

CAPITOL CITIZEN AND HOST OF THE HUNGER GAMES

Interview night is the most important night of the year. Well, for the tributes of course, it's probably the day in the games where they meet their bittersweet end fighting for their district. But for me, the interviews are a chance to make each tribute shine, to ask them what they bring to the games, to show all the citizens of the Capitol where to place their bets. It's the most fun part, too, getting to show off all the kids and talk to them about their lives and plans if they win. Not all of the tributes have interviews, especially if they're too hysterical. Their mentors decide not to send them out because... well, since it's the Hunger Games after all, and a crying tribute in front of the careers is like throwing a wounded baby zebra into a lions' den.

Almost no one is hysterical this year, so I'm ready for a great night of smiles and applause!

I tie up my shiny violet tie and smile widely in the mirror, brushing some pale powder off of the mirror.

A crew member raps the window of my dressing room with his knuckles. "Caesar, we're ready for you."

Showtime.

~

"Introducing the master of ceremonies...son of the famed Lucretius "Lucky" Flickerman...host of the hunger games for over ten years...CAESAR...FLICKERMAN!"

The booming music hypes up the crowd, making them shout and scream "Caesar!" and the names of their favorite tributes so far.

I hate to admit that this year I don't know nearly any of them. Usually I spend my time researching and watching the tributes to make them sound as enticing and entertaining as possible, but I've been busy this year with my father. He's getting much older and with age comes bad health, even with the miraculous healthcare in the Capitol. As far as we've come, we can't fix everything. I doubt he'll be around to see another games, so even with my late start, I'll make this the best one yet.

The earpieces that dull the booming music around me so I can hear the tributes' answers to my questions doubles as a projector, giving me the list of tributes and a few of their basic facts to fall back on. The first girl up is one I've heard of around the betting tables at the Capitol. Not that I was betting, of course, because that would be... illegal.

"Welcome, welcome, welcome, ladies, gentleman and everyone in between, to the tribute interviews of the 48th HUNGER GAMES! I am your dearly honored host, Caesar Flickerman, and tonight, folks, we have what are, in my opinion, the best batch of tributes in a long time. From the incredible weapon fighting skills from the career districts to the smarts of the producing districts to the brute strength of the working districts, everyone who steps on this stage tonight has a fighting chance."

I tone down the utter excitement that keeps the crowd screaming my name and quiet the stadium.

“Now, some of you have placed your bets. Some of you are yet to do so, you want to see how they look and act, yes?” They erupt into cheers again. “Well, let's get started with the tributes with the highest odds out of all 24 of them... Miss Gleam Andia, District 1!

She steps out in a short, tight, revealing dress and I see the stylists are taking the same angle they do every year on the District 1 girl, and I do as I'm supposed to: play it up. At least she's 18... but honestly, what's the difference? She's still a kid, and joining in on the disgusting catcalls from the audience makes me disgusted with myself.

Her interview is boring but good, I doubt many people will take back their bets after hearing her rave about her speed and accuracy with her famed poison swords. Her non-graphic approach to explaining her average kill makes the crowd cheer, and I can tell she's been doing practice interviews for many years. When her time runs out, she does a dramatic curtsy and exits the stage.

“All right folks, we've got a lot of blondes tonight, but perhaps none as talented as our next guest... please welcome Mr. Delian Hearth!”

A tall, muscular teen walks out, head to toe in black. He looks average for a career, and he's not the kid we've been hearing about for the last few years. He sits in the chair, shifting his position to a wide-legged seat.

“Well, Delilan, it's a pleasure to see you here tonight. How are you feeling?”

“Well, I'm a bit tired.” he laughs, but the booming sound I expect is replaced with a nervous chuckle. “But the threat of death will replace that soon, I'm sure.”

Well, that's not the usual open to a career interview.

“I hear you're a replacement to a different hopeful? Not many people here know much about you. So tell us, what secrets are behind this stone face of yours?” The last bit is laced with sarcasm, letting the audience decide whether I'm playing around with him.

