Adorn

by ianlevitt

Summary

He was the privileged brat. She was the lackluster victor. When a curious dilemma puts them together, will they realize how greatly they adorn one another before it's too late? (To feature majority of the HG characters.)

Notes

So, I really didn't want to have two fics running at once, but I just have to! I fell in love with Hayffie after watching Mockingjay Pt. 1—yes, I'm late, but at least I'm on the ride—and this idea came to mind! It's not necessarily a role reversal, but it is AU. That said, it's still set in Panem, with the Games and Katniss and Peeta and all of that goodness! You can check out what I have in store for this story and/or graphics and such on tumblr at 'ianlevitt'.

For this tale, Haymitch is about 23, and Effie is 21. He's a 'Capitol Boy' and she's a 'District Girl' and...you see where this is going. I recently watched "White Men Can't Jump" starring Woody Harrelson, and I think that's what Haymitch looks like in this story, for those of you who can't picture a younger Mr. Abernathy XD

Without further ado, the prologue~
Embarrassment.

That should've been his son's name.

Not Embarrassment Jr., or Embarrassment Abernathy—simply mononymous. Because that is precisely what Mr. Abernathy felt whenever he took his son out in public, and, on several occasions, his son had responded to the name better than he did his government name.

Evidently, this behavior could only be attributed to the fact that Haymitch Abernathy took everything as a joke, whether he was drunk or not, and he was the former much too often for his father's liking. Aaron Abernathy had worked his way up the social ladder in the Capitol all his life just to score the position of Head Gamemaker; he hadn't counted on his son threatening to screw it all up at first glance.

Aaron had made the mistake of pressuring his son into attending a celebratory party, two months prior to the next Games. Haymitch didn't particularly enjoy festivities that weren't related to sports, especially when he was forced into showing up at venues. The last thing Aaron needed was to have Haymitch stumble into the party, tipsy with the intention of becoming all the way drunk; alas, Aaron's actions warranted no better.

If only he'd washed his hands of Embarrassment when he'd had the chance. The child was meant to grow out of it. The tantrums at five years old turned into the experimentation with dangerous substances as a teenager, which evolved into the loose, drunken fool that had earned the reputation of the Capitol's Finest Idiot in the modern day.

Aaron excused himself from his conversation with his colleagues when he spotted Haymitch off in a corner, chatting up a pair of Avoxes. The older Abernathy neared his son with his signature smile, adjusting his cuff links and shooting pleasant glances at people who passed by and wished him good luck on his first Games. As he halted a couple of feet away from Haymitch, Aaron overheard his son's conversation with the two undeserving young men.

"I wish we were all Avoxes." Haymitch paused, holding up a finger on his free hand as if he was about to puke. He belched instead, and he beat on his chest with his fist for a moment or two afterwards. Haymitch couldn't have noticed his father's presence, and, should he have, he paid him no mind, anyhow. In lieu, the 20-something regained his grip on the glass that was threatening to slide away and crash to the ground. He held it out to the Avox closest to him, and, wordlessly, the other man filled the glass halfway. Haymitch paid no mind to that, either, as he continued. "'Cause you don't have to talk and everything, but you can still play ball and drink." Perhaps for the purpose of emphasizing his point, he took that opportunity to throw back his fresh shot and request another. Haymitch met the Avox's irate gaze, nodding to the glass. "Want some?"

Having had enough, Aaron balled up his fists and opened his mouth to speak. As if on cue, another's hand latched onto his shoulder and averted his attention, causing the words to die from his lips. "President Snow." And just like that, Aaron's eyes were no longer kneaded, and his faux beam had returned.

"Mr. Abernathy." The president paid him back in kind with a grin of his own. "May I speak with you for a moment?"

Instinctively, Aaron looked back to where Haymitch had been, only to find that several people had joined his son and that it'd be inappropriate to both interrupt Haymitch's conversation and to
deny President Snow's request.

"Of course, sir."

The elder man whisked Aaron off to the punch bowl, where they both greeted a few of their colleagues before President Snow addressed the topic on his mind. "Your son, Mr. Abernathy—Haymitch, is it?"

Anxiously, Aaron stared ahead, refusing to make eye contact with the other man. His soulless stare instead bore into the corner where Haymitch was. *If this kid ruins this for me, I swear.* "Yes, President Snow."

"He's not necessarily normal, now is he?" The president said this with a forced chuckle, and it stung Aaron in the worst of ways. It felt like not only an assault on his parenting but on him as a person. What if Haymitch's behavior somehow proved to Snow that Mr. Abernathy wasn't capable of performing well at his job? Briskly, Aaron shook his head, and President Snow went on. "That's not always a bad thing. Abnormality, that is. I believe that, when fostered in the right respect, he can be his own individual while maintaining his status as a Capitol representative. Don't you think?"

Hesitantly, Aaron nodded, his breath hitching in his throat.

"Good. I'll get right to it, then. Seneca Crane is missing."

Aaron arched his dark brows, recalling the last time he'd spoken to Crane, a few months prior. Crane had congratulated the man on his new assignment, and they'd exchanged a few words. Mr. Abernathy had an uncanny moment of sympathy, but it was fleeting. He asked no further questions on the matter. Disappearances, death—if he lost his wits at the mention of every one, he wouldn't be a very good Gamemaker.

President Snow set down his glass and clasped his hands before him. "I was surprised myself, Mr. Abernathy. As you know, he was District 12's escort for four wonderful years." Yes, and in the fourth year, Mr. Abernathy remembered, Crane had made the foolish mistake of crying when his estranged nephew was reaped, and he'd read his name from the card in a quivering voice. After Crane's nephew was brutally murdered on day 2 of the games, Crane refused to participate in an interview with Caesar Flickerman until the Games were over. On the fateful day when he'd agreed to sit down with Caesar, he'd burst into tears, and no one had seen him nor asked for him since. Aaron wasn't sure if the president believed him to be a blubbering fool, or if the other simply utilized the word 'missing' as a code word. "Now, I'm afraid, we're trying our best to get ahold of him—." All right, so Snow honestly did think his Head Gamemaker was as much of an idiot as his son. "But we need a replacement for the next Games, just in case. I'm formally offering the position to your son, should you oblige. I find that it may boost his nationalism."

Mr. Abernathy sipped quietly on his punch, looking everywhere except for at the president.

---

58th Hunger Games

The little blonde-haired boy sat crisscrossed in front of the screen in the living room. His father was busy paying attention to his files, but he glanced up whenever a cannon went off. In lieu, his son's gaze seldom left the screen, for he feared that he might miss something. However, Haymitch didn't watch the Games with enjoyment or excitement or anything of the like. There was pure, unadulterated bewilderment in his eyes.

Once Haymitch had fallen asleep on the sofa, Aaron assumed his normal routine of picking his
son up and depositing him in his bedroom. When Haymitch was younger, putting him to bed was much easier. Now that he was so hyperactive and he slept a lot lighter, Haymitch often woke up whenever his father tried to put him to rest. Tonight was no different.

As Aaron tucked Haymitch beneath the sheets, Haymitch studied him as if he were looking for something to say. Taking note, Aaron sat languidly on the edge of his son's bed. "What is it, Mitch?"

Haymitch furrowed his brows, pursing his lips. "Why do they let kids hurt each other, Papa?"

Aaron sighed, shaking his head. He ran his calloused fingers through Haymitch's hair. "You've learned about the Rebellion, son. I don't understand why that question continuously comes up."

Haymitch shrugged, and he debated speaking for a moment until he simply said whatever came to mind. "I don't think it's very nice, that's all."

"Don't talk like that." Aaron was visibly less calm. His tone was stern. The man stood and headed for the door, but he glanced back and gave his son a look of contempt. "They're hurting each other because they hurt us. You fight a man when he hurts you. The rebels ruined this government once, mister. Don't you think we should retaliate?"

Afraid to disagree, Haymitch nodded numbly, shutting his eyes. They opened again when the door closed loudly behind his father, and he shot up in bed, reflecting on what he'd learned in school in comparison to the Games he saw annually.

"It's a wonderful idea, sir. I'm positive that he'll be honored." Aaron was very well aware that he was lying through his teeth. He simply hoped that the president didn't know him well enough to point it out.

President Snow smiled crookedly. "Yes, Aaron. He'll be thrilled, won't he?"

At that moment, a group of reporters came by to snap photographs of the Gamemaker and the president conversing. The former was glad for the interjection. Aaron had experienced Haymitch's wavering loyalty to the Capitol firsthand, and he was convinced that he'd require a lot of alcohol to get through the argument that would ensue when they got home.

After all, Embarrassment was never thrilled with his father, or Panem.

"Effie, open up! I've got your monthly stash of sweet cakes." Effie registered the voice of Peeta Mellark just as she was pinning her long blonde locks up. Normally, she met him at the front door; alas, today she was a couple of seconds off schedule, which would certainly not do in the future.

Why did he think it was acceptable to announce her dirty secret to the world? Everyone knew enough about her as it was.

Effie ran another hand over her head before she opened the door with a bright grin—it contrasted her dull, grey outfit perfectly. "Please, Peeta. Don't say it too loudly."

"Ah, all right. EFFIE ORDERED SWEET CA—!"

Against her better judgment, Effie narrowed her eyes. "Ssh! And give those here." She snatched the box of pastries from him and handed him his payment. The blonde calmed down quickly, and she smiled at him, her cheeks reddening from bashful embarrassment. She noted his distinct laughter. "I'm sorry, Peeta."
"No biggie, Effs." Peeta shrugged nonchalantly. Who could blame a victor for how he or she chose to deal with his or her nightmares and survivor's guilt? Other people turned to liquor, or pledged allegiance to the Capitol. Effie happened to find refuge in manners and treats. Besides, she rarely imposed herself on the townsfolk, although they wished to see their only victor more often. Effie had remained cooped up in her home—the lone house in Victors' Village—for seven years now. She had a handful of acquaintances; yet, Peeta was the only person she could honestly call her friend. Seneca Crane hadn't phoned her in months, and she assumed that he'd left her, like everyone else in her life. She wasn't looking forward to seeing him at the next Reaping. Then again, she wasn't anticipating the event itself.

"Would you like to come in?" Effie's offer was one of those that people weren't meant to accept; she only did it for the sake of politeness. Peeta had known her long enough to determine when Effie genuinely desired company.

"No, thanks. See you around." With a slight wave, he spun on his heel and retreated the way he'd come, the strings of his apron trailing behind him.

Effie locked herself back up, and she removed the light touches of makeup that she'd applied to meet Peeta. She released her hair from its prison, allowing it to cascade across her shoulders, and she curled up in front of the coffee table, forgetting everything temporarily with bits of sweet cake in her cheeks.
Chapter 2

Hold your fork in your left hand, tines downward.

