the giant line of tributes. Rose petals fell in steady streams as they bled down from the sky. The noise was back, but this time was the sound of the crowd roaring for their tributes. Each member screaming at the top of their voice as we passed by.

There was no question about it. The Capitol loved us, and my heart



pounded for them in return but only with the thought of how much I hated them.

That fire in my chest started to burn again until it consumed me entirely and shot out from my eyes in retaliation to the mob. Then, as if triggered by my disgust, fireworks began to explode overhead, giving background to the red rose pedals, still steadily streaming down.

The crowd became louder and more insatiable, each cry uttered was representative of their thirst for blood; my blood, as well as that of the other tributes.

Each cry enraged me further, yet I would allow no outlet, my face impassive, except for my eyes blazing white hot from the screen projections.

Their cries and my anger both continued to mount, each adding more fuel to the other. I feel either I, or the mob, would have to explode if this continued for much longer, and that was when each chariot came to a halt in front of the presidential mansion.

President Snow walked up to the podium, the lights flickering off his salt and pepper hair and the white rose in his lapel. The crowd was still as loud as ever until the president, ever so casually, lifted his right hand and the crowd immediately fell silent.

"Ladies and Gentlemen before me, citizens of Panem from all reaches. Tonight, we celebrate as we graciously accept these fine men and women who stand before us. May they serve as a reminder of the might of the Capitol.

"Though it is true that from many, only one may be victorious, I wish you all the best of luck. We thank you for your sacrifice and may the odds be ever in your favor. Let the Fiftieth Hunger Games, and the second Quarter Quell, begin!"

The president accents his final words by raising both of his hands to signal the official start of training, but then quickly lowered his right hand to wipe the

side of his mouth, as if he accidentally allowed more than words to escape his lips.

As soon as the ceremonial speech was over, the crowd once again erupted. The horses, already knowing their duty, began to move forward as each chariot in turn is swallowed up by the training center.

Once inside, we're met by Azrael, Orla, and the prep team.

"Oh, don't you all look adorable in your little miner out fits!" Orla exclaimed.

"Yeah... adorable." Azrael adds with a roll of his eyes. "Let's get upstairs and get you out of that getup before the other tributes start thinking they reflect how you'll be as opponents."

I never thought I'd be grateful for anything that came out of that man's mouth, but it seemed that he had the same contempt for the choice of outfits.

He steps behind us with his arms open to herd us toward the elevator. We get about ten feet away when I freeze. I've never been in one before and the only story I have about one involved the death of my father. At the sight of these mechanisms rising and falling with such great speed, my stomach plummets and I break out in a cold sweat. I force myself to push through to not allow anyone to note my fear.

With great effort, I move forward. When I do, something else catches my eye. Clay, who'd been walking beside me, also stopped dead in his tracks.

That's when it hits me. His father and mine were friends and coworkers. They'd spent many an hour, both on and off the job, in each other's company. They were "thick as thieves" as the saying goes and even died in the same accident.

The others are starting to stare curiously at him.

I quickly cross over, place my hand on his shoulder, and whisper. "I know

how you feel, but now is not the time to let it get the best of you. There are plenty of things to come that you can be worried about, this can *not* be one of them." I gently squeeze his shoulder, he nods, and moves forward.

"What was that all about?" Azrael asks.

"Nothing, the chariots just made him a little woozy is all." I say in return.

Azrael accepts this, and in a way it's true. At least for Maysilee and I, when we came to a stop and let go of the bar in front of us, we had to peel our flesh away from it. The entire ride was so unnerving, that we all held on with an iron grip and when we let go, we left distinct handprints behind.

We all entered the elevator, this time without protest. The initial feeling, however, hadn't subsided and was made worse with the force the elevator shot upwards. Both Clay and I held our breath as we ascended to the designated floor for our district. Once we were safely off, the tributes uttered a collective sigh of relief.

We went into our quarters to find a lavishly furnished apartment with a long dining table, a large television nook, and two substantial white staircases on either side of the first story, leading to the second floor that contained our individual accommodations.

"Alright everyone," Azrael starts, "dinner is in an hour. I suggest that you all have a look around and get comfortable until then. Settle in and make yourself at home, because that's exactly what this place is for the next few days until you enter the arena.

"Orla will gather you all up when it's time and we'll talk strategy. Tomorrow is your first day of training."

We took our cue to look around and find our individual rooms. The left staircase led up to the lady's quarters while the right led to ours.

Although the space was much larger and more exuberant, my living

quarters were just as welcoming as the one on the train. Again, I decide to hurl myself onto the bed and dive into the mountain of pillows. Almost immediately after my body hit the soft surface, my lights went out.

## Chapter 5

An hour later when I felt the familiar pounding on the door, I raise my head ever so slightly and realize my head both feels like it weighs a thousand pounds, and aches like it is going to split in two.

Orla did not help this when at the top of her lungs she sang, "DINNER TIME!" The ringing in her voice resounded through my ears. I give a soft moan and drag myself up, and down to dinner.

