

Chapter 23

The seal of Panem once again takes over my screen as well as all the others in view, and the anthem plays. I get to my feet, look around to see none other than President Snow appear out of nowhere.

He walks over toward me and for a moment he doesn't do anything but look at me. He just stands there waiting patiently in his tailed tuxedo. The crowd at the president's appearance has resumed its roaring of my name as the anthem continues to play.

Suddenly, my senses are being assaulted by the sickly-sweet smell of roses. He has his trademark white rose in his lapel, so that must be a portion of it, but what else does he do, bathe in rose cologne?

He's smiling, but it's as if it's a mask with absolutely nothing behind it. He must do this every year, I guess; so he's probably over the experience.

The young servant makes her way up to the president with a large red pillow, atop of which sits my golden crown. President Snow picks up the crown, gleaming in the spotlight, with his perfectly white gloves. He leans over to place the crown upon my head, and I get a red flash of warning that goes through my body like a bolt of lightning.

His eyes meet mine for just a moment, and something flares beneath the facade. Could it be... Anger? Abruptly I feel my nose turn sour as a new smell pervades the air. The unmistakable metallic smell of blood.

I only have a moment to ponder this before he places a hand, gently, on my shoulder and starts to point me in the direction of the front of the stage.

The smell of blood intensifies as I hear him whisper in my ear, "Go on,

Lad, you don't want to keep the public waiting, this is your night, after all."

There isn't anything exactly threatening in this, but it sends a cringe down my spine as I feel the warmth of his breath fall upon me.

He gives a small, but firm, shove back towards the audience who are now on their feet, are in fact jumping up and down still screaming my name as one. I take a small bow, and the stage lights go black. I feel a hand on my shoulder and find myself scared that it might be the president again.

The very familiar voice of my mentor whispers in my ear and I relax. "C'mon, Kid, there's tons to do and people to see."

He directs me off the stage and towards the elevator where we make our way down to the lobby where a long black car is waiting to take us to the president's mansion, where already the huge after party was in full effect.

Hundreds of capitol citizens, Gamemakers, and the who's who, swarming the place in some of the funniest outfits I've ever seen. My eyes seem to strain with all the use of extreme colors. Everyone had one thing in common, though, they're all incredibly drunk.

My interest was in the food, which was everywhere, but I could hardly move with all the attention I was getting. I couldn't go more than a few steps without being stopped by someone who wanted to congratulate me.

I'd grab a plate with whatever free hand I had as I passed a table with some new dish on it. I filled myself clear to bursting and thought I had had just about enough, that is until I see the dessert section.

My mouth begins to water at all the sweet's offered. My favorite are these little chocolate cakes that when you bite into them, fudge drips into your mouth and warms you from the inside as it trickles down your throat.

My heart sinks, however, when I come to a bunch of tiny candies that are sitting on dishes inside of an enormous woven basket. My thought's go to

Maysilee and the sweet shop back home that is now one basket-maker short.

Suddenly, I don't feel well and decide to try and make it to the bathroom before everything I ate decides to make a reappearance.

As I make my way to the door, I accidentally bump into this little black table that sits along the small stretch of wall that separates the two bathrooms. Atop it are little ornate glasses filled with a clear pink liquid that I almost send flying as I make my way through. All I can think is why anyone would think this would be a good place to serve drinks.

Once inside, I don't feel as though I'm going to throw up, but the room is still spinning a bit, and I feel cold sweat on my forehead. I splash some water on my face at the sink.

I almost jump out of my skin when a hand gently taps me on the shoulder. I spin around ready to... what? Defend myself? However, I'm only met with the gaze of a silent man in a white uniform indicating an array of products he has on the counter next to his slim stool.

"What is all this stuff?" I ask.

He doesn't answer, rather presents one product after another that he thinks may be useful. They all have labels on it like: Cologne, mouth wash, breath mints, etc. I decide to take one of the hot towels and he places it gingerly on the back of my neck. It actually soothes and calms me down a bit.