At a formal dinner, the meat is removed from birds with a fork and a knife. No fingers are used.

Unfold your napkin in one smooth motion without "snapping" or "shaking" it open.

Breathe in. Breathe out. Repeat.

This is what kept her sane. There were things that the arena didn't have a hint of, and that included etiquette. No one killed kindly; they simply killed. She killed. Five years later, she couldn't bring herself to put it in the past tense. She hadn't left that arena.

She was still apart of the Games.

She was still expected to turn up at the Reaping.

She was still meant to send two cowering, undeserving children to their deaths.

She was still going to see Seneca Crane today.

Effie halted, leaning over with her palms flattened on her knees. She took a few deep breaths; her head shot up when she heard the crunching of leaves beneath what she presumed were boots. Fear was the first emotion that enveloped Effie in its dark grasp, and she stumbled further into the woods, trapping herself in the midst of a couple of trees. Peacekeepers didn't normally come into the woods, and the residents of District 12 usually didn't dare, either. Thus, Effie had chosen the area as her personal track, to walk or run on every morning, depending on her mood. Never before had she been interrupted this early in the morning by the presence of anyone else.

She briefly wondered if she'd been under surveillance of some kind ever since her Games ended. Then, Effie concluded that it was a dumb thing to think about because of course the Capitol was watching her. Her home was bugged in the most amateur manner, and she did her best to pretend that the minuscule audio and video devices weren't planted in obvious places around her home because she wasn't exactly yearning for an expert monitoring system. No, the question wasn't "if"—it was, more so, "to what extent?".

Effie heavily doubted that she could stay cramped between the trees for much longer, and, had anyone truly wished to detain her, they could've had her by now. She wasted no time stealthily poking her head into the crevice that an assortment of branches allotted. The 21-year old discerned two figures: a girl and a boy, both donning the worn garbs of the poorest district's peasants. A sigh of relief escaped her. Effie had half a mind to berate them but, upon witnessing one of them shoot a bird with what she assumed was a bow-and-arrow, she came to terms with just how ludicrous that idea sounded.

That morning, Effie ended her walk a half hour early.

Chaff unceremoniously dumped a glass of wine onto his longtime friend's face, holding back his laughter and capitalizing on the authority when Haymitch spluttered to life. In lieu of hopping up and chastising his friend, like a normal person would, Haymitch blinked and lapped up as much of
the liquor as he could, gliding his tongue around his mouth. Chaff winced in disgust, and the humor vanished from his countenance.

"What's your problem, sweetheart?" Haymitch grumbled, sitting up and noting the sharp pain in his back. Apparently, Chaff had made him sleep on the couch again. Their domesticity honestly worried Haymitch at times.

"Your father sent me here to keep an eye on you and make sure that you're doing what you're meant to be doing, yes?" Chaff inquired, slamming the glass onto the coffee table that Haymitch had rested his feet on the edge of.

"Don't ask me. Ask him." The blonde man scoffed, stretching before he finally registered the solemnity of his best friend's glare. A groan escaped his lips. "I recommended that Dad enlist you and not anyone else because I figured you'd let me do anything I'd like, as a true friend would." He spat the words out a tad harsher than he'd intended. With the intentional lack of alcohol served on the train, however, what else could one anticipate?

"See, that's where you're wrong." Chaff rolled his eyes and tossed Haymitch a set of clean clothes. "A real friend makes certain that you don't fall flat on your face and get into major crap with your dad. Get up and get dressed."

Haymitch narrowed his light blue eyes at Chaff's retreating back. This was why they were friends. In grade school, Chaff hadn't kissed up to Haymitch simply because his father worked for the government. This was partially attributed to the fact that both of Chaff's parents were minor government officials until Chaff's mother ditched her family to start a new life with a young victor in District 1, eight years ago. The pair was doomed to become lifelong pals, as they liked to say.

"You're not my mother," Haymitch shouted back, halfheartedly. Chaff didn't dignify him with a response.

Haymitch shoved his clothes aside, kneeling on the sofa to get a better glimpse of the world streaming by out of the window. He quickly comprehended that buildings were no longer zooming by, and the train had stopped. "Chaff." Haymitch's voice was leveled; yet, there was a tinge of alarm to his tone.

"What is it, Mitch?"

"Why are we in the middle of butt-fuck Nowhere?"

Effie loathed the Capitol and everything it stood for. Although she didn't dare say it as a precaution for her life, which she still cared for in the most insignificant of ways, there was no question that she despised the place nearly as much as she did the people in it. The memories were bad.

But the dresses were nice.

Effie Trinket had always dreamed of wearing a gaudy, white wedding dress as she strolled down the aisle of her lavish wedding venue. Her father, Cassius, promised her that he'd pay for it all himself, as long as she was the one who picked her husband. In all honesty, it had nothing to do with the husband.

They'd laughed about it, and, in spite of the fact that she mentioned it often, Effie seldom expected her family to have the means to afford something even close to resembling the wedding she wanted. In fits of cognitive dissonance, Effie constantly reminded herself that such ceremonies
were for Capitol people, anyhow. She should be satisfied with a toasting.

The impossibility of her desires became a harsher reality when Effie's father was killed in a mining incident. She was fourteen. Shortly after, Effie felt compelled to acquire a job of her own at the local bakery, owned by the Mellark family.

A year and some change later, Effie was finally able to afford the wedding and whatever else her heart craved after she was crowned victor of the 69th Hunger Games. She returned home to find out that her mother had suffered from a fatal stroke when mutts had attacked Effie less than a week into the Games. Seneca Crane had also been "promoted" to her district's escort, and, to top it all off, the boutique that held her dream wedding gown had closed its doors.

A draped bodice, with a custom illusion neckline. A silk veil. A thin, black line running across her —

"Ouch!" Effie whined, feeling a needle pinch the sensitive area near her spine. She regretted her actions directly afterwards, and she opened her mouth to apologize.

Without even looking up, Portia clicked her tongue in disapproval and interjected. "No pain, no gain, darling." She quirked her brow, gazing up at the woman as she readjusted the bow on Effie's blouse. "I came over here to show you the tributes' proposed designs for this year, and you have me working on your own aesthetics." Effie blushed, smiling at the hint of amusement in her friend's voice.

"You're right. I apologize." Effie chuckled, shaking her head.

Yes, she hated the Capitol, but she loved their apparel. And their stylists.

Seneca Crane hadn't bothered to stop by Effie's mansion prior to the Reaping. She was positive that there was something deathly wrong, considering that he had no reason to avoid her at this point. They'd be spending the next couple of weeks in one another's presence, anyhow. Effie had an inkling that he was in trouble for his actions during the last Reaping. The consequences were palpable to her, but Effie would rather focus on remaining ignorant, just this once. Perhaps Seneca had grown bored of their fleeting bouts of companionship. For the first time in her life, Effie found herself hoping desperately that someone had abandoned her.

It was better than the alternative in this situation.

Effie was more of a bundle of nerves than normal when she took her seat before the dull-faced citizens of her hometown. They were pigs freshly prepared for slaughter, and she felt the fury rising into her core. No child should have to endure what she'd gone through. No man, woman, or child, for that matter.

As she scanned their blank countenances, Effie chewed discreetly on her lower lip. This was why she needed her friend here. Seneca didn't take enjoyment out of this; he'd made it known, and they'd grown close because of it, and he'd died for—

No, there was a possibility that he hadn't. He could still be alive. He could still warrant a tongue-lashing for turning up later than usual to the Reaping.

Effie held onto hope, as imprudent of her as it was. She tried her hardest not to meet the wandering stares of the young children waiting to mourn one of their own or be mourned themselves. They were all waiting with bated breath. It merely wasn't the good kind.

When the brat from the Capitol stepped onto the stage, sporting an outfit that didn't consist of
loose-fitting clothes for once, Effie knew.

She knew that she had one friend left in the world.

Composure.

Effie maintained her composure throughout the idiot's pitifully slurred introduction, throughout the propaganda film, and almost throughout the naming of the male tribute.

"Peeta Mellark," Haymitch exclaimed, in the gruffest of tones. Effie had never abhorred the man or his voice as much as she had in that moment. His tone wasn't excited, per say. It was almost nonchalant, which seemed, for whatever reason, invariably worse than exhilaration. Effie desired nothing more than to witness Haymitch cry onstage, as Seneca had. To see the Capitol make a Gamemaker and his son vanquish from the earth with no questions asked would be a feat that she'd celebrate.

Effie's attentions settled on Peeta as he marched up to the stage, his head held high. He attempted to make eye contact with Effie. She couldn't bring herself to see the innocent trepidation hidden in his composed mask.

Composure.

Seven years of friendship, and she was going to lead him to his death. His family had given her the only paying job she'd ever had. The luck of the draw could be a real bitch sometimes. Effie gripped the edges of her chair until her knuckles turned white.

COMPOSURE.

And then the female tribute was called, and a teen with a familiar braid volunteered in her place. Effie cleared her throat, figuring that they were sisters. This is what the Capitol did. They tore families apart. Effie resisted saluting Katniss with the rest of the district because she didn't want to have a bullet lodged in her neck. Instead, she shot a pointed look in the direction of her new escort. Haymitch didn't reward her with so much as a backwards glance. Why should he?

This is, after all, what he stood for.

Unlike Effie, Haymitch refused to permit the Peacekeepers to manhandle him on their joinery to the train that would be shuttling them to the Capitol. After all, he'd behaved enough for one day. The young man figured that cooperating meant that they'd return to the Capitol soon, and that's where the hard liquor was. As long as he didn't land on television for puking on another Peacekeeper in public, Haymitch reasoned that he could have his natural way of life back in no time. District 12 would get an official escort for the next Games, and he'd mooch off of his father for the rest of his life, as he'd always planned.

Thinking about it was a tease in itself.

As Haymitch and his flanking Peacekeepers neared the train, he glanced back and spotted Effie. She hadn't fawned over him yet, even in a subtle manner, and that worried Haymitch. Typically, women couldn't resist him. She appeared to be passive at best and infuriated by his presence at worst. Or, more likely, Effie pined for men in a different way. It must be lonely for her, being the only victor and all. She probably didn't see gorgeous men like him too often. Without processing his actions, he winked at her and only tore his gaze away when Chaff intercepted him.

"What are you doing, man?" Haymitch hissed, under his breath. "Get on the freaking train. We have to get back to the Capitol, as soon as possible. These tributes need train—."
Chaff's hearty laugh bemused Haymitch for a brief period. "Don't bullshit me, Abernathy. We both know you want to get back to the girls and the alcohol."

"Mainly the latter," Haymitch confirmed, unabashedly, "but the girls are nice, too. Seriously, why aren't you on the train already? My tributes are coming any minute now."