Everyone is already at the table. I sit down, and a waiter brings me the first course of the meal. Apparently, everyone had been waiting on me to start, because that was the moment we all dug in. In between courses, Azrael would mention something that we'd need to be aware of for the days to come.

"There's a lot of competition this year, even the career pack will be worried. Sheer numbers are a big factor in these games. What certain tributes lack in quality, they have the potential to make up for in quantity. Everyone faces that same obstacle. You either have to kill or outlast forty-seven other tributes.

"Tomorrow during your training, I want you to not spend too much time at any one station. Everything they have to teach is of value, and you'd do well to learn.

"In addition to this, I want you to keep your eyes and ears open to your fellow tributes. I want you to talk to others and get a feel for the competition. If you can, see about making some alliances. In a numbers game, it's best to fight fire with fire."

After the meal was over, we sat for a few moments in silence. Azrael broke it again by saying, "Tomorrow I'm going to talk to each of you in turn. This will

be the norm for the remainder of your training. When you wake up, get dressed and wait for me in your room. We'll go over your individual strategies for the day and the overall games. Are we clear?"

We all nodded in agreement.

"Good." He said. "Then we are finished for the night, I suggest you all get some rest. It's going to be a busy day tomorrow."

Eventually we all made our way to our own rooms to retire. Not long after I'd enclosed myself, however, there came a knock at the door. It was Clay.

"Can I talk to you for a bit?" He asks.

"Sure." I open the door wide.

After that scene on the elevator earlier, I'd been expecting something like this. Once inside, I close the door behind me and turn to find that he disappeared. I was unnerved for a moment until I heard the shower turn on full blast. I walked over to the bathroom where he is messing around with the water settings.

"Don't you have your own shower?" I ask with notable sarcasm. He doesn't answer, rather, gestures to come closer.

"Shut the door." He says in just above a whisper.

I start putting two and two together. Obviously, Clay has something that he wants to say and probably figures that all the rooms have cameras and audio feeds except this one. I decide to try and stay as vague as possible because I have trouble believing that a group of people who send children to their deaths on a yearly basis, will have any moral qualms about spying on them while in the bathroom.

He's standing right next to the shower. I get as close as I can to keep the volume of our conversation as low as possible.

"So, you remember me?" He asks.

"Just that our fathers knew each other, and that they died in the same accident."

He looks at me wondering for a second, then laughs and says, "I know it was a long time ago, but you really need to reevaluate if you think that was an accident."

"Why wouldn't it have been an accident?" I ask. I was only eight, I had no reason to think anything else.

"My father would always talk to yours about anything and everything, and vice versa. On more than a few occasions, I heard them talking about..." He pauses for a second as if in contemplation of his next words. "... Certain things. You know, the kind of talk that would make officials nervous if they ever overheard it."

I could see that something other than our father's deaths was on his mind and he was going to need some gentle prodding. "What's bothering you?... other than the obvious I mean."

"First of all, I wanted to thank you for knocking some sense into me earlier. I shouldn't have frozen like that, but I also wanted to explain why I felt that way and possibly get your take on it."

"Shoot." I say wondering if his reasons were any different than my own.

"I just think that this whole situation is just very... convenient, you know?"

He sees the puzzled look on my face and forges ahead. "I don't think their deaths were an accident, and just when their sons were reaching manhood, they both get called forward in the reaping.

"Then when I saw the elevator tonight, I thought that they were going to take care of *us* the same way. After you talked to me, I knew it was silly. Why would they do it then when they have a whole multitude of ways to do it in the arena, right?"

"You think that the Capitol believes we would end up causing trouble for them like our fathers planned to?"

"Sins of the father...' Right?"

There it was again, for the second time in as many days. Somehow, the thought had become more real to me upon remembering Brie's words.

"It's convenient," he continued, "because in one fell swoop, they take care of two possible rebels, maybe more, I mean who knows what the story is for the rest of these tributes, all while pacifying the Capitol and keeping the districts in line."

"It's definitely something to think about." I agree.

"Just... I don't know, keep your eyes open. Maybe you'll start noticing... things. Above all, watch out."

"Watch out? For what? They're already planning on killing us in the arena."

"True." He pondered. "But there's something else, something I can't put my finger on, but it's got me worried all the same. Just remember what I said."

With that he opened the bathroom door and left.

I sat there next to the shower, listening to the water spray out and hit the tiled surface. It was a soothing and peaceful sound. Then I noticed the air, steaming up and growing warmer. All were provocative and inviting. So, I thought, no point in letting it go to waste. I stripped off my clothes and hopped in.

As the warm spray massaged and relaxed my body, I started really thinking about what Clay said. My father always said nasty things about the Capitol at home. Spending most of his hours in the mine, wouldn't he likely do so there too? I don't think he'd be killed just for speaking out, but maybe he was starting to cause trouble. That'd certainly explain why my mother was so



worried before his death. I never thought about it then, but looking back, it was as if she knew it was coming.

I'm sure the Capitol wants us to think it's all knowing, and all powerful, but did they really rig the reaping this year to go after families of those that had gone against them? If that was possible, maybe they engineered this quell to take out or scare as many families that have given them trouble as they could.