"Thanks." I say in a small voice.

In reply, he shows me the small container of mints again.

Since he was right about the towel, I decide to see what all the fuss over the mints is.

I go to take one, but I only pull out a small square of translucent paper. He points to his mouth indicating where it goes. I place it on my tongue and close my mouth. The taste of mint floods my mouth and nose, and it's as if someone

gave me a good slap in the face to wake me up.

"That did the trick, thanks a lot!"

He gives a little bow as I leave the room to rejoin the party. I have no urge to stay around however and just want to go back to my room at the training center. As soon as I make my way back to the crowd however, I have to endure minute after minute of garbled speech. I can't recognize much, but I'm pretty sure they're talking about the arena.

One woman who looked to be old as dirt started talking to me and getting way too close for comfort. I get a good look at this woman who is trying so hard to look young and have to wonder what's holding her together?

She mutters something that I think sounds like, "Ifff II was twenty years younger... but ah well..."

I give a little jump as she accents her last proclamation with a squeeze of my left butt cheek.

OOOKAAY... It is definitely time to go!

I look around to try and find someone I know, but I feel like I'm drowning in a sea of Capitol people that I've never met before tonight, yet every one of them acts as if we are on first name basis.

The sun is just starting to show its first reds and oranges in the sky off in the horizon and I start to wonder how long this party will last. Then I see Azrael. I make my way over to him and am surprised to find that he's drunk but still very coherent.

"Haymitch, ma boy, there you are. Enjoying your party?"

"Riveting," I say with an unnoticed roll of the eyes. "Doesn't anyone get any sleep around here?"

"Now that you mention it..." He says, lifting up his left sleeve to examine his watch with the ring finger of his right hand, not spilling a drop of the liquid

in the glass he held with the rest of them. "It is about that time. You've got your final interview in a few hours, let's get you some rest!"

I open my mouth to say thanks, but he stops me as if I'm going to protest.

"Now now, Haymitch, you don't want to spoil it, too much of a good thing you know..."

I just smile and say, "Lead the way."

He cuts through the mass of people still living it up and enjoying themselves as best they can. whenever someone tries to stop us, he waves them off good naturally and makes hurried excuses.

When I finally make it back to my room at the training center, I give a great sigh of relief, strip off my padded clothes, throw them into a corner, and sprawl onto my bed. As I drift off into sleep, I have one parting thought to the waking world:

Is this what it's going to be like being rich? If so, I don't care for the company, but I could definitely get used to the comforts.

I immediately fall asleep, but there is no reprieve to be found as I am forced to watch Minos and his girlfriend bite the poisoned apple once more, and then I'm surrounded by the faces of all those who could've gone on with their life, but for me. They all ask me the same question. Why you?

I try to answer but I have no voice. I touch my mouth to find that it has been sewn shut and the words I try to get out pile up behind the fused lips, collecting in my mouth and throat as I begin to choke.

I spring out of my sleep, bolt upright with a giant gasping inhale, then another, and another until I remember where I am.

I look up at the clock to see I've still got a few hours before they start prepping me for my final interview, but there's no way I'll be able to get back to sleep. Instead, I go down to the dining area to try and get some breakfast.

After I'm primped, preened, and shoved into yet another padded suit, it's finally time for my last obligation before I get to go home. I find myself thinking more and more of what awaits me back in 12: Mom, Felix, Brie, my very own house in the Victor's Village.

None of us will go wanting of anything the rest of our lives. Not to mention the year of our entire district being showered in food and gifts of medicine and the like in celebration of my victory. Home is something that's only slightly out of reach but gets closer with every passing second.

"Are you ready, Haymitch?" Asks Caesar as we take our seats in the little room as the cameras start to warm up.

"As I'll ever be, let's do this."

"That's the ticket, Lad. We'll be done before you know it."

Then he grins those too-white teeth at me, the anthem plays, and we launch right in.