"I can't come with you, man." Chaff shrugged, awkwardly rubbing the back of his neck. "Peacekeepers' orders. I'm taking the regular train home."

As if on cue, Effie came up beside them and spun around to hug a woman who was, undoubtedly, a Capitol citizen. Haymitch didn't recall his and Chaff's train harboring refugees. He exchanged looks with the other man, and, though they said nothing, they made a silent agreement to listen in on the women's conversation.

"Thank you for finally critiquing our designs, dear." Portia chirped, pecking Effie on both cheeks. Effie beamed, truly beamed, and the men apprehended how vibrant she could be if she put forth some effort every now and then. "You're welcome, Portia. Thank you for helping me with my wardrobe for this Games." She visibly faltered under the watchful eye of the surrounding Peacekeepers. "Please, have a safe trip home, and tell the new stylist—Cinna, right?—that I adore his work."

"Will do." An air kiss or two later, and Portia scurried off.

Haymitch snorted, nudging Chaff in the abdomen. "Women." He said it a tad too loud, and Effie made a point of stepping over to him and tilting her chin upwards. It unnerved him to no avail.

"Excuse me, Mr. Abernathy. Were you speaking to me?" The crispness of her tone felt mocking somehow. Haymitch told himself that his tributes would be finished with their farewells soon enough, and, thus, he shouldn't go messing things up simply because 12's mentor decided that she wanted to be a bitch. He liked her better with her mouth shut.

"As a matter of fact, I was." Haymitch rose to the challenge. It was an impromptu move, of course, for he couldn't plan what he'd wear in the mornings, much less a comeback. "Hello, princess." Haymitch said whimsically, with his most charming expression. If she could resist that, then she was an entirely new breed of bitch.

Haymitch swore that he'd broken her down when she averted her focus to Chaff. No such luck. "Please, refrain from the name-calling, Mr. Abernathy. It's a pleasure to have you on the District 12 team." With that, the mentor boarded the train, leaving Haymitch dumbfounded in her wake. She clearly hadn't meant the last bit. It was a formality.

How could she detest someone that she barely even knew? "Did you see that?"

"Mhm. Pitiful or pathetic: which one has the stronger connotation?" Chaff sniggered, which earned him a moderately rough punch in the chest from his best friend.

"You saw how uptight she was."

"District women are feisty." Chaff paused. Then, he waggled his brows. "Trust me, man—you want feisty."

That brought a genuine smile to Haymitch's face. He wrapped his friend in a bear hug and sent him on his way.
Upon entering the train, Haymitch registered Effie's lithe figure removing the bottles and glasses of wine from the table in the dining area.

*This is going to be a long voyage home.*

Chapter End Notes

All of the etiquette rules were borrowed from etiquettescholar!

Remember— You can track this story/contact me on Tumblr at 'ianlevitt'!
Katniss and Peeta were more well-behaved than any victors she'd gotten thus far, Effie decided. Not that manners were essential in bloodbaths—it was simply common sense that children lacking respectability weren't likely to listen to her nagging, which more or less doomed them in the arena. Yes, she mused, scrutinizing them from the corner of her eye as they feasted, *they have potential*. For once, Effie wouldn't give up on her tributes before they were out of a five mile radius of District 12.

Effie had taken the children into the living area to eat dinner; it was a rare occasion when she broke her own rules, yet it was custom for the tributes and their escort and mentor to watch the reapings on television. Haymitch's absence did not go unnoticed. She had half a mind to rush off and reprimand him, but she couldn't think of a polite manner in which she might do so. Her thoughts were plagued by the innocent faces of the younger children in particular soon enough.

For years, she'd been a spectator on the sidelines of the Games, crossing her fingers and rooting for her respective tributes, at the age of five; going into the Games and slaughtering beings whose ghosts still haunted her, at sixteen; and sending the same tributes she'd once believed in to their premature deaths, ever since she'd turned seventeen.

To think of any person having to live through the horrors of the Games as she did, especially Peeta Mellark, was heart-wrenching. Regardless of whether he survived the Games or met his demise, he would never be the same again. The losers died to the background noise of enthused clapping, and the winners...they lost themselves during the spectacular event. There was no victor. There was no victory. There was merely a hollowed shell of someone who'd once lived.

Guilty. Why did she have to feel so guilty all of the time? Hell, it wasn't like she'd started the Games or pulled names. No, that was the Capitol; that was Haymitch and his father. She was the good guy, despite how many kids died on her watch, no matter the amount of blood puddled onto her fists—.

"Five cookies says Haymitch is nursing a bottle of scotch right now," Katniss chirped, smirking over at Peeta.

Appalled, although she would've made the bet herself, Effie chastised the young woman accordingly. "We do not gamble, Ms. Everdeen. And when we do, it is impolite to bet with food, of all things."

"Why not? A hunk of meat in 12 is probably equivalent to half a designer sock in the Capitol, *Ms. Trinket*." The formality of the name was not lost on Effie. It was proper, and Katniss surely didn't sense that anything was amiss. Nonetheless, Effie had reluctantly given Peeta the right to address her by her first name again months after her addiction with his father's bakery began. After all, underage or not, Peeta spent a sufficient amount of time keeping her company to be considered a friend.

Her face fell. No one. She had no one. Had she ever?

Peeta returned his focus to Katniss, who was sitting on the couch at the opposite end of the room. "I say it's whiskey. You're on."
Effie persisted, resisting the urge to roll her eyes. "There's a substantial amount of food on this train, children, and there are cooks for a reason. Honestly, you don't have to fight each other over desert. That's not what the Hunger Games is about—excuse the misleading title." This elicited modest laughs from her companions, and Effie quirked a brow.

If the odds were in their favor this year, only one of them would be coming back to 12 with her. And, as selfish as it seemed, Effie already knew that she needed to bring Peeta home. She couldn't face his family or let them know that she'd caused his death by not mentoring him well. Truthfully, what was the purpose of mentors? All they ever advised was to stay alive and to kill, for they weren't given a heads up on even the theme of the arena prior to the Games. Effie was helpless, and she was hopeless, but she'd be damned if she didn't get the boy home safely. She was determined, above all, and that had to be worth something.

The sound of awkwardly shuffling feet stole the attention of all three of the room's occupants, and they found a drunken Haymitch hobbling into the room. He was pale, and his eyes are glazed over. The man managed to settle himself against the doorframe as if nothing was wrong, except he was hugging it more than he was leaning into it.

His steely blues scanned the room, and he shut his eyes. "When am I gonna get my food?" Haymitch's whining was uncanny, to put it nicely. Within moments, he was keeled over, vomiting and collapsing into his own puke. Varying noises of disgust were heard from the other three people, and Peeta shot to his feet.

The sixteen-year old scurried to Haymitch's side and picked up his arm by the soaked sleeve, before he let it fall back into the puddle with a splashing sound. "I, uh, I'll clean him up, girls." Effie didn't bother to correct his misuse of the word 'girl' in relation to her. Peeta leaned in and sniffed the unconscious man beneath him. He had a grin on his face when he met Katniss's gaze. "That's definitely whiskey."

One moment, he was complaining to Chaff on the phone, and the next, he was getting tucked into bed by one of his tributes. Haymitch glared up at Peeta as their eyes met. The Capitol boy didn't do gratitude, and he made it evident "Listen here, Perry—."

"It's Peeta."

Haymitch sat up, wincing at the pain he felt in his spine. "Peter, Perry, same thing, as long as they picked a peck of pickled peppers, am I right?" He dismissed his own inquiry. "No, I am right; I don't need your confirmation. Philippe, the point is, whatever transpired here tonight is punishable by law—."

"Are you suggesting—?"

"—and I currently feel violated—."

"—that I took advantage of you?"

Haymitch tossed his hands up in mock-surrender. "It's not the first time people have heard of it. I get it. You're from a small district, and all of the guys are obsessed with having families of their own, and you don't know how to express your sexuality. So, you know about the Capitol and the way we do things, and I come along—."

The man's sentence came to an abrupt halt when Peeta's fist collided with his nose, then his eye, and, finally, his cheek. Haymitch flailed around and attempted to fight back, but Peeta stepped out
of his proximity. Haymitch was still inebriated to an extent that only sleep could heal, and he wasn't going to take the chance of falling to the ground whilst he tried to tackle a dingy district kid. As he clutched his swiftly swelling eye and curled into his headboard, one thought brought him solace: *This guy will be dead by next week.* Haymitch and karma hadn't always gotten along; yet, when they did, they were unstoppable.

Karma fixed everything that Aaron couldn't, and there were few dilemmas that Mr. Abernathy wasn't able to tweak for his son. Peeta opened the door, and he faced Haymitch for a moment. "Nothing happened. I like girls, for starters. You came into the living car and you demanded food. Then, you threw up and passed out, and I took the liberty of bathing you so that Effie didn't have to, and I figured that I couldn't leave you in the tub all night. That's how you woke up to my face. Don't assume next time because you're not much of a catch, anyways."

With that, he left Haymitch in stunned silence.

Peeta's shrill scream was, hopefully, muffled by the padding on the walls. He'd gone to his living quarters and found Effie Trinket there, standing beside his bed with her hands clasped in front of her. That is, until he overreacted. Her hands then traveled to her heart. The boy tentatively closed the door behind him, and he eyed her curiously.

Effie hadn't planned on intruding. It went against everything she stood for now. There was no other way to get Peeta alone, though. "Sorry for frightening you, dear," she apologized, making a beeline for the door. "I wanted to ask you if you'd like me to bake some fresh cookies for you. I know that Katniss, more likely than not, brought you stale ones." She casually flipped her hair over her shoulder and glanced at him. A glint of urge marred her gorgeous orbs, and Peeta recognized it almost immediately.

"You're right." No, she wasn't. "I'd love some, actually." Peeta was still utterly bemused; he followed her in spite of that. Some layer of trust remained between them.

They wound up in the kitchen, and Effie pulled a pan of cookies from the oven. "I baked them while you were busy with Haymitch," she explained. "You were taking awhile, and I grew bored."

This meeting wasn't about midnight snacks in the least, and they were both aware of it. Peeta played along, like the good sport that he was. Effie had taken him to the kitchen because it was one of the places on the train that wasn't bugged excessively. She surmised that surveillance wasn't too necessary in the kitchens, as Avoxes were normally the ones working in them.

Peeta hoisted himself onto the countertop, and his narrowed eyes extinguished any comment from Effie. He took a bite of a cookie. His only feedback was, "oatmeal".

Effie looked from side-to-side a couple of times and moved closer to him, until she was leaning with her back pressed into the edge of the counter. "I'm so sorry." Her voice cracked unexpectedly, and she felt self-conscious about it at first. Nevertheless, Peeta's hand found its way to her shoulder, and waves of comfort shot through her. She stared pointedly at him. "I'm bringing you back to 12, Peeta. You're not dying."