With all the pondering and warm air, I started to get lightheaded. It all looked possible, but it could just be the paranoid delusions of the son of a man who once plotted against his government... and had possibly been taken out by it. Such a thing could make anyone a little unstable, which could be why it has such an effect on me.

Either way, really, the outcome is the same. In a few days' time, I'll be pitted in a fight to the death against my fellow tributes as well as anything and everything the Capitol can dish up. I can't let anything get to me. After all, I have a promise to keep.

"*Stay alive.*" I say to myself.

I won't disregard this completely, though. My father always told me that there is no such thing as useless knowledge. Especially when dealing with things moving against you, no matter how big or small.

"Knowledge," he would tell me, "is worth far more than gold, and to be forewarned was to be forearmed."

The next morning after I'd gotten up and dressed, my breakfast was delivered directly to my room. I ate and waited for Azrael. Not much later, I arose to a knock at the door. I let him in and we sat down at the study nook to discuss strategy.

"Alright, Haymitch, what've you got? Any special skills you have that you want me to know about?"

"My father taught me how to use a knife. I've been using one ever since I can remember."

"That's good! Can you throw one?"

I pick up one of the dining knives that came with my breakfast. I feel out the weight of it in my hands. It's different than the knife I'm accustomed to back home, but I was certain I could throw it with a good amount of accuracy.

"Pick something." I say, with just a touch of arrogance.

He smiles at me and looks around the room. After a moment, he points over my left shoulder by my bed. "The clock."

I look at the target and it's roughly eight to ten feet away. It's an old-style analog clock with the standard three hands. "What number?" I ask.

This makes him roar with delicious laughter and says, "Twelve, why not." He sits back deep in his chair, folds his arms, and watches me.

I stare at the clock for a bit, and we both sit in complete silence. He stares at me, and I stare at the clock.

After about thirty seconds pass, he asks, "What's the matter?"

I just continue to stare at the clock.

"Look, if you can't do it, it's fine, but we have to..."

I interrupt him by saying, "Three, two, one."

In one swift motion I throw the knife as hard as I can. It hits the clock dead on, knocks it off the nightstand, and on to the floor.

"Not bad." He says impressed, "But what was with the counting?"

"Check it out." I say in the most matter-of-fact voice I can muster.

He looks at me with a suspicious glare for a moment, then gets up and picks up the clock.

"Holy Hell!" I hear him exclaim and I smile.

He brings the clock over to me and I'm not at all surprised when I see that

the blade hit horizontally across the number twelve, driving the seconds hand straight into the number, right when it hit the very top of the clock.

"Alright... What, in your mind, would be the best strategy for you?"

I decide if I'm going to trust anyone it might as well be him.

"I want to be invisible. I think my best chance is for everyone to overlook me, rather than them seeing me as weak or to be feared. I want to be completely off everyone's field of vision."

"Free to move around without notice, to strike when the opportunity arises, yes?" He asks.

"Something like that, yeah."

"From what I've noticed about you, kid, you just might be smart enough to pull that off."

I can tell by the smile on his face that he approves.

"Now I want you to listen to me very carefully. In addition to what I told you last night, not only do I want you to hide this talent from everyone, but there will be a knife throwing station in the gym. I want you to go to it when it seems that most of the tributes are watching. I want you to make it look like it's the first time you've ever tried handling a knife. Throw it and start off horribly at first. You can show some improvement, but I want them to think you with a knife is about as dangerous as rubber scissors."

"Alright, no problem."

"In addition to that, you still need to get to know your competition, but be careful who you interact with. Use your eyes and ears more than anything else."

I didn't need to be told this last part, but I still nod and stay silent to keep him happy.

"Go ahead and get going, looks like you're already going to be late. Try not to make an entrance."

"You got it." I cross the room and exit to go down to training.

I arrive a few minutes later at the double doors leading to the gym. As quiet as I can, I open the door and slide myself in. For the most part, I think it works. I look around to see all the other tributes at stations hard at work. I spot Clay and Violet over at the physical endurance training, and Maysilee is off in a corner station trying to light a fire.

I look around at all the different subjects being taught, and something about them... I'm not sure what... Is setting off little red warning bells in the back of my mind.

I start moving closer to the weightlifting station, trying to figure out what that feeling is. Then I notice the male tribute from 2, the one with the ring in his nose, Minos, is looking straight at me from across the room; paying no attention to anything else around him. He just continues to try and stare me down, and all I can think of is how stupid he looks with that ring through his nostrils.

So much for going unnoticed.

I decide to indulge myself at the weight training center. Since we only have a few days before entering the arena, today I'll focus on trying to improve my body as much as I can and maximize the amount of time to recover before the games. Still, I try not to overexert myself too much, knowing how sore I'll be in the morning.

After I finish weightlifting, I move on to the physical endurance station. I run for a bit and use some of the equipment, but every once in a while, I get a weird sensation and know Minos has started staring at me again.

I do what I can to ignore it, but I can't help wondering why? I know he's trying to intimidate me, which I can't even take seriously and I have to choke back outright laughing at him. But why is he trying so hard to do so? Forty-six other tributes, and he chooses to focus on me.