“Yeah, Lux. Great guy, really talented. A piece of gym equipment broke on him, crushed his ulna. Hundreds of pieces, no way he could go in the games. I was the number two, so I stepped in.” Delian's demeanor repairs itself and the boasting tone he should hold appears- still, yet, with some cracks. “But his accident was a savior to our district. Sure, he was good, but I think I could out-fight him any day.” He doesn't look so sure.

“I bet you could. Look at you! All this muscle, what do you use it for? Any specialties?”

“I'm smart on top of this bulk. I know a lot about surviving, recognizing plants and venom. You won't be seeing me die from eating poisonous fruit.” He pauses for a minute, considering what to say next. “My weapon of choice for the past few years has been a morning star. If you're not familiar with weapon terminology, it's an ancient weapon that comes from Germany, it's a spiky ball with a handle. Sounds dumb, but a single strike from this can kill you instantly.” The crowd erupts into cheers and Delian scoots further back into the seat, looking rigid.

It never looks good when the crowd is loud and the tribute is silent, so I try to get him to talk a bit more before the time runs out. “And lastly, Delian, do you have a message for anyone back home?”

This piques his attention. “Yes, actually. To my brother Nigellus and his wife Epha... I’m here. I made it. And I’ll try to get home for you.” He pauses tentatively and I start to stand up so he can exit, but he opens his mouth again. “And to Noah... if I get out of here alive, there’s something I need to tell you.”

He stands up and doesn’t clarify further, so I shove the awkwardness under the rug with an almost comically large grin. “The mystery and intrigue continues! Mr. Delian Hearth, everyone!”

Yikes. That was awkward, especially for a career interview. Hopefully the twos are normal. The first one is short, she doesn’t even come up to my shoulder. But she’s absolutely jacked, and her running at me would scare me half to death. She talks about her skill in nearly all weapons, especially throwing blades and swordfighting. She describes her craft with such brutality my stomach starts flipping around, but I can tell the people in the crowds who are serious about the sport of the games are eating it up.

“Now, Sylvie, I’m sure we’re all wondering what happened to your eye? Looks like a gruesome accident.” The thin but deep cut that looks past infection but still gnarly runs from the top of her eyebrow down to her cheekbone. She grins.

“It was no accident, Caesar. The top hopefuls in my district have a tradition a week before the reaping. Our runner-up takes a shot at us with a weapon of our choice.” She looks at me with a chilling smile. At this point, I can’t tell if she’s an incredible actress or just simply sadistic. “Most people choose something basic, like a net or a dart. But, you know, Circe was eighteen, she doesn’t get to try again. So, I let her take a shot at me with my own specialty: throwing blades. I didn’t dodge, because what kind of coward does that if they’re trying to carry out tradition?”

“Not you, certainly.” She laughs warmly, and it sounds unsettling.

“Indeed, Caesar, not me.”

I talk to the District 2 male, and he’s impressive, even getting the same score as Sylvie, but doesn’t quite entrance the audience as she did. Next up is the girl from Three. She’s normal looking as we move into the middle districts, small, pale, and underfed. Yet her demeanor does not match her appearance, she is cheerful and brings a childlike energy to the stage.

“So, Alex, tell us about yourself and your life. Do you bring anything special to the games that others don’t?”

“Sure! Back at home, I worked on electronics. I really love video games, and even though I didn’t get to make them, I felt a part of making them because I helped put together chips! Oh, and special skills. I’ve been working on close up fighting. I learned how to jump on people at different angles and hurt their bones.” She gives a crooked smile.

“Fascinating! How are your relationships with the other tributes? How about the Capitol and its people?”

“I’ve loved everybody I’ve met so far! Everyone here is so diverse and unique. I made sure to say hi to all 24 tributes, and their mentors, and their stylists. I tried to talk to them too, but most people just walked away. And for the Capitol, it’s amazing! I wish the districts would take a page out of their book. “

The girl's undying smile and cheer makes me slightly sad. She's about to die, she must know that?
"Alex, your personality is just to die for! How do you manage to stay so happy despite the circumstances?"

