

Boarding the bullet train to the Capitol is one of the most harrowing experiences I've ever endured, yet simultaneously one of the most exhilarating. I have awaited this moment with bated breath, truly, since the tender age of twelve.

I am what the Capitol, the envious denizens of the impoverished districts, and even some of District 1's own citizens refer to as a career. I stand at the pinnacle of my class, much like Delian, the other tribute from District 1. A career emerges victorious nearly every year. Most other tributes stand no chance—they are perpetually starving, frail, and untrained, whereas we are well-nourished, muscular, and adept in the use of any weapon to lethal effect.

The ragged yet verdant landscape rushes by as the train hurtles forward at an unprecedented speed. Remarkably, it is effortless to maintain my balance on the impeccably clean marble floor.

Delian reclines on the velvet bench, holding a glittering, rainbow-hued beverage.

"This... makes me feel odd. Too girlish. Would you like it?"

I shake my head, declining with grace. "No, thank you." Delian and I have known each other since our training commenced, which seems like the true beginning of our lives. He bears a striking resemblance to me, as do most of the men at home. He is exceptionally talented—the immense muscles that bulge from every part of his body are not merely a sign of brute strength. They aid him in all his endeavors, which invariably seem to encompass everything. Yet, I worry for him. I doubt he truly has a chance of winning. The sole reason he is here is that the real top of our class broke his arm and shoulder a few days ago. Lux is the quintessential District 1 male tribute—arrogant, confident, and proud, much like people describe me. I do not shy away from it. It is how we achieve victory after victory. But Delian... he is an adequate actor, yet I can discern that he does not wish to be here. The sponsors will recognize this as well.

He could triumph if he desired, if only he could overcome his aversion to killing. Should he manage that, he would indeed be formidable competition.

I am deep in thought when our escort and mentors make their entrance.

My mentor is a petite, slender woman named Ivory who triumphed approximately ten or eleven years ago. There have been few female victors recently. She would undoubtedly be a better mentor for Delian; after all, she won her games by lingering near the careers, "assisting" them with their kills while she surreptitiously poisoned them and eliminated the few remaining weak tributes. Delian's mentor, on the other hand, towers over me by a foot and appears even bulkier than he did in the 45th games. He wielded a massive spiked hammer, similar to Lux, and virtually bludgeoned every other tribute to death. I heard that viewership in the Capitol nearly declined due to its residents' queasiness at the sight of such brutality.

Delian could demolish a brick wall with a steak knife, but place a human

before it, and he suddenly becomes immobile.

Our escort follows swiftly, his shiny silver heels clacking against the cold tile. "Hello, hello, hello, tributes!"

Octavius's booming voice fills the room, and we turn to face the trio. I quickly adjust my expression to one of righteous composure and gesture for Delian to do the same. He finally rises behind me.

"Hello," I say politely. Delian follows suit, introducing us both.

"Well," Octavius begins, "We'll be at the Capitol by mid-morning. Much to discuss before we arrive, yes? Sit, sit."

I settle into a blue velvet chair, crossing my legs and waiting intently for the forthcoming discourse.

"So, upon our arrival at the Capitol, you will proceed directly to the junior stylists, though you two require minimal work from them." He glances at Delian and me, our golden hair neatly styled, our faces clean, and muscles toned. "Then to the real stylists, who will present you with the ensembles they have crafted for you. And let me assure you, only the finest stylists are permitted to work with the District 1 tributes." He wiggles his eyebrows excitedly.

"Then, following the parade, there will be three days of training, interviews, and finally, the Games!" he grins widely. The Games are the highlight of the year for the Capitol, with the winter victory tour as a close second. "I understand you two are the crème de la crème, yes?"

"Indeed," I affirm confidently, choosing not to divulge the true reason for Delian's presence instead of Lux. "They only send the best."

Ivory and Argent smile with a rare pride. Delian shifts uncomfortably.

I swear, this boy is going to be the death of me.

Octavius pontificates for hours about the importance of putting on a show and the critical nature of garnering sponsors, a subject with which we are already well-versed. I listen nonetheless, in case he shares any novel insights.

He does not.

Finally, he indicates two rooms on either side of the train. "You will wish to confer with your mentors, no? Then we shall dine."

Ivory moves swiftly, and the door behind her is nearly closed before I manage to enter the opulent train car. It is fascinating to witness where all the luxuries we produce end up.

Ivory has evidently been a Capitol favorite since her victory. Not necessarily for her methods, but certainly for her appearance.

"So..." she begins in a voice as velvety as our surroundings. "I conducted some research on you. As much as your district's and the Capitol's policies would permit. I acquired some basic details... 5'7, 125 pounds, weapon of choice is a sword. Intriguing."