Whether I take him as a serious threat or not, he's part of the career pack. If he's chosen to come after me, he could convince the others to do so as well and that's a real problem.

It can't be helped now, and it's getting close to lunch time. With all the work I've exerted this morning, I'm tired and extremely hungry. When the bell rings signaling that we are to adjourn to the dining room, I welcome it wholeheartedly.

Lunch is served buffet style with all the possible entrees lined up on a long table. After I gather what I want, I go over to the dining area where tables are laid out with clean white cloths and sparkling cutlery. This is in stark contrast to the diners who are all sweaty and rough looking from the day's activities.

I look around and see the careers have pushed a few of the tables together near a wall so they can separate and keep an eye on us. All of the District 12 tributes are scattered around the room, talking to other tributes, in sync with Azrael's instructions. I decide to do so as well and sit at a table with four tributes there already.

"This seat taken?" I ask.

One of the male tributes from District 5 says, "Yeah, by you. By all means, join us. Name's Gregor. The two lovely young ladies from Seven are Adalind, and her little sister, Maple."

"Wait, You two are sisters?" I ask.

"Yep," Says Adalind. "It still hasn't fully registered with us. I remember being called and thinking I was glad at least it was me and not Maple. Then when she was called immediately after, I kind of went into shock. I mean what are the odds that both of us would be called?"

What *are* the odds of that? I can just see Clay's smirking face. I bet if I were to ask, one of their family members did something to upset someone in the

Capitol, but as we are most likely being watched, it wouldn't be wise to do so.

"Bad luck." I say shaking my head

"Some of the worst I've heard of, but we're all kind of in the same boat, right? By the way, that strapping young gentleman to your left is Calder, from District Eight."

I look over to the small, skinny, boy with the thickest pair of glasses I've ever seen. He's diving into a plate of mashed potatoes that sits next to a giant plate of rare roast beef and golden dinner rolls. He can't be any older than twelve, and for the first time, I actually feel pity for a fellow tribute.

"At least you haven't lost your appetite." I say and give him a gentle slap on the shoulder.

He takes a moment to look up at me through those thick lenses and gives me a crooked toothed smile, that was nonetheless warm as a ray of sunshine, then quickly resumes eating.

"Not much of a talker, though I see." I add.

"No, he's not." Gregor says while looking at the human vacuum. "Frankly, I don't think he *can* talk. Hasn't said a word since he got here. Not that I know of anyway."

"What do you think of the competition this year?" I ask.

"Well, as you can see: the career pack has twelve people in it this time 'round. Some are tougher than others, but they all seem pretty serious minded. Looks like you have an admirer, though."

He gestures with his head to the career table where, surprise surprise, Minos is trying to stare me down again. This time it looks as if he's also looking at something in his hand. Then he looks up and gives me what he thinks is a menacing smile. This is new, what could he possibly have? Maybe it could explain why he has taken such a shine towards me.

I turn back to Gregor. "You noticed that huh?" I say with a laugh.

"I don't see how anyone can not notice it. Have any of the other members of the pack been doing this?"

"Not that I know of."

The other members aren't showing any particular favoritism towards me, just being their ol' nasty selves. Maybe whatever it is Minos and I have going between us can stay that way.

"You're from Twelve, huh?" Maple asks turning the attention back on me. "You guys sure looked funny in those outfits yesterday." She adds with a laugh. "Do your people really have to dress like that for work?"

I smile as I think about both her and her question. She is a young girl, either thirteen or fourteen, with long brown hair to match her sister, but hers is in two tight braids that fall down either shoulder.

I laugh and say, "Oh no. They usually wear something a bit looser, more a jump suit than the overalls we had on. That's just for show."

"I'll say!" Adalind chimed in. "You all certainly showed a lot!"

All of us start laughing heavily, even little Calder looks up from his food and is shining his bright smile. After a moment, we start coming to our senses and notice the others have noticed us. We ignore it and continue eating.

After a while, the bell sounds again signaling that we are to resume training. We all get up to leave and I look over at Calder's now empty plates and wonder where he put it all.

Slowly, and begrudgingly (aside from the careers that is) we make our way back to the gym.

I decide to take it easy for a little bit to let my body digest. Over at the shelter building station, I see Maysilee listening closely to the instructor. Since she was the only one there, I decide to give her some company.

The instructor goes on to tell us that most people overlook key aspects of shelter. The main one being the difference in the boost of morale just to be out of the weather, which has a tendency to turn nastier the longer the games last.

Another keynote was that most people who do find, or are able to construct a shelter, forget the most important element which is to conceal it.

He gives us a few pointers, then instructs us to each build a shelter in the patch of forest and grass land he's set up. The object of the game is to make it as unnoticeable, but as functional as possible.

We each chose a spot where we thought we could build a formidable abode, and then the instructor presses a button and a power shield raises between us, blocking off our view of each other.

"Once you've each finished, I'll lower the shield and you'll have to try to discover where your opponent's shelter is."

This adds a bit of excitement to the day and we quickly get to work. I decide to work at the base of a tree surrounded by bushes and knee-high grass.