He retracted his palm and inhaled deeply, his eyes shut. "It's not up to you."

Effie was relentless. She wasn't giving him up without a fight. She wasn't delivering his casket to his parents alongside a slob like Abernathy. "I will charm every sponsor, I will kiss every rear end, I will lose all of my dignity to get you into that bakery again." There was an urge to run her
fingers through his hair to relax him, as a mother would her baby boy.

Peeta hopped down from the countertop and deposited his empty plate in the sink. "Thanks for the cookies, Ms. Trinket," he said, loudly. Then, he leaned in to hug her and whispered, "Do the same for Katniss, Effs." Apparently, the whole formality thing was an act. Overjoyed, Effie held him there for a moment and nodded. She released him and nudged him out of the kitchen, shutting off the lights as they exited.

Peeta was right, of course. Katniss deserved just as much of a chance to live as anyone. The fact that her friend was accustomed to this notion of fairness, however, scared Effie half to death. Nothing was ever fair in Panem, and he'd have to learn that the hard way. Teaching could only do so much, and, rumor had it, learning came from experience.

The pair exchanged biddings of good night at Peeta's door. Inquisitive as ever, Effie posed the important question of the night. "How were the cookies?"

Peeta rolled his eyes, the corners of his mouth twisting upward. "Delicious, Ms. Trinket." He entered his bedroom and Effie smiled to herself, turning on her heel and bumping right into a masculine figure.

Per usual, Effie was the first to apologize, although she wasn't at fault. She arched her brows at Haymitch, who, predictably, offered nothing of the like. He was scowling down at her, and she refused to resort to his level. Effie noted that he smelled a lot nicer than he had earlier. His clothes weren't tainted with the stench of liquor, and neither was he. And he had these outlandish, purple bruises adorning his features.

At least he looked like the brute he was. Pride swelled in Effie at the possibility of Peeta having done this to her arch nemesis.

Never a girl to hold a grudge, externally, Effie grabbed him by the forearm. "Let's get you cleaned up."

All Haymitch had ventured to the kitchen for was a drink. What he'd received was much more than he bargained for: the disturbing image of Effie escorting Phillip to his room. It didn't sit right with him. Why were they awake at this hour? He'd seriously thought about ignoring them and pressing with his plan, but his bewilderment took over. Perhaps he should've slipped past Trinket and lover boy. That way, he wouldn't be lying on a sofa with Trinket aggressively applying dry ice to his face. He might as well be frozen. To think, he could've downed half of the whiskey stash by now!

Effie perched herself on the edge of the sofa to take a break, setting the bag of ice in her lap, and Haymitch couldn't tear his focus away from her, despite his desperate efforts. It was taboo to become infatuated with someone from the districts, and it was taboo to the second power to have said person be a complete bitch that he was positive he loathed with every bit of his heart. Except the edges. Haymitch excused his admiration through an exquisite practice of cognitive dissonance. He was a man, and, regardless of Effie's personality, she was attractive. Lust and contempt were a normal mixture in circumstances like these. Escorts and mentors, superheroes and villains, cops and robbers—they were bound to harbor attraction, though nothing more than affection.

"Why are you gawking at me?" Haymitch registered the amusement on Effie's face, and he grimaced. Whatever he'd felt was gone.

"Why are you having an inappropriate relationship with a tribute?" He retorted, sitting up to face
her at a better angle. She was too reserved for him to detect anything from her reaction.

"How dare you." Her voice was low, deadly. "I would never."

"Then, what'd I see back there?"

"It's none of your business." Her words were biting, and Haymitch realized that she was taking this to heart and preparing to step onto her soapbox, so he made the wise choice to remain silent. "Worry about your job before you criticize mine. You are an insensitive, undeserving brat, and you will never grow into your manhood. Seneca Crane was a martyr. He was a man that died because he believed in something, and all you seem to have faith in is your daddy and your daddy's connections. For the record, I'm not screwing Peeta Mellark. I apologize if you have to go and report to your daddy that you've given him false information."

She tossed the ice bag at him, and, instead of getting discouraged, Haymitch stood and trailed her, egging her on. "Seneca Crane was a rebel. People like him are the reason we have the Games, and the Games are good." He didn't trust that for one second, but he'd had it beaten into him often over the years. Anytime he came close to muttering something remotely rude regarding the government, Haymitch had the tendency to check that his father wasn't around, with a massive switch in his left fist. "Besides, my father's going to do us one good and give you a major shot at having another victor to complain with," he concluded, proudly.

Effie paused at the entrance to the dining car and spun around to face him. She wasn't angry. Her gaze was gentle, and he could've sworn that she felt bad for him. It pissed him off. She shook her head, smiling in the saddest way imaginable. Effie raised her hand to his cheek, and he stepped away from her. She didn't grow frustrated. In lieu, she allowed her hand to fall to her side.

"How does it feel to be daddy's angel? Fair warning: he has to get rid of your tributes first."

The stick of blonde hair marched off.

There was no telling how long he stood there afterward, seething, replaying the events of the past few minutes in his mind, and contemplating comebacks that were now futile in nature. She was right, and he'd been foolish to even assume that his father would show him favor. Should Aaron make a decent impression, he needed to show the exact opposite to his own blood, to show that the Games were first in his life. A nine hundred pound weight collapsed onto Haymitch's shoulders, and they sagged pitifully. Of course.

Effie Trinket was the bane of his existence. And his father was reemerging as his moral enemy.

Chapter End Notes

This was meant to be longer, and it wasn't even supposed to turn out this way, but it's 1 AM and I'm exhausted. I missed my Sunday deadline, as you can tell. I'm probably gonna hate this in the morning *cues writer's guilt*

I so meant to say 'moral' in that last line, though. *slow claps*
Chapter 4

Haymitch slung his arm out form beneath the comforter and hit the alarm clock in vain. He'd chosen the 'snooze' option one time too many, and even he realized that rousing at a later hour than it already was would be unacceptable. Mr. Abernathy had to kiss up to the president and the media more than usual for his first Games, and that meant that his son was obliged to as well. Haymitch was thoughtful enough to allow his father to prosper by offering minimal resistance in public, but, in the comfort of his temporary quarters, Haymitch wasn't going down against the alarm without a fight.

Barely a minute into blindly assaulting the machine, the 23-year old relented and groggily pushed himself into a sitting position. Perhaps it was the fact that he'd heard a cracking noise emanate from one of his raw fingers, or the pestering voice of his father lingering in his head. In all honesty, he didn't care to find out once he registered the sounds coming from beyond the door.

Muffled voices were chattering; Haymitch distinguished one from the others, and he was out of the door in minutes. Of course, he didn't bother to change out of his pajamas—which were yesterday's daywear—or pursue any routine aimed toward hygiene.

Haymitch's bare feet took him to the dining cart, where, sure enough, the pair of tributes and their mentor was strategizing.

"Water," Effie piped up, watching Katniss and Peeta devour their breakfast as if it was their second-to-last meal. They weren't far off the target, he supposed. What chance did two impoverished teenagers have against the brutes from the higher districts? "Water is your best friend. You find water, you live a couple of hours, maybe a day, longer." The urgency in her tone effectively broke Haymitch from his reverie. He rolled his eyes and cleared his throat to make his presence known. The three people at the dining table gave him a vast selection of glares—the girl's 'I Don't Like You Because I Hate the Capitol and Drunks'; the boy's 'You Accused me of Something Despicable Last Night After I Tried to Help You, and, If I Didn't Loathe You Before, I Loathe You Now'; and Effie's signature 'I Never Wanted You Here in the First Place and Your Brash Behavior isn't Helping'. He had half a mind to test the waters and jest about the tough crowd, but they returned to their meals and continued ignoring him.

Stubborn as usual, Haymitch resorted to annoying them to get their attention. As he moseyed around the table, scooping various foods that he'd definitely barf up later onto his plate, he hummed obnoxiously. The children and Effie attempted to remain unfazed. However, he detected the occasional narrowing of an eye or the twitching of an eyebrow. It wasn't until he poured himself a glass of whiskey and took the seat next to Katniss that he got a reaction. Everything was suddenly transpiring in slow motion. His fingers were tightening around his fork, and his humming was increasing in volume drastically, when the girl lunged at him and struck the crevice between his pinkie and forefinger with a knife.

Should he laugh? Should he beg for mercy? Should he leave his fate to the gods?

Haymitch gulped. It was all he could bring himself to do. His bright blue orbs met her dull grey ones, and all either of them heard was—.

"That is mahogany!"

The tension lessened considerably, and the girl withdrew her knife. She regarded Effie with the same disdain as Peeta did Haymitch for the remainder of breakfast.
He couldn't muster the balls to say another word; nevertheless, he silently wondered if staying in bed had been such a terrible idea.

The most difficult part of mentoring was reliving the Games without portraying any rogue emotions toward the Capitol. Every year, Effie met a pair of kids that were in a boat identical to hers. And she was not allowed to tell them the truth of the matter, or warn them of the life they were to lead should they defy all odds and win. For the entire duration of her Games, Effie had lusted after the notion of having a mentor. A mentor was someone that comforted dying children. She'd imagined an older person wiping away the sweat on her brow and tucking her into bed for the last time, like Effie had done on many a night for her younger male counterpart, Maynard. They'd had nobody, save for Seneca; still, it'd been Seneca's first year as escort, and he could barely do well at that job, let alone research and take on the role of mentor, also.

Effie and Seneca spent their nights together in the living room of the train and, when they made it to the Capitol, the den of the penthouse. Neither of them dared seek comfort in the other because positive interactions elicited feelings, and feelings led to caring, and caring meant that they'd make rash decisions and favoritism would become an issue. Not getting involved with Seneca was, probably, the best judgment call that Effie had ever made.

She hadn't needed a mentor to tell her that it wouldn't work, that he was too valiant and he was too much of a martyr in spirit.

No, a mentor had not been a necessity for her to survive. And she felt that, by assuming the role herself, lying through her teeth, and give self-directed advice to amateurs, a mentor was nothing more than a burden—a tease depicting what his or her tributes could seldom become, for the Games were constantly changing and counsel was futile.

Katniss and Peeta didn't need her to believe in them. They had to have faith in themselves. Typically, children from the lower districts had downcast attitudes from birth. A tiny ray of hope shone in Effie's peripheral vision when she spotted Peeta waving at the people of the Capitol. His gaze drifted over to her, and he smiled smugly.

"Water," he explained.

Effie merely nodded. "Water," she murmured to herself.

In no time, the tributes were off of Haymitch and Effie's hands, and the former found this to be a cause for celebration. He swiftly unpacked his lone suitcase and organized his room in the penthouse to his standards, by disorganizing it.