"Poisoned swords, specifically. For engagements involving multiple opponents. Lacerate their major arteries with a fast-acting poison first, and you can decimate an entire crowd."

Ivory listens attentively and nods. "Ensure you elaborate on that in your showcase...but not to the other tributes. And if you are confident in that skill, demonstrate it during the training simulations, ensuring that it is observed. But only once."

"Right. My coaches advised me to hone every weapon and survival tactic in those final days."

"Precisely. While you perfect your skills, others merely begin."

We discuss training and interviews briefly, but we shall have more time in the coming days. As we are about to part ways to freshen up before dinner, I need to ask one more thing.

"Ivory... the career pack. I have been contemplating that the usual alliance might be weaker this year. In your research on me, I'm sure you noticed Lux? You know, enormous, burly, brutal Lux? He sustained injuries during some last-minute training. And Delian may be strong and skilled, but... I doubt he will kill when necessary."

Ivory gazes at me, expressionless.

"Am I mistaken? We cannot always rely on the twos either... they seem to harbor a perpetual dislike for us. I wish this whole 'career' arrangement was not set in stone."

She continues to stare, nearly perplexed.

"You fail to understand. You are in the most advantageous position imaginable. Look at yourself! Look at your origins. You are a career, Gleam. There are eight other tributes who would kill—and are about to attempt—to be in your position. You are stunning, you are strong, and you have just as much of a chance as Delian and those brats from Two. Understood?"

I glare up at her with a haughty edge, silently reminding her of the spectacle District 1 careers are expected to present. I can discern a weak point merely from conversing with her.

"I'll see you later." I rise and proceed to my own compartment of the train to take a hot shower.

We arrive at the Capitol by mid-morning the following day, precisely as Octavius stated. District 1 is relatively close to the Capitol, so we, along with Two, Nine, and Five, are the first to arrive. Tributes begin disembarking from their trains. A strawberry blond girl from Five with short, wavy hair glances at a tribute from Nine. But my gaze remains fixed on my fellow careers.

The two from District Two look strikingly similar—dark hair, muscular builds, and skin that would burn rather than tan. The boy is as tall as Lux, and the girl is considerably petite. They saunter up to us immediately. The girl, unaware that I have already observed them, shifts her annoyed smirk into a more convincing grin.

She extends her hand, not offering but rather forcing me to shake it.

"I'm Sylvie, and this is my district partner," she says, nodding at a boy who epitomizes the average District Two teenager.

"Ashton," he says, shaking hands with Delian, then switching to me.

They appear cheerful and amiable, but I know their sole purpose is to fortify the 'career pack.' These two would not hesitate to slit our throats the moment it suits them.

"My name is Delian Hearth, and this is my district partner Gleam Andia."

Ashton chuckles upon hearing this. "Delian and Gleam? We've heard much about you, Gleam, but scarcely anything about you, Delian. I expected... Lucky? Luxor? What was it again?"

Ashton and Sylvie undoubtedly know Lux's height, weight, skills, and academy scores, just as I know theirs. It is amusing how dull they believe we are.

"Lux."

Sylvie smirks. "Oh, yes. Lux. What happened to him?"

"Delian tested last minute... he outperformed Lux," I lie. The higher I can elevate Delian, the better.

She raises an eyebrow. "Fascinating."

This draws my attention to a fresh cut through her eyebrow, still red. Likely from some reckless, violent dare on reaping day.

I scrutinize her more closely, attempting to discern her objective in this conversation.

Up close, she is significantly shorter and covered in freckles.

"It's an intriguing group of us, isn't it? We watched all the reapings with

our mentors on the train. Only a few criers. Just two non-career volunteers."

She is malicious; I can tell from her demeanor. She will not struggle with the hurdle that Delian does.

Tributes from 1 and 2 adhere to distinct stereotypes. Careers from 1 are typically blonde and blue-eyed, with an accent that lies somewhere between Capitol and District. Twos, and the other districts, criticize us for the way we talk. They say it sounds stuck-up and too fancy, like we're pretending to be in the Capitol. We are polite and flirtatious, but as soon as that bell tolls, we are as formidable as our Roman-worshipping counterparts. Twos look more varied, but at this age, they are either in the mines, military, or academy. They are arrogant, placing pride above all else, but their looks and charisma make them perennial Capitol favorites.

"It will be a thrilling Games with all of us in the mix, won't it?" Delian smiles politely, concluding the conversation. The Twos saunter away.

I scrutinize Delian, wondering if I can surmount that hurdle. I swiftly decide that I can. I will be able to kill Sylvie and Ashton.

"We proceed to the stylists now, correct, Glean?"

I will be able to kill him, too.