The tree has an indentation in it big enough to conceal my body from my chest up so I decide to use this for the base. I break off some leaf covered branches from nearby trees and use them to make a small triangle to conceal the rest of my body. I use many layers to make sure it's watertight with a small opening in front, through which I can crawl in and out.

After I finish that, I go to work concealing it. It doesn't look too bad as is, in that it wouldn't catch your eye if you weren't really looking for it. I use a knife that I'd likely have in the arena to dig around the base of some bushes and cut the roots free. Then I re-plant them all around my tree in the most inconspicuous way I can manage. Then I take the chunks of grass I dug out and try to conceal the holes where the bushes were originally.

The result is a functional shelter blended into its surroundings. But, there



was one small problem. If you were seriously looking for something, you might be able to tell it's there when right next to it. Since it's a friendly competition, I'll just cross my fingers and hope she doesn't find it.

I signal that I'm ready and wait until the instructor indicates that Maysilee is also finished and beckons us towards him. The energy shield disappears, and the hunt is on.

It takes quite a while, but eventually she catches on that something isn't right with my tree. Once she discovers the entrance behind the movable bush, she goes inside to check it out.

I, on the other hand, can't find any indication of hers at all, except notable traces from where she got her materials. I'm just about to give up, when I look up to see a large clump of branches, too thick to see through. I decide to investigate.

I climb the tree to the thick branch where the clump sits. She made her own little nest that, despite its relatively small size, is rather cozy. She hung a bunch of small branches all around the large one. I don't think I'd be able to sleep up here for fear of falling, but then I get a closer look at the branches.

They were all small and thin, but she wove them in such a way that it formed a large basket around its support structures. I tentatively put a little weight on one of the sides. It gives a little but stays firmly in place.

Gradually, I put more and more weight on it until my whole body is pressing up against it, and I am certain it'll hold. She'd done her homework alright, and I had no choice but to concede victory to her.

The instructor, after taking a closer look at our creations, gives his approval and congratulates us on a job well done.

As we walk to the next station I ask, "So how did you learn to do something like that?"

"My mother is a basket weaver. She taught my sister and I how to do it

when ever since we were old enough. Now all three of us make the decorative baskets for the chocolates in my family's sweet shop.

"Mostly I think it's just a way to keep us occupied, but every once in a while, she'd sell one of our creations and we'd celebrate with a big dinner that night. Once, she even let us eat a large, brand new, bar of chocolate. Usually if we get to eat something from the shop, it has to've been sitting out for a while and deemed unsellable."

I smile at her for a moment and say, "Sounds like a good day."

"Oh yes, one of my favorites." She smiles in return. Then we turn and go our separate ways to continue training.

Later that night during dinner, Azrael asks us to recount our day. We all have our little reports to give him. Violet, after some instruction, has become quite handy with a spear. Clay spent the day trying out many different weapons, discovered some he liked more than others, but never stayed with one too long and tried to absorb as much as possible.

Maysilee gave the account of how she whooped my butt... in nicer words. I also mentioned it, as well as report that I focused on training my body more than anything else today, and about talking with the four other tributes at lunch. I didn't tell him about Minos just yet. I want to save that for our next private session.

When the time came the following morning, I told him everything. He admitted that it was a bit odd, but Minos probably noticed me either during the reaping recap, or the opening ceremonies.

"He sees something in you that he feels the need to snuff out. He's trying to get in your head and play mind games."

"I don't think this guy has enough brain power for mind games."

"In any case, you've got him scared about something, this is just his

reaction to it."

I guess he could be right. I know if I were a career and something about another tribute worried me, I'd make them first on my priority list.

I'd go about it differently, though. I wouldn't want them to know I was interested. I'd want to learn everything I could about that person in order to estimate just the right way to come at them.

No, something doesn't smell right. Plus, what about those warning bells I get whenever I enter the gym. It's as if some important bit of information is staring me right in the face but I can't grasp it. A lot of things didn't feel *right*. I suppose nothing could, since we are all just training to kill each other.

"Is there any other weapon besides the knife you feel comfortable with?"

"Nothing that comes to mind." I admit.

"Do you have any aversion to learning how to use a sword?"

"No." I say, wondering where this is going.

"Ok, here's what I want you to do. Learn as much as you can about sword wielding as quickly and discretely as possible. A sword is just a bigger version of a knife, so hopefully you won't have much trouble picking it up.

"Then, when you feel comfortable enough with it, start using it, and I mean *really* using it. I want you to let out some... not all..." he stresses this point to me with his eyes boring into me. "... of your frustrations. Give them enough to think that the sword is your go-to weapon."

With that he gestures me to get going and I head down to the gym. I'm on time this morning and I enter alongside other tributes. I look around for my pal Minos and am surprised to see that he's not there. This is the perfect opportunity, I decide, to do exactly what Azrael instructed.

I head over to the sword fighting station, where there is already a large group forming. The instructor gives a quick overview of the basics of how to

wield a sword and beckons for us to start giving it a try.

A tall, stalky boy from District 10 steps forward to try his hand against the instructor. He does rather well, but still gets bested and the instructor gives him some pointers about what he did wrong and how to avoid it in the future.