"So, Haymitch, what have you thought about the capitol so far?"

"Boy, it's certainly something... but I honestly can't wait to go home."

"Ready to start your new life as a victor?"

"I guess you can say that."

"Well, when you do get home make sure to enjoy it. Before you know it, you'll be off on your victory tour, and then of course, you will be District Twelve's new mentor for the next games."

I forgot about that, first they're going to parade me around the districts like some side-show, then *I* get to be the one who watches kids die left and right every year.

I answer him with, "Then let's get this going so I'll have some more time in between."

He laughs as if I just said the funniest thing he's ever heard and I can't help

but to start feeling uncomfortable again.

"Alright then let's get right down into it. What went through your mind the moment you heard your name in the reaping?"

"Honestly, not much. It's such a shock when you hear your name being called, it's a wonder anyone's able to make it to the stage."

We start going through all the little details of the Games. What I thought about being the only one to move for a long while after the gong sounds. How close I came to death several times throughout. We talk about many of the tributes that I had to come up against, but when it came to the ferran tribute, he seems to gloss over and onto the parting of the ways between Maysilee and me. They never seem to be too proud of the tributes who turn like that. As if they were mutts the Gamemakers never intended to make.

Caesar wants to know more of the feelings that went on within me when I held Mays's hand for the last time as death took her, but I wouldn't answer. I just shake my head. Then comes the last fight of all between Chanel and me. He insists on doing a blow-by-blow recap and how I was able to carry on while holding my guts together.

"I knew if I wanted to live, which I certainly did, I had one last hope, and that was the cliff."

"Which brings me to my final question that I have been absolutely *dying* to ask..."

Oh, I don't think you were, Caesar. If you truly want to know what dying feels like, why don't you take a turn in the arena? I promise those large pearly whites won't make as much of an appearance anymore when it comes to the subject.

"...When you used the force field to redirect the axe, it looked like you were going to die right then and there, but then you said something and smiled

before Chanel was taken down. What was it?"

Even now I smile at the thought, at what could have been my very last word in this life. Caesar sees the smile on my face and starts to prod me with his little question cards.

"OOOOOH come on don't keep us in suspense, what was it???"

"Well, Caesar, if you really must know, I just called her an Idiot."

"Wait a second, Haymitch. Let me get this straight. You are holding your guts in... trying not to die... knowing that the axe was on its way back up... so you turn to her and say 'Idiot?!'"

"Yeah." I say with the smile still etched on my face.

A pause fills the air as he is temporarily at a loss for words, then he starts to guffaw and clutch his sides as if they were in pain from the spasms of laughter.

He slowly regains himself and with a few tears in his eyes he turns to the camera and says, "Well there you have it, folks, strong words from a strong man. Let's all wish him luck in his new life of being not only a victor, but the victor of the Fiftieth Hunger Games and the second Quarter Quell!"

He struggles through this and his closing statements trying (unsuccessfully) to keep a straight face.

Once the cameras are off, he stands up still laughing, pats me on the shoulder and says, "You are too much." He shakes my hand, and we part ways.

My job in the Capitol finished, at least for now, I'm escorted to the lobby where a car is waiting to take me to the train station. Before I leave, however, I'm met by Azrael who has apparently been waiting for me.

"Well, Haymitch, it's been an utmost pleasure to have gotten the chance to work with you. Thank you for making my brief time as a mentor, a great one."

"I don't think I can quite say the same to you, what with the huge

possibility of me dying and all, but I can say that I am truly grateful for everything you did for me. I probably would've never made it out of that arena alive if it wasn't for you."

"Oh please, you gave me a lot to work with, I'm sure you would have made it out of there even with the most inept mentor at hand."

He pauses, looks around to see if we're being watched and in a slight whisper he continues, "Which between you and me is saying something."

He pats me on the back and we both can't help but laugh. Then he does something I never would've suspected. He pulls me in for a hug. I don't resist and I find true warmth in this embrace.