Haymitch was halfway into the corridor when he heard the shattering of glass. Without a second thought, he rushed to Effie's room. She was kneeling next to her dresser, picking up bits of a picture frame. The young woman peered up at him, with a startled expression. He glanced at the remnants of the frame and spotted the image itself: a photograph showing four horrified children, gathered around a television. Haymitch recognized Effie straightaway; she didn't appear to be too much older now.

She slid the photo beneath the dresser, and Haymitch refused to look at her. There was no explanation required. He knew. He'd be a complete buffoon to not know.

A strange tenderness crept into his voice. "Your fellow—."

"—none of your business," she finished, scowling at him pointedly.
Haymitch returned to his usual despicable persona and shoved the dresser aside, leaning down to take the photograph. He never broke eye contact, crumpling it up in his hand and stuffing it into his pocket. Effie was evidently livid. But she didn't matter. His father and the Capitol did, and they'd be proud of him. "Do not display any more negative propaganda aimed at the Capitol. If I catch you doing so, I will turn you in. Do I make myself clear?" The words cut through him like a knife, in all the right ways.

"Yes, Mr. Abernathy." Effie's tone was clipped. She was no longer glaring at him, which was unfortunate because he still harbored an uncanny, untimely attraction to her.

"Mr. Abernathy is my father, sweetheart." She visibly tensed, and Haymitch left the Training Center before either of them could properly assess what had occurred.

Living in the past was quickly becoming an everyday occurrence for Effie. It was the only way to stay sane. She'd gone from annually sharing sentiments with an equal to establishing a system of superior and subordinate based on social class with a Capitol brat. She didn't ask him where he was going or go after him in an attempt to act as a spy. He wasn't worth whatever incriminating evidence she might find.

Effie divvied up her time between worrying about her tributes and taking notes on this year's sponsors. To her chagrin, she discovered that the majority of them had pledged their allegiance to the other districts. This wasn't anything new; Effie normally quashed her flicker of optimism at this point in the Games. Yet, something told her that this year had to be different, and she refrained from throwing in the towel too easily.

A half hour later, there was a knock at the door. Effie shut the refrigerator and scurried to the door, fixing her hair and checking her appearance in the glass windows. She squinted into the peephole, and she identified the man outside instantly. Disguising her distaste with a tight-lipped beam, Effie opened the door and scrutinized the dark-skinned man. He was holding a case of liquor—was that a guilty expression?

"Hello, Mr…?" She extended her palm graciously. He shook it.

"Please, call me Chaff." He flashed a grin that sickened and wooed her simultaneously. Yes, Chaff Davis. She recalled seeing his face next to Haymitch's in the papers every now and then, prior to their brief meeting in District 12. If she wasn't mistaken, Chaff's family owned a line of Men of the Capitol calendars that he made an appearance in every October. Peeta's mother had sent her one too many as Christmas gifts.

In spite of herself, Effie blushed as she removed her palm from his. He may have seen it as charming, but all she saw was money. The Davis family sponsored a different district every year. Since Effie's victory five years prior, they'd yet to extend their blessings to 12.

Chaff's connection to Haymitch could change that.

Effie brightened considerably. "I'm Effie—."

"—Trinket, yes." Chaff's gentle fingers came up to her cheek and caressed it as he murmured, "You should ponder a name change. Trinket is mundane. I like 'Treasure' better."

She came dangerously close to glowering. In lieu, she stepped aside and invited him in. Chaff appeared to be humored. He set his case of liquor atop the coffee table and crossed his arms. "Where's Haymitch?"
Effie pursed her lips, her gaze trained on the eyesore that was his alcohol assortment. "He stepped out."

"Did he tell you where he was going?"

"No."

For whatever reason, Chaff cackled in response, nearing her. "Listen, sweetheart." The pet name made her cringe enough when Haymitch used it. Chaff's application reached a whole new level of discomfort. "It's ill-advised to permit a man such as myself to invade your personal living quarters when you're alone."

She detected no threat there, besides the gash to her pride. After all, Chaff was a womanizer, not a predator. "I'll have you know, Chaff, that it took more than a pretty face to win the Hunger Games. In other words, I'm perfectly capable of handling myself, thank you very much."

Chaff tossed his hands up in mock-surrender. "Sorry, sweetheart. I didn't intend on pushing any buttons." He paused, momentarily swiping the smirk from his countenance. "I'll leave. How's that sound?" He backtracked to the coffee table and continued, "Just tell Haymitch to phone me whenever he returns. Or you do it, if he's wasted."

Effie gave him a half-hearted shrug. "That won't be necessary," she muttered, softly. "It's only polite that I ask you to stay until he comes back. So, make yourself comfortable."

The man removed his coat. Effie had vanished by the time he finished straightening his shirt.

"I was just fixing myself some cinnamon buns. Would you like one?"

"I'd like two," he bantered, beaming as he plopped down onto the couch and resumed viewing the sponsor interviews where Effie had left off.

Haymitch Abernathy hadn't courted a girl since grade school. There was no sense in getting into a committed relationship whilst Alcohol was the number one woman in his life. She was perfect, and she tasted flawless, and she didn't judge me. Alcohol didn't demand that he ceased drinking her. She encouraged him. They were loyal to each other.

Whenever a situation sent him into a rare state of euphoria, or a dilemma pissed him off more than was healthy, Haymitch would seek refuge in the love of his life. Effie had requested that the penthouse's supply of Alcohol only be served at mealtimes. But that was the thing about Alcohol. She was everywhere, with open arms prepared to suffocate him into an amiable oblivion.

Haymitch parked his car at the rear of the bar and stealthily crept to the entrance through a familiar alleyway. He carelessly slipped on his shades as the sunlight of the street hit him and turned the corner, only to fall into a sturdy figure. Growling, Haymitch lurched backward and registered the three men hovering above him. They were effectively blocking his access to his safe haven.

"Is this shit called for?" He spat, although he dared not take another step. They had history.

There was no verbal response. The trio merely marched him forward, their elbows digging into his spine whenever he walked too slowly for their liking. "I'm a grown ass man. Tell my father that I don't need watchdogs."

At that moment, Haymitch stopped cold in his tracks.

Aaron Abernathy was motioning him forward; he was surrounded by journalists and the
The most intimidating of the watchdogs patted Haymitch on the back, chuckling.

"Why don't you tell him?"
As his father beckoned him forward, Haymitch didn't know whether he should be pissed off or frightened. When he recognized the look in the older Abernathy's eyes, however, Haymitch settled on the latter. Expertly swallowing his pride, Haymitch strode to his father's side and refused to meet his gaze, instead paying attention to the horde of reporters calling his name, for once. The glare of a camera temporarily blinded him when his father's hand latched onto his shoulder.

Haymitch stilled, maintaining his faux, uncharacteristic, and tight-lipped smile. For good measure, he slid his arm around Aaron's waist, moving his head every which way so that everyone had a chance to get their photograph.

An array of people shouted out queries in a jumbled mess.

"Did your father always want to be a Gamemaker?"

"Shouldn't you be charming sponsors?"

"Do you think that Twelve has a chance this year?"

"Was Effie Trinket ecstatic to have you added to her team?"

"Haymitch, do you want to take your father's job someday?"

This explains why I haven't stopped to chat with these imbeciles before: they're fucking irritating. Deciding that this impromptu interview had to end soon, or else he'd regress to his former ways, Haymitch answered the final question. With a gentle sound mixed somewhere between a laugh and a scoff, he replied, "Me? Take his job? I'd have to get my own tributes killed in the arena to prove myself, then, wouldn't I?"

The roar of laughter that he was rewarded with made his skin crawl, but he couldn't pinpoint precisely why. Perhaps it was the manner in which his own father's breast shook with hearty chuckles. That ultimately led Haymitch to recalling why he'd gone to the bar for solace in the first place.

Aaron interjected the next round of inquiries, signaling for his chauffeur to open the back door to his limousine. "We really hate to go, but there are the Games to prepare for, everyone. Have a nice evening!" Of course, they were only bombarded with more chattering directed towards them; nonetheless, the duo was no longer expected to respond. Aaron all but dragged Haymitch to the limo, shoving him inside with the assistance of his bulky figure. He slammed the door behind him, and a swarm of people came to peer inside, banging on the window with their fist and snapping pictures.

"Don't look at them, son. Look at me."

Haymitch slowly glanced over to his father, whose mask was removed prematurely. He wasn't as giddy as he'd wanted the crowd to believe and, in all honestly, he never had been—at least, not as far as Haymitch could remember. The man's lips were merged into a thin line, and his brows were furrowed. His cold, calculating eyes... Well, that was another story altogether, Haymitch supposed.
Somehow, Haymitch managed to regain the bass in his voice. "What is it, father?" He demanded, turning to face the soundproofed partition separating them from the driver. Busying himself with the lapels on his jacket, he continued, "I don't appreciate you pulling me into surprise press appearances. Nor do I enjoy it when you spring your watchdogs on me. For all you know, I could've been schmoozing with a spon—."

"Oh, cut the shit, Haymitch." Aaron tugged on his son's collar and yanked his torso around, so that their faces were inches apart. He was visibly seething. "No respectable sponsor would meet you at a fucking bar. I wouldn't have to keep my so-called "watchdogs" on you if you were responsible enough to care for yourself, which means performing your duties adequately! As for this tone you've become accustomed to using with me… You've lost your damned mind, and I'd be happy to help you find it." Spit flew onto either of Haymitch's cheeks with every word.

No one would ever guess that the mild-mannered, humble Mr. Abernathy had a temper. And he used that fact to his advantage.

Haymitch couldn't muster the willpower to feed his father another poorly planned lie, so he nodded numbly in lieu of that, not breaking eye contact with Aaron. Slowly, yet surely, he was released, and he dared not move abruptly this time.

"My apologies, father," he whispered, regarding Aaron in a new light. Whenever he tried to be brave, his father ensured that he understood just what 'brave' entailed. "It's difficult. I have an addiction."

"You don't have an addiction," Aaron grunted, curtly. He loved to deny Haymitch's more obvious faults, both in public and in private. Haymitch always assumed that the far-fetched fantasy of a normal, scarcely flawed spawn made Aaron feel better about himself as a parent and as a man in general. After all, Haymitch could be quite the embarrassment. "You are not permitted to indulge in alcoholic beverages again until further notice. Find another way to exercise your youth when you need a break from all of the escorting business. Don't try to evade me, either. I have eyes everywhere."

"Yes, sir," Haymitch responded, glumly. Everywhere. The man had eyes everywhere. "Father?"

"Yes?" Aaron's tone was cool. He checked his watch for good measure.

"My tributes." Haymitch paused, reluctant to go on for fear of setting Aaron off.