It goes on and on like this for as long as I'm willing to watch. Tribute after tribute steps up to tryout wielding a sword and then the instructor tells them what they did wrong.

Every so often, I'll get a little gold nugget of information as the instructor spouts out some new information and I mentally store it for use later. I quickly find out that I don't need to strain my memory very hard, because the other tributes apparently aren't listening to what he has to say, or are just too thick to let the information sink in. He often has to repeat the same thing, over and over, because the new tributes are making the same mistakes as the ones before them.

This, I tell myself, is itself a gold nugget about my fellow tributes.

After about an hour, I decide to pick up a sword myself and try to get the feel of it. The moment my fingers grasp the handle, they feel as if they are greeting an old friend. I lift the sword to find it's surprisingly light, but properly weighted so it would still be able to do damage.

For a few moments I swing it around in my hands to get the feel of it. Then the instructor sees me and calls me forward. I look around and, aside from the now much smaller pool of tributes at the satiation, everyone's attention is elsewhere.

Good, time to get some practical experience. I head over to the instructor and he says to show him what I've got. I start with a couple of rudimentary moves to test the waters.

He blocks them without much effort, but each time we pause he smiles and says "Good!"

Then he switches to attack, he starts with the same moves in return, mostly striking at my head, legs, or torso. To his surprise, I block everything he throws at me with just as much ease as he had.

"Not bad," he says. "Glad to know someone's paying attention. Let's turn up the heat, shall we?"

He starts coming at me like a typhoon. A whirlwind of sword flurries makes their way towards me. He moves so effortlessly and fast, it's all I can do to keep up with him. It takes a few times, but then I see it.

He has a pattern to his strikes. He switches certain parts of the pattern up, but he always strikes at my legs immediately after thrusting at my waist. He also feigns a head strike and turns it into a slash directed towards my waist immediately after he strikes at my shoulder. I decide to use this to my advantage.

I keep pacing with him until I see him go for my shoulder again. When he does, I block his strike, and see him start to fake an attack on my head. For a moment, I look as if I'm going to block his sword when I bring mine up to my face, looking straight at the flat of the blade. I see him start to bring his sword around for his next move. He has to open the left side of his torso for it.

I simply turn my sword at the wrist bringing the tip towards him, and I thrust as hard as I can into the side of his unguarded chest right under his armpit.

He has body armor on, but this still takes him by surprise and knocks him to the ground. He just sits there a moment looking up at me and grabbing his side.

Then he smiles at me and says, "Nice work! You found for your opponent's weakness and exploited it. My hat's off to you sir."

I take a quick survey around the room to find a much larger crowd had stopped in to watch. This included all the career pack. I look over to see my old

pal Minos looking at me and smiling.

No doubt he thinks he got a key glimpse at what he can expect from me in the arena. However, I'm fairly confident he overlooked the real piece of me that I did show. The one the instructor just blurted out.

I want to take a break from combat for the moment and try to learn some new survival skill I can use in the arena. The knot tying station seems to be calling my name, so I go over.

I ask about how to make a good snare knot for hunting, but to my surprise, the instructor is hesitant to show me. She gives me a quick, basic demonstration of how to do it, but suggests that I learn another knot that would be more suited to the task of setting a trap for a fellow tribute. She then proceeds to show me how to set a twitch-up snare to send an opponent up and dangling from a tree.

I know this one all too well after my own experience. I insisted my father show me everything that had to do with making and spotting it, to ensure that I'd never be caught in it again.

I listen politely for a little while, but I can't help wondering why she was so hesitant to show me how to make a basic hunting snare. After a bit, I feel my time can be better spent elsewhere.

I look around for another survival station that might come in handy, when all of the red warning bells start coming in clear and I realize what's wrong.

There aren't many survival stations this year. They have the shelter, and the knot tying, and of course how to build a fire, but that's it. There's no hunting station, no edible plants station, not even a camouflage station. They aren't allowed to show footage of the tributes training, but to fill the gap between the opening ceremonies and the final interviews, they advertise the many subjects the tributes have the option of learning. So, I know *that* these stations existed in the past, where are they now?

Each station, other than a select few, is all about how to kill an opponent, not necessarily how to stay alive. With so many tributes this year, they must need to kill us off as fast as possible at least until the quantity goes down.

This *must* be a clue about what we're going to face in the arena. A long smile slowly crawls across my face because I doubt if any one of my forty-seven fellow tributes were able to pick up on it. I certainly won't be pointing it out any time soon.

The remainder of my training passes in a similar manner, until the morning when Azrael makes his way to my room to discuss my strategy for the final day of training. Today will be my personal session with the Gamemakers to show what skills I've been keeping from my opponents. At the end of which, they'll give me a score from one to twelve, disclosing how lethal they perceive me to be. The higher the number, the better possibility for sponsors.

"Ok, so you still want to remain invisible to your fellow tributes, correct?"

"Absolutely, I think that, other than the show you had me put on with the sword, I've blended in with the non-careers... except for whatever is going on with Minos."