Then he says in my ear, "If you ever need anything, I'm just a phone call away."

He breaks contact and brings his right hand up. In between his first and middle finger tips is a card which he then places in my hand.

The door to the lobby opens and the high, sweet voice of Orla reverberates through the room.

"There you are, Haymitch, you must hurry along, the train and District Twelve awaits!"

"He's coming, Orla." Says Azrael. "Go on, kiddo, I'll see you soon."

Orla opens the lobby door, and we enter the car together. She escorts me back to the train where she points out the food and that I still have a lot of filling out to do. I eat, but it seems awfully lonely on the train with only Orla to keep me company. Eventually I find my way back to bed where I'm met with more bad dreams.

The following morning, I am filled with excitement at the coming prospects. I am not disappointed. A crowd of people fills the train station awaiting my return. At the front, I see the two most important and have tearful

reunion with Ma and the Squirt.

"Oh, I jus' knew if anyone from District Twelve could make it home it'd be you, Haymitch." Ma says with tears streaming down her face. She pulls me in closer and kisses both sides of my face and then hugs me even tighter.

"Ma!" I say with a little cough. "Ma, if you hold me any tighter, you're gonna break me!"

Immediately she releases and says, "I knew it, I saw it on the T.V. They ain't fed you enough, we don't have much but c'mon home and let's get you somethin fixed up."

"Ma, they fed me just fine, I just need to regain some of the mass I lost when they were putting me back together, and that home isn't going to be home anymore, they're giving me a house in the Victors Village!"

I feel a tug on my sleeve, and I look down to see Felix looking up at me with that big smile of his and he asks, "Did you really do all that stuff on T.V., Haymitch."

"Who let you watch the games?!" I say scowling at my mother.

"Well, what was I s'posed ta do? Jus' tell him stories of what's going on when all his little friends at school would've been watching an tellin' him everythin' that was goin' on?"

"I guess not, I just..."

And then I saw her. Just standing there waiting patiently for her turn. Those beautiful Almond shaped eyes to which, at that moment, nothing else in the world existed but me. I had found my way back to her, through all of my trials and tribulations I'd made it through, and here stood the real prize. Not only a life, but a life to spend with the most beautiful woman I had ever known or would probably ever know.

"Hey sweetheart..." is all I get out before she leaps into my arms and a long

slow kiss is shared between us as the world melts away. I don't know how long we keep at it, but slowly the wolf calls and whistles start to sound, and I see her father not too far away, arms folded, face beet red with one eyebrow raised.

I stared at him at a loss for words. Then he laughed and we all followed suit.

Then I remember something.

"Here," I say to Brie, fumbling to get it off from around my neck, "I think this belongs to you!"

I hand her back the pendant I'd carved for her. She snatches it back and clutches it to her chest.

"Took you long enough, I was starting to think I'd never get it back."

A sly smile creeps onto her face, and I can't help but lean in for another kiss to which she answers and presses back.

"Well," I say to all three, "Are you ready?"

The smallest voice of them answers as I put my arms around the other two.

"For what?" says Felix.

"The next big adventure! Come!" I say, "I believe there's a new house with our name on it!"

A note to the reader:

I would like to thank you for sharing this adventure with me so far and hope you have enjoyed the ride.

However, I would also like to break the fourth wall to talk to you for just a moment. If you are a reader who only enjoys happy endings, I encourage you to

stop here.

Those who have read the original trilogy, know the rest of the story deep down, even if the front of their consciousness has pushed it far out of memory. You know where this story *has* to go in order to continue on with Suzanne Collins's narrative.

I know that not one of you who read this will heed my caution, however, so I would like to point out the fact that you have been warned; and if you are unsatisfied with how this tale truly ends, I encourage you to start the originals once more while keeping my addition in mind.

Therefore, I say to you, "Read on, and 'may the odds be ever in your favor...'"