"What about them?"

"They're going to have as fair a chance to win this thing as everyone else, right?" Somewhere, deep inside, there was still childish hope surging on, telling him that a district floozy couldn't possibly predict his father's actions.

Chuckling, Aaron shook his head, and Haymitch's heart collapsed into his stomach when he spoke. "You can't be that gullible, can you? I hope that you answered that reporter's question truthfully, son, because you haven't been paying attention to my life lessons. In your little fantasy world, out there between a run-down sports bar and a basketball court, your tributes are going to win the damned Games. But in the real world, with the big boys, they don't stand a chance. Twelve never has, they never will, and I'm not risking a show of favoritism for sworn losers. Don't worry your pretty little head about them. The sooner they're dead, the sooner you get your booze back."

Haymitch was frozen when his father's fist pounded against his shoulder in a display of sportsmanship. This man was his hero. This was the man he was meant to want to impress. At this
point, he didn't know if he even liked him as a person anymore. Had he ever?

No. No, he wasn't upset with his father. He was pissed with the district bitch for having the nerve to suggest that Aaron Abernathy was a monster. Aaron Abernathy was commendable for his actions. Aaron Abernathy was going to be the best Gamemaker that Panem had ever seen. Aaron Abernathy was his son's hero.

Effie Trinket was scum.

Haymitch slumped against the leather seats of the vehicle, staring out of his window and watching the familiar sights of the Capitol speed by. There was nothing he felt like saying, so he kept his mouth shut.

Eventually, Aaron filled the silence. "How's working with Ms. Trinket?"

"Hm?" Haymitch twisted his body toward his father. "Oh, her. She's aggravating. I guess she knows what she's doing."

"So I've heard." Aaron shrugged, adjusting his cuff links. "I've also heard that she's a looker, and, when I met her in person a few months ago, I personally verified that rumor."

"Whatever. What's this about? You've got the hots for her?" It was strange for him to hear Aaron discuss a woman, let alone her attractiveness. Every now and then, Haymitch saw two shadows slinking off to his father's bedroom, with the second shadow varying in stature each time, or he heard noises while he was in a drunken haze. Obviously, men had needs. Those were primal. Romance, on the other hand? As far as Haymitch knew, Aaron hadn't loved anyone since the passing of Haymitch's mother, and Haymitch wasn't keen on humoring the notion of his unbearable colleague becoming his stepmother.

Aaron snorted. "She's more than twice my junior. I wouldn't have any luck coaxing her into my bed unless I blackmailed her there, and I prefer the challenge of wooing a woman." A smirk painted his already intimidating countenance. "You, on the other hand. I'll have to watch for you."

"Me?" Haymitch sounded incredulous, and he was. Why would he ever? Evidently, he had to divert his attention to women now that alcohol was out of the question, but he'd seldom stoop that low. Like Chaff had told him: district women were feisty. He needed calm, collected, and classy. He needed a dumb bimbo to disobey his father's orders and sneak him bottles of whiskey.

"It's not unheard of, Haymitch. Mentors and escorts get together all the time. I can't have you getting involved with a mentor for a variety of reasons. You'd have more publicity than the others, due to me serving my first term as Gamemaker, and this scandal would be all over the news. It'd snag the media away from the Games. Plus, you'd get the girl's hopes up, and that would lead to a string of bad press—."

Exasperated with the direction of the conversation, Haymitch absently cut in. "Don't worry about her and I. It's not happening. She's hot, but she's a total nightmare."

"Sweet dream, beautiful nightmare—in both, she's got a gorgeously crafted 34B cup, so your promises fall on deaf ears."

The limousine stopped. Haymitch recognized the Training Center straightaway and went to open the door. Aaron covered his son's hand with his own, giving him one last intense, foreboding glare. "Heed my warning. Control yourself."

"Like I said: total nightmare."
Capitol men weren't naturally brash, Effie realized, as she clinked glasses with Chaff. Her escort was one bad apple in a batch of several thousand.

Luckily, District 12 and its mentor were accustomed to receiving poisoned fruit. Every escort since her crowning had been a male—on purpose, she surmised—and they'd only had one thing on their minds. When she refused, they asked to be transferred to another district after vowing to scout sponsors for tributes from any other district than Twelve. In this way, Haymitch was a breath of fresh air. Or polluted air.

"Your baking skills aren't as subpar as I anticipated," Chaff admitted, wiping the icing on his fingers onto a napkin. There was a hint of teasing in his tone.

Effie decided to play along. After all, she was in a much better mood than she had been prior to his arrival. "Oh? You doubted me?"

"Quite honestly, I don't understand how someone from the districts, especially a district with much less resources than the others, has the knowledge of how to operate an oven. I'm shocked you've even seen one as hightech as the ones we have here."

He wasn't trying to be offensive. Nevertheless, that didn't stop Effie from frowning slightly. "We have ovens. Also, I've visited the Capitol every year since my Games to mentor. It shouldn't be shocking."

Chaff shrugged, focusing on cracking open his case of liquor. "Thinking about it that way, then, yes, you're right." He kneaded his brows, and she wondered if there was something he was struggling to say to her. Moments later, he finally spoke up. "I apologize for what happened in Twelve. I consider myself to be a polite man, and you weren't meant to hear any of that. It wasn't my intention." Chaff offered her a beer wordlessly, and she took it with a sweetly crafted, "Thank you".

"Chaff, the point isn't that I heard it, darling." She twisted the top of her beer off expertly, whereas Chaff was forced to utilize his shirt to get a good grip. "The part that's agitating is that you were discussing me at all. Neither you nor your friend had any business making assumptions without having met me formally." Effie tilted her head back and took the most ladylike swig of beer Chaff had ever witnessed. "Oh, right. I accept your apology." The sardonic smile she gifted him with elicited a snigger. She wasn't as bad as he'd thought.

"It won't happen again, Trinket."

The last thing Haymitch wanted to be greeted by when he arrived at the penthouse was giggling. Had Trinket seriously started kissing ass already, in spite of the fact that she knew better than anyone that those kids were going to die?

"I thought the rules prohibited you from snatching sponsors too ear—. Chaff?" Haymitch was dumbfounded, to put it nicely, upon walking in on his best friend and Trinket enjoying an apparently humorous conversation on the sofa. It pissed him off more. Why was the couch so massive, anyhow?

"Haymitch!" Chaff exclaimed, sitting upright. "Effie let me in to so that I could wait for you. We didn't know you'd take two hours. I see that you're not inebriated; I brought liquor, but..." Chaff held up his bottle and nodded at Effie's. "When you snooze, you lose." It wasn't lost on Haymitch that his friend's arm was slinking dangerously close to Effie's shoulders. She was too happy. Why were they there alone? What had they done? More importantly, why did Haymitch care? He had
no right. She had no right.

It had to be the lingering effects of Aaron's speech.

Regaining his composure, Haymitch allowed his gaze to sweep over them before he smoothly made a beeline for his room. As he passed Chaff, he muttered, "I can't have any, anyways."

Haymitch slammed his bedroom door behind him, feeling very much like a petulant adolescent. The day had been taxing. The Games shenanigans was going to drive him clinically insane. It was comparable to being dragged out of a dark cave, into blinding, searing light, and he wished he hadn't crawled out of bed that morning.

The blond-haired man bent over the marble dresser, his chest heaving. His head shot up at the sound of the creaking door. He met Chaff's eyes, which were considerably less glimmering.

"What happened, Mitch?"

"I hate that district bitch." Haymitch gripped the sides of the dresser, turning his knuckles to a beautiful shade of rose.

"She's not that bad, seriously. She drank with me. She laughed with me." Nothing in Haymitch's demeanor was growing softer to portray acceptance. Chaff nodded stiffly. "You hate the district bitch. You also have to deal with her. Get ready for the Chariot rides. I'm telling you because, that way, we can prevent an altercation that might result from her nagging you about it."

Despite Chaff's word choice, Haymitch didn't feel like his friend was entirely on his side in the matter. Maybe he was behaving like an intolerant brat more than usual, if Chaff couldn't handle him. If only Chaff had heard what she'd said, though.

"Thanks," Haymitch murmured, flatly. He turned his back to Chaff.

He closed the door, leaving Haymitch to wallow in his rampant stream of consciousness.

Effie Trinket was a lot easier to hate when she was sporting regular clothing.

To have an attraction to a colleague that he loathed was a foreign concept to Haymitch, and it made him feel more abnormal. It's her fault. She's doing this to you. Yes, she'd worn a vermilion cocktail dress and pumps just to trigger his short temper. Not even he could convince himself of that. For the duration of their drive to the plaza, he resisted the urge to run his fingers through the cascading blonde locks that were draped down either of her cream-colored shoulders. She'd get ticked off, and he'd get to be the butt of her frustration.

Dear heavens, he'd never despised a woman so much, and he'd never despised anyone, man or woman, so much for no viable reason. What had she done?

It was what she represented.

She displayed an innate hatred for the Games. Should he let down his guard for too long, she'd infiltrate his fortress and bring him down with her. He wouldn't revisit that period in his life voluntarily. The Games are good. The Games are good. The Games are good.

The unlikely duo arrived at the plaza with minutes to spare. Cameras flashed nonstop from the second Haymitch's chauffeur opened his door for him. The photographers were bemused, although they kept snapping away. Haymitch smirked, realizing that District Twelve rarely showed up anywhere in style. He hadn't cared to research how they'd gotten around the Capitol
prior to his assignment. However, he figured that Effie and her previous escorts had moved
around on foot. The perks of having "daddy's angel" on her team included the limousine that
daddy had purchased for him at the age of 21.

Haymitch was an asset to this team just as much as Effie was.

Her tributes were going to die, yes, but she'd be exceedingly comfortable whilst she watched it
happen for a change, and it was all because of him.

The smirk that this epiphany caused didn't disappear until his tributes caught fire on their chariot.
An expression of awe marred his typically unpleasant or stoic features. Fire. They were beautiful.

Fire.

Fire made the stars.

His mother was a star, or so he'd heard.

She'd burned bright.

She would have been the most vibrant star he'd ever laid eyes on, if she'd survived, save for the
ones in his dim, blue orbs after tussles with his father that he swore he let the old man win.

Chapter End Notes

Damn, this got dark quickly.

I just love writing from Haymitch's perspective, for whatever reason; I feel like I can't
screw him up half as much as I can screw up Effs.

But I do hope everyone liked that bit of cognitive dissonance and displacement that
took place with Haymitch. Truthfully, I've been looking forward to writing the initial
confrontation with him and his father for awhile, and I really hope I did it justice!
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

As soon as they escaped from the hustle and bustle of the chariot rides, Katniss and Peeta were bombarded with compliments from Effie. She couldn't help the fact that she was ecstatic. Portia and Cinna had turned her tributes into something worth remembering, and this time it wasn't because of their mundane attitudes, subpar training scores, or poor excuses for wardrobes. For once, the people of Panem could at least pretend that Twelve had a fighting chance.