"Good, you don't want to go completely unobserved to avoid suspicion. You're leading the careers by the nose, and that's just how we want it.

"Now as far as your private session goes today, you don't want to get too high a score. Given what you've shown me, I have no doubt that you can earn at least a ten or even an eleven. However, this would be bad because the others will know you're a force to contend with, rendering all of our efforts useless. That being said, I don't want you to get a low score either, everyone will mark you as a weakling and it'll be much harder to get you sponsors."

"Already planning my sponsors, huh?" I ask.

"Don't get too excited. I'm still playing all four cards in my hand. You just

prove that my efforts will be worth it, then we'll talk."

"Alright, so what do you want me to do?"

"What's another skill that you hold in high regard?"

I have to pause and think about this for a moment, then I seize it and say, "I'm fast."

"How fast?"

"There isn't any time I can think of where someone has beaten me for speed. My father used to say I move faster than a jack rabbit over a boiling lake of lava."

"Alright, when you're alone with the game makers, grab a clutch of knives and use the simulator. Put the setting on the higher end to give you multiple attackers. I want you to mostly play 'keep away' from them. Occasionally take a few out with a knife, but make it a little sloppy if you can, maybe even miss one or two. That should get you where you want. That's not going to hurt your pride is it?" He asks with a smile.

"You think that I give a damn what those idiot's think about me? I doubt any one of them could go up against the greenest tribute and live."

This fills him with booming laughter as he snaps his head back to let it out. "You're probably right, Haymitch. Now go get 'em."

With that, I head down to my final day of training.

This process is only supposed to be an afternoon, but as soon as I get down to the gym, we all pile into the waiting room until we're called. It seems as if we are plunged into total chaos as we all squeeze together on benches that have our district numbers on them. Mostly it's the careers that are loud, but some tributes talk to others to pass the time. It doesn't usually last long, however. I guess it's too hard for anyone to get past the fact that in less hours from now than there are tributes, we start killing each other; causing the two numbers to go in the



opposite direction. Once the careers have left, everything quiets down immensely.

It feels as if we have been here for hours, and being from District 12, I'll be one of the unlucky few waiting here the longest. My one slight comfort here is that, contrary to every other aspect so far, it looks as if the boys are called in first, so I won't be the absolute last person here. I have no idea why they decide to do things this way, but I'm getting out earlier so I'm not complaining.

Slowly and methodically, the room begins to empty as the day wears on until only the District 12 tributes remain. Clay gets called as the first of us, and I'm left alone with Violet, and Maysilee.

"So... Did you guys come up with a good strategy with Azrael?" I say more to break the silence than anything else.

Violet just scoffs and in her velvety voice says, "I don't think that man really knows what he's doing. He's never gone through the arena himself, so what does he know about mentoring us."

Maysilee pops up in a hopeful voice. "I think he's been doing well, seems like he knows what he's doing. I don't really think I'll win, but I definitely think I have a better chance now after the things we've discussed."

"He actually came up with a plan with you? All he did was tell me to do what I had already planned from the get-go." says Violet.

A little too dreamily I say, "Well you can't improve on perfection." I catch myself and continue in a more casual tone, "If he thinks your plan will work, why would he try and change it?"

In answer, she just stares at me. It looks stern, but I detect the faintest traces of a smile. I can't help but wonder what's going on in her mind.

"Besides," Maysilee continues, "even If he hasn't had to experience the games, he knows all of the people surrounding them, what better person can you

think of to get us sponsors?"

Maysilee hit the nail right on the head. When you get right down to it, it's up to you to formulate your own plan to stay alive in the arena. The real power a mentor has is getting you sponsors. Sometimes the best plans can still fail. One thing that will always tip the scales is a gift from a sponsor.

"Haymitch Abernathy!" A capitol attendant calls from the door.

I'm really starting to loathe the sound of my own name. Over the past few days, it's only been an ill omen of things to come.

I get to my feet and start for the door. When I've reached it, I turn around to look at the girls, give a little wink and say, "Give 'em hell ladies!" the door closes between us, and I am led into the gymnasium where the Gamemakers are waiting, but don't seem particularly interested in my appearance. One person is obviously asleep.

Good, so much the better for my purposes.

I walk up to them and state loudly, "Haymitch Abernathy..."

Yep, definitely starting to hate it.

"... District Twelve."

This gets a few faces to look up at me from their food, but most continue as if nothing had happened. One gestures with a rolling hand to tell me to get started.

I move over to the simulator where an attendant, a quirky young man, helps me with the settings. He's not dressed like a regular attendant, though. He's in formal attire, like the gamemakers in the viewing area above us. He tells me the difficulty setting, specifications, as well as close up video footage will be played on a large screen before them.

Once everything is set, I pick up a handful of throwing knives and enter the simulator. I start to walk around and find the floor moves underneath me

(speeding up or slowing down based on my movements) giving me an infinite space in which to move around.

I barely have enough time to acclimate myself to the feeling when the first computer generated analogues start to move in. Each has a different weapon in its hands, a sword, a spear, even a bow and arrows. I focus on what Azrael and I agreed upon, and just start running.

They're fast, but I am faster.