She pauses for the first moment in her whole interview. I can tell she didn't expect to be asked this.

"Well... I guess I don't have a whole lot going on back home. I just have my job and my cat, Nebs. Being overly happy spices up my life, you know? And the more...complicated things get, the happier I try to be."

"You're turning into quite the Capitol darling. Alex Laurel!"

The District 3 boy is small and nerdy, leading to an uninteresting interview. But now District 4 is up, a personal favorite of mine.

"First up from District 4, Miss Delani Avery!"

A short thirteen year old in a dark teal dress meekly walks across the stage and meets me in the center.

"How are you feeling about being here tonight, Delani?"

"Y-you can call me Del if you want. And, uh, half dead?"

I laugh boisterously. I can tell she's not kidding, but the audience sure can't!

"Of course, of course. Well, the goal is indeed trying to avoid that. Have you considered any alliances to help you out with that?"

"Not really, not yet. I hope I could team up with or at least talk to Sabille? She seems nice, and we're around the same age."

"You are! This year has one of the youngest average tribute ages ever! 41% of tributes are only fifteen or younger. How does that make you feel?"

Delani frowns. "Awful. None of us get to live our actual lives. We're gonna get crushed by the kids who have been training forever for this, like Sylvie and Ashton and Gleam. A few of them are actually adults, I'm barely a teenager."

"Well, I believe in you. And from the looks of your odds, some of us here in the Capitol do too! Any legacy you want to leave behind for us?"

"I, uh... I want to make it the first week. After that, whatever happens happens."

"Thank you! Miss Avery, everyone!" Some scattered cheers appear, but I assume her odds will lower tonight as everyone adjusts their bets.

"Next up is a true Capitol favorite, with odds of 5-1, Mr. Carper Conch!"

Carper is the classic District 4 tribute, tall, muscular, and golden hair and skin from the salt and sun.

“Mr. Conch! How are you tonight?”

He cracks his knuckles loudly and the mics pick it up. I chuckle.

“Not great, sir. I’ve never been much of a crowds person.”

“Really! A handsome young man like you? Well, Carper, I can assure you that the Capitol views you as a crowds man. Isn’t that right, everyone?”

He smiles a bit, looking intrigued.

“Now, we know the Capitol likes you. But how have you been finding the Capitol? Any favorite moments so far?”

“It’s certainly very colorful. Everyone seems nice and all that. I think my favorite moment so far was after the parade, someone handed me a sort of popping drink? I’ve never had anything like it.”

“Ah, a popple, perhaps? One of my favorites, I will admit. You’re such a people person, you know that? I’m sure you’ve been discussing some alliances.”

“Eh, not yet. I mean, it sounds nice in theory, to have someone who has your back in the arena, but we’ll still have to eventually kill each other. The whole thing doesn’t make a ton of since, at least in my mind.”

I nod at him. I don’t get many people sharing that opinion often. “Indeed, you may be right. Any final thoughts as the games get closer and closer?”

“I’m actually pretty calm. Weird, right? It’s just the drawback before a tsunami, I’m sure. But to any sponsors: I believe in myself and you should believe in me too. Cheer for me, okay?”

“We’re all rooting for you, Carper. Mr. Conch, everyone!”

The Five interviews go fast, with nothing special. The girl tells a touching story about her and her soon-to-be wife, a marriage that, according to Jinx, will happen no matter what. Mercedes, the girl from Six, breaks down behind the stage and we skip ahead to Blake.”

“Now, Blake, what or who are you fighting for in these games? Anyone special back home?”

“My little sister, Emmie, and my girlfriend June. They’re my whole world and I’ll do anything to get back home to them.”

We run some commercials and I step behind the stage for a few moments to myself.