When they reached the elevators, Effie wasted no time throwing her arms around her tributes. Their bodies were rigid, as if they were uncomfortable, but she didn't register the impropriety of her actions. She was simply too pleased with their performance tonight.

"I'm so proud of you," Effie whispered, beaming as she looked between the pair. "We are going to make sure that Twelve is a factor this year. You two are going to be a threat." The gears were already whirring in her head. Separate training. Paired training. She was prepared to do it all, as long as they kept trying to survive. Those before them had accepted their deaths the moment they'd ascended the stage during the Reaping. And Effie tried with them, too—of course, she did—but they hadn't been willing to put on a show for anyone. They hadn't been willing to fight. As Effie had learned those measly few years ago, life came with a price.

The corner of Peeta's mouth twitched into the gentlest smile, and he nodded, eyeing Katniss from the corner of his eye. "We'll make sure of it."

With a loud buzz, the elevator doors opened and they were greeted by their escort. Effie noted that he wasn't grinning from ear to ear as he should've been, but he wasn't glaring per usual, either.

"Kiddies, good job," Haymitch said gruffly, directing his attention to Peeta and Katniss as they exited the elevator and headed to the suite. Effie followed after them, and he caught up with her quickly, opting to walk side-by-side. There weren't words to describe just how uncomfortable she was. She maintained her civil demeanor.

"I think they did all right. Do you think they actually have a shot?"

Effie paused abruptly, causing Haymitch to come to a halt as well. Her brows were arched, and her arms were crossed against her chest. "Since when do you care about these tributes?"

"I never said whether I did or didn't. They were just good tonight. I believe they were."

"Well, due to your limited skill in syntax and vocabulary, I'm proud to say that their mental preparedness does not depend on your vindication." Haymitch opened his mouth, ready to remark snidely in return. Effie was gone by the time he thought of something clever to utter.

OOO

Upon Effie's arrival in the dining room, she spotted several familiar faces. There were the children, which was a given, along with Portia and servers that Effie had become acquainted with over the years. Portia had a male companion by her side. He was dark-skinned, handsome, and doused in just enough makeup to be considered a model Capitol citizen. Effie politely greeted her friend. Then, rather uncharacteristic of Effie, she welcomed the stranger with a warm hug. He responded in a bemused manner, slinging a stiff arm around her waist as she was releasing him. Effie's beam was replaced with an expression of embarrassment in the blink of an eye when she peeked up at
the man. "I'm so sorry. I have better manners, I promise. I simply assumed that you were the
glorious Cinna that made my tributes stand out tonight."

Cinna chuckled, nodding. "I'm guilty as charged, Effie. There's no need to apologize. I'm lucky to
be in the presence of a victor."

She regarded him kindly and allowed an Avox to direct her to the dinner table, where she was
seated adjacent to Portia. The dinner was composed of a variety of meats, grains, and desserts, and
tactful chatter was maintained throughout. Mainly, this was because Haymitch barely spoke two
words to anyone besides the servers. Effie noted that, while he was behaving like a brute in the
sense that he was stuffing his face to capacity, he treated "the help" with more magnanimosity
than she would've expected of a privileged brat. He disappeared into the kitchen a few times and,
on some occasions, he reemerged into the dining room empty handed.

At one point, Effie entered the kitchen to inquire about a turkey recipe, and she witnessed
Haymitch's exchange with a man slightly older than him.

"Did you have any brothers? Sisters? Uncles or aunts? Cousins?"

The man nodded to the first three and shook his head at the last two.

"How many siblings did you have in total?"

The man held up ten fingers. Haymitch asked what portion of that number was illegitimate, and
the man revealed that only half of his siblings were related fully by blood. Then, Haymitch
whispered, "Are any of them alive?"

When the other man lowered his head and shook it, Effie gasped.

The two men heard her and their heads shot in her direction. Needless to say, Effie exited the
kitchen without the turkey recipe. She came up with an excuse about the illiteracy of the Avoxes
to appease Portia. Moments later, Haymitch reclaimed his seat at the left head of the table. He
tossed a distinct glare her way, and Effie rolled her eyes. She stabbed at her cupcake in an
unladylike fashion, overcome with a mixed bag of emotions.

Fury. Haymitch's insistency to fraternize with Avoxes was bound to put District Twelve at an
insurmountable disadvantage. The Training Center was bugged. If anyone in the government
cought wind of Haymitch's sympathizing, at the very least, Twelve would be purposely terminated
at the start of the Games.

Relief. On the upside, if Haymitch's father found out, he would force his son to resign
immediately. Effie would be able to find suitable help for her tributes.

Regret. No one could choose their parentage. Despite his bloodline, Haymitch seemed to be a bit
more grounded than the average Capitol male. While he may be privileged, he wasn't a brat. Well,
he wasn't as much of a brat as he could be.

Concern. What would happen to Haymitch if his father did make him resign? Would he vanquish
from the face of the Earth like Seneca? Was Aaron Abernathy truly heartless enough to allow
such a thing?

Before she narrowed down her feelings and pinpointed one, Katniss dared to proclaim that she
knew one of the Avox girls.

"There's no way in hell," Haymitch scoffed in a facetious tone, his grimace evident. His next
words were calculated, as if there was a hidden message within them. "You haven't seen these
people in your life." It was clear. He was giving Katniss advice, in order to protect her from the
government's wrath. Since Haymitch could set rules for the children, why couldn't he do so for
himself?

Effie interjected. "Haymitch means that these people have committed crimes against the Capitol.
Luckily for them, the government was generous and only cut out their tongues." She'd become
accustomed to a negative-to-positive, spinner's script.

Peeta followed up with a tale about how the Avox resembled a fellow classmate. The otherwise
lighthearted conversation continued. Peeta felt that he'd solved the issue. On the contrary, Effie felt
that he added insult to injury, assuming that the story was fabricated to placate Haymitch.

Due to her harsh, rehearsed words, she refrained from meeting an Avox's eyes for the remainder
of the meal.

When Effie's flirty friend started making googly eyes at Haymitch, he came to the conclusion that
dinner was over. Normally, he wouldn't turn down an evident invitation. Alas, the eventful night
that had included daydreaming about his mother, something he hadn't done in over a decade, and
intensifying his strange distaste for Trinket thwarted him completely—besides, that Cinna guy was
shooting her worried glances between his pitiful and subtle attempts at intriguing Effie. Haymitch
had been involved in enough love triangles to know that it couldn't end well.

So, with a definitive, "Peeta and Katniss, you should head to bed because your training begins
tomorrow morning," Haymitch indirectly forced everyone to disperse.

OOO

He made a beeline for his bedroom, quietly closing the door to avoid potential altercations with
Trinket.

The tie was the first to go. Then came the shoes and the socks. He finally tore open his shirt
buttons and plopped down on his plush bed, reaching for his television remote. The only thing on
was, of course, reruns of coverage of the chariot rides. Haymitch allowed the slightest smile to
grace his mouth when he heard the unanimous praise that his tributes received. Per usual, the first
person he thought to call was Chaff. He recalled their not-so-pleasant separation earlier, but
Haymitch always prided himself in the fact that their friendship was seldom inhibited by silly
arguments.

"Hello?" Chaff's voice was...tired, if Haymitch had to choose an adjective.

"Am I interrupting your sleep, beautiful?"

He heard the smirk in the other man's voice as he snorted, "Yes, sweetheart."

"Sorry. I just wanted to know what you thought of my tributes." Haymitch was playing with a
stray seam that was sticking from one of the buttons on his shirt. He tried to not weigh too much
emotion on the words because it was a bad, midnight-influenced judgement call. But Chaff’s
opinion meant more to him than his father's at times, and Mr. Abernathy couldn't exactly
congratulate his son, anyways. It'd be taken as favoritism.

"They're the talk of the town, buddy. Although, they're probably useless. Everyone's going to
forget about them by the time their training scores are revealed." Chaff yawned, and Haymitch
narrowed his brows. "Thankfully, we're not betting on them."

The bet. Haymitch and Chaff bet on opposing districts each year. Chaff won most of the time
because he had more background. Haymitch didn't even watch the Games, so he had no clue as to who had a better defense or offense and so on. He was Chaff's sucker for money after Chaff turned off his previous gambling buddies with his cockiness, and, honestly, Haymitch didn't mind.

At least, when his tributes' lives weren't on the line. "Y'know, Chaff, I might be considering betting on my tributes this time. It's my inaugural year as escort."

"You can't be serious, Mitch. I'm aware that you're probably attached to them in some way, and I win these things almost every time, but you shouldn't be that discouraged." Chaff chortled. "It's a sweet notion, them having potential. It's just not realistic."

"You can't have Avoxes as friends." It's just not realistic. Yet, he'd befriended many of them, and he'd named his favorites Mer, Ben, Leslie, and Andy.

"Exchanging anything other than pleasantries with district people is ill-advised." It's just not realistic. Somehow, every district citizen he'd met was less brutish than Aaron.

"No, it's not possible for you to visit your mother's grave." It's just not realistic. Admittedly, Haymitch hadn't visited to this day, and his father hadn't risked revealing which district she'd died in. All Haymitch knew was that it was some freak accident that occurred in one of the lower districts. He couldn't count on that because his father considered any district that wasn't One to be classified as "lower".

The point still stood, however. His tributes winning was just as probable as anything else.

Out of the blue, Haymitch muttered, "I'm going." He heard Chaff suck his teeth before he slammed the phone down. There was something happening to Haymitch, and he didn't enjoy it.

He watched as Caesar Flickerman directed the audience's attention to the screen displaying the outside of the studio building. This must've been the opening of the chariot rides. A feeling of misery settled over him once he recognized his father's faux beam. Without a second thought, he shut the television off.

Effie found it close to impossible to settle down and rest. Her tributes had given her the good sort of jitters for once, and it seemed that she wasn't coming down from that high anytime soon.

Around the time the television was no longer broadcasting anything save static, Effie tiptoed from her room. She'd aimed for the kitchen and wound up in the living room. It wasn't her fault that she was behaving so spontaneously. She blamed it on the late hour. There was also the factor of her Games playing on video cassette. Effie had lent the tapes of the prior Games to Katniss and Peeta, hoping that they'd find inspiration in them.

Perhaps the children hadn't been able to sleep much, either. She could either be giddy about them taking a keen interest in the strategy of the Games, or she could be irrationally angry about them staying up later than Haymitch had advised and leaving the television on. Effie chose the former.

She attempted to leave the room. Nevertheless, when she saw her younger self shake hands with her friend, Maynard, Effie was glued to the television screen. She propped herself up on the couch and relived the most devastating event in her life thus far.