Each try and approach me, maybe even throw a weapon, but none can catch me. The more time I spend running, however, the more analogues start to pile up. The numbers start to grow so great, that I'm in danger of being surrounded. I reach for my knives. I only take out the ones that put me in immediate danger.

One appears right in front of me with a spear. I stop for just a moment, giving it time to aim and throw. I immediately roll forward and to my left as the spear sails right past me and into another analogue. I roll up to my feet and throw a knife straight into the spear throwers chest. It immediately disintegrates as I run forward and reclaim my knife.

More and more pop up around me, and I start throwing knife after knife to take them out. Every once in a while, I miss on purpose to try and get the audience off my trail. I just keep running. Two have caught up beside me, each wielding a sword. Without any real grace or precision, they hack and slash through the air, but try as they might, they can't get me.

As I just start to work up a sweat, all the analogues dissolve at once. I step out of the simulator to find I'd been running and dodging for about ten minutes straight. I wasn't feeling tired, but I decide to put on a show for the Gamemakers, huffing and puffing. I even managed a couple of dry heaves.

This, I find, is a dangerous maneuver because the physical activity mixed

with all the food almost turn acting into re-acting as the food threatens to make a reappearance.

I stood there in a fake stupor as one of the game makers tell me I can go.

Not being able to resist an impulse, I immediately stop puffing, stand up straight, and casually walk away.

I did worry what they would make of that, and started cursing my arrogance until I thought to myself: what *could* they make of that? Not a thing that I could think of. So, I start to head upstairs to wait for the televised scores, when the young man who ran the simulator stops me.

He smiled and comes close enough to whisper and actually shakes my hand.

"Man, that was brilliant. I see what you did there, even if it sailed right over those half-wits up there. You are incredibly fast too. I turned up the difficulty while you were in there to see just how fast. I'll be keeping an eye on you in the arena."

I have a small burst of dread feeling that I tipped my hand and am immediately pacified when I look up to see that no one is paying the slightest bit of attention.

He sees me look up and says, "Oh don't worry about them, your secret is safe with me. But I know talent when I see it." He winks and sends me on my way.

Later that evening, after we all returned from our private sessions and finished dinner, we all sat in front of the screen in the common area. As usual, not much was said from us, but the team was dying to know how we did.

I look over to Azrael to see that he was looking towards me and smiling broadly. I don't think he knows what I did, but with all his connections with everyone involved, I wouldn't be surprised.

Caesar Flickerman appears once again to recap everything so far and announces that, "Tonight we will get to know how our Gamemakers feel about this year's stalk of tributes."

The presentation of the scores are less dramatic than in previous years in an attempt to keep the length of the broadcast down. Even so, it's hard to keep track of faces and scores.

A few stand out. The careers always get scores on the higher end, and this year was no exception. The large blonde girl from District 1, Chanel, is awarded a nine. My pal Minos tips the scales at a ten.

Gregor gets a five, which I thought was kind of funny, him being from 5. The sisters from District 7 both get a six, and I can't help but wonder how they managed that. Poor little Calder only manages to get a four and again, I'm reminded what pity feels like.

Caesar continues to move down the list and finally he gets to District 12. Clay achieves an eight, which is still pretty good for anyone not from the career districts. Then it's my turn, and I get a seven, precisely the number I was aiming for. I look over at Azrael to see he's already smiling at me and gives me a little wink. I look back to the screen to see the final two tributes.

To my surprise, Violet has matched Minos' score of ten. I look over at her face where she slyly peers at the screen and offers a little smirk, evidently pleased.

I wonder what she did to get it. Incidentally I feel a little worried for her as, no doubt, every other tribute is wondering the same.

Maysilee ends the broadcast with a seven to match me. I lean over to her and say, "A tie's not beating me, guess we'll have to go three out of five." She laughs and pushes me away.

Caesar is back on the screen to remind us of the coming events, the

foremost of which is the broadcast of our final interviews tomorrow night. The broadcast ends, and the screen is shut off.

"Ok everyone, well done, but I think special congratulations are in order for Miss Eardwulf for her magnificent score of ten!" Azrael pauses and the prep team claps vigorously. "Tomorrow is yet another big day. You will each have time with either myself, or Orla, as well as a member of the prep team to get you ready for your interview.

"Violet, you and Maysilee will start off the morning switching off between Orla, and your stylists to get ready. Once you're done, you will come to me, separately of course, for your final coaching. Clay, you and Haymitch will go to your stylists in the morning, and when you're done, Clay, come see me and we'll work from there.

"Alright, don't stay up too late, tomorrow will be a loooooong day, trust me."

He starts to make for his quarters when I stop him, "Wait! What about me?"

"What *about* you?" he says staring at me with a quizzical look on his face.

"Well, when Clay's done with Aurelia, he's going to come see you, yeah?"

"You are right on top of things as usual, Haymitch." He says and I recognize my own sarcastic tone being used against me.

"Well, when do *I* come see you?" I ask as if this couldn't be any plainer.

"You?" He says with his smirk reappearing. "I'm not worried about you."

With that, he turns and retreats to his room.