The constant waking up and dozing off was becoming boring. Haymitch would rather not waste his energy on sleep if he wasn't going to get any. Whenever his insomnia caught him in her death grip, he was reduced to looking to his one true love for assistance.
Trinket couldn’t have gotten rid of all of it. And his conversations with his Avox friends likely earned him their sympathy, accompanied with a case or two of scotch in a high place that Trinket wasn’t tall enough to poke her nose into.

There probably was a nice surprise awaiting him in the kitchen. He didn't get a chance to find out, for he came across a glorious sight: Effie Trinket, clothed in a robe, snoring away on the sofa in the common area.

Snickering softly, Haymitch shook his head and leaned down, pressing his arms against the insides of her arm in an amateur attempt at tickling her.

Abruptly, Effie sprung up, unsheathing a knife from her robe pocket and slashing wildly in the air. Haymitch hopped off of her, panting heavily. She eyed him with a feral look in her eyes before she realized where she was and gently set the knife on her lap. "I'm sorry," Effie mumbled, averting her gaze. "I came out to get water and the kids left my Games on and I just fell asleep."

He reacted less than favorably. "Why the hell do you have a knife with you, Trinket?" Haymitch barked, wrinkling his nose.

"After the Games, I started sleeping with it. For protection." She was more defensive this time around.

"And you're still a privileged brat with a major daddy dilemma."

Haymitch didn't stop her from leaving the room. He was relieved. She became easier to dislike by the minute.

OOO

There was a jug of water atop the countertop, and Haymitch didn't look any further for alcohol. He promised himself that he'd go straight to his bedroom. No excursions. The sound of the television lured him forward, though.

Just to turn it off, he warned himself.

As Haymitch expected, curiosity killed the cat.

He rewinded the tape to the very beginning. From the time the tributes rose onto the platform, Haymitch realized that he didn't remember them. He didn't remember any of the Games.

OOO

11 years prior

"Mitch! The Games are on, honey. Come downstairs."

Haymitch huffed, meeting the eyes of his nanny. She was a short, fair-skinned woman with a kind smile, and her name was Ms. Olivia. He loved her whenever it wasn't this time of year.

"Why don't you trust me to watch them by myself?"

Olivia tilted her head to the television. "It's on mute, sweetheart." He loathed that nickname. "I trust you, Mitch. Your father wants to assure that you're the perfect young man. There are going to
be a lot of eyes on you when he's announced as Gamemaker someday."

As if that would ever happen for real. Alas, Haymitch didn't put up a fight like he typically would. He stood and snatched a couple of books off of the shelves. They were mainly historical fiction and parody novels, clothed in the covers of pro-Capitol books just in case his father popped in at a random time and demanded to know why his undivided attention wasn't on the Games. Honestly, Haymitch hadn't a clue as to how watching other kids die was going to enhance his personality. Aaron was adamant about his son spectating regularly, and Aaron had admitted to hiring the nanny five years ago to ensure that Haymitch remained on the "right track". It'd started off rough, but Haymitch eventually got into the groove of things. He read throughout the entirety of the Games. It was the only time that he voluntarily opened a book of any kind.

Haymitch raised his head from the carpet, looking at Ms. Olivia as she came into the living area with a bottle of liquor in hand. She drank herself into a stupor most nights. Haymitch didn't mind covering for her and making the old narcolepsy excuse whenever his father did break away from the sponsor room for awhile. It seemed to pain Ms. Olivia to watch the Games. Haymitch was aware that she was from District Eleven and that she had an extended family there. No one had bothered to tell Haymitch more, and he hadn't asked.

With the sweetest beam a stubborn boy like himself could muster, Haymitch queried, "May I have a glass, Ms. Olivia?"

"Don't drink after I'm asleep. And—."

"—don't tell my father. I know the routine."

OOO

Present Day

His subconscious objection was leveling once again.

Every time a child was beaten, bloodied, and/or bruised, Haymitch winced and he felt a layer of his very being torn apart. It'd taken so long to build this resistance. The only reason he'd moved out of his father's house as soon as he got the chance was to avoid the Games cycle. Ms. Olivia had turned into Stacy, who'd turned into Ms. Yolanda, who'd turned into Ms. Ulysses. They were all unbearable people, now that he reflected on it. Who allowed a 12-year old to become an alcoholic? Who allowed Snow to take their children and send them off to slaughter for the amusement of others?

The last straw was the scene of Effie holding a guy named Maynard's hand as he died, her hands drenched in his blood. At sixteen, Haymitch wasn't brave enough to use the washing machine without assistance, and here was Trinket, showing him up again. He wasn't as pissed as he should've been. Not until Effie was slashed half to death by a mutation. Swiftly, Haymitch shut the television off and tossed the remote aside, burying his face in his hands.

It was gone. It was over. It was no longer relevant. He knew how this ended.

Mental passivity wasn't an option, and it was all Trinket's fault.

A thought still plagued him.

What would Aaron have to say about this sudden change of heart?
Hit me up on Tumblr: @ianlevitt
Chapter 7

Haymitch had been shooting hoops in the Training Center's gymnasium for a little under an hour. His accuracy was off today, but any random passerby wouldn't have been able to tell.

The gym was deserted. Everyone was probably out on the town or anxiously waiting by their television sets to see any updates on the tributes. This marked their first day of training. The idea brought moths to Haymitch's stomach, but it wasn't enough to weaken his game by its lonesome. Effie's tape had been the thing to tip the scale.

He was so conflicted. There couldn't be anything wrong with disagreeing with the exploitation of children's brutal murders; yet, something told Haymitch that it would land him in a world of trouble if he acknowledged his opposition, even in the "privacy" of his own quarters. And why was he so against it? Contrary to popular belief, Capitols had hearts. If the Games were inhumane, many would have stepped up to end them before his time. Right?

Breathing heavily, Haymitch placed his hands on his hips, watching dejectedly as his basketball was deflected by the rim of the hoop. He'd felt that one coming on, just as he'd felt the dozens of misses before it. Normally, he would stop, take a breather, and get back to it later. But this was his distraction.

"This is the perfect time to ask you for a 1-on-1."

Haymitch rolled his eyes and turned to face Chaff, wiping the sweat from his brow. "Makes you a wuss if you can't beat me when I'm at my best."

"It doesn't matter when I beat you. It matters that I do beat you. Who cares about the technicalities?" Chaff hummed, inching closer to his friend. "Where are the kiddies?"

"Training." He studied the other, wondering whether it'd be a wise idea to tell his second-best confidant, next to the Avoxes, about Trinket's Games and his feelings toward the whole ordeal now that he'd watched them. Ultimately, Haymitch refrained. It was too early in the morning to toss complicated questions at anyone.

Chaff made a beeline for the hoop and snatched Haymitch's bouncing basketball out of the air. "Are you still full of optimism for those training scores?" He dribbled as he spoke, between his legs, in front of them—just showing off.

"Hey, it's out of my hands, man. The girl can use a knife; the boy can hit."

Chaff snorted. "Lovely."

"Yeah, whatever, bro." Haymitch set his hands on his kneecaps, bending down and peering up at Chaff. "You gonna check the ball or what?"

"I thought you'd never ask," replied Chaff, with an electrifying grin.

OOO

It was a dirty game—dirtier than usual. Chaff caught a whiff of Haymitch's passive aggressiveness with every bit of trash talk, and, eventually, it rubbed off on him.
"You're a little quiet over there," Chaff mocked, as he removed his shirt and carelessly tossed it aside. "Is this shot for the Avoxes, then?" Haymitch was losing by a whopping ten points. It was only notable because the men had seldom been separated by more than seven points on a bad day in the past. Be that as it may, Haymitch wasn't intent on losing heart anytime soon.

Alcohol. Playing basketball, especially when he was pissed off, was the equivalent of drowning in whiskey.

He charged forward, dribbling the ball as he went, and knocked Chaff down on his way to the net. Chaff fell on his rear, and he grit his teeth as he tilted his head back, watching Haymitch soar over his head and dunk the basketball. Haymitch hung there for a moment, and then he released his grip on the rim, landing on his feet in a crouched position. He spun around, slowly. By the time he was facing Chaff, the other had assumed his standing position again.

Instead of, "I'm sorry", which, admittedly, was an unlikely phrase to come from Haymitch Abernathy, of all people, in itself, the blonde spat, "So, how was she?"

Chaff needed a minute or two to mull over the question before he understood its full meaning. He scowled, leaning down to pick up the ball, which had rolled in his direction after Haymitch had abused it. "Whoa, whoa, whoa, let me get this straight. You nearly dislocated my ass bones for a district girl?"

"You've gotta be kidding me. I'm her escort," scoffed Haymitch.

"In which ways?"

"Will you shut up?"

"Will you get it together?" Chaff tossed the ball in Haymitch's direction. It collided with his chest and made his breath catch in his throat, but Chaff did not relent. "This is year one. You can't start feeling things for your meal tickets, man. I never meant for you to get your heart involved in this thing when I insinuated that you should get with her."

"I haven't gotten with her."

"And neither have I. Alright?"

Meekly, Haymitch nodded, caressing his burning chest. "You win," he mumbled, after a while.

"You're damn right I win."

The clicking of heels interrupted the solemnity of the moment. Effie Trinkett had entered the gymnasium, clad in a dress that was practically made of ruffles. The Capitol women would love her. Haymitch wrinkled his nose in disgust.

"Were you ever planning on helping me devise an approach to get us sponsors?" She hissed.

Chaff pursed his lips, directing his attention to Haymitch, as well.

"I think you know the answer to that question." He paused, meeting Chaff's gaze. "No."

Haymitch dragged the "o" out theatrically, eliciting a chuckle from his friend.

Her mouth was agape. "How do you expect them to win if you don't intend on working to ensure that it happens?"

"Easy. I don't expect them to win." Chaff cackled at that, a mischievous glint in his eyes. Haymitch shrugged. "Face it, Trinket. Twelve doesn't have a chance. And it's all thanks to me:
"Go to hell." Although it wasn't ladylike, it made her feel fierce. Effie stormed out of the gymnasium, determination and persistence at the forefront of her mind.

The men continued their game. Chaff won.

OOO

Crying wasn't Effie's forté, especially when it came to crying at another's shortcomings. So, when she returned to the penthouse directly after her altercation with Haymitch, she didn't cry. There was no reason to. He'd been a lost cause from the very beginning. Now that she thought about it, it was probably for the best that he didn't properly insert himself into his role. From the start, Haymitch had operated as a jinx. Perhaps she could bring her tributes to victory all by herself. Increasing Haymitch's involvement would only decrease Katniss and Peeta's time in the arena.

Seneca had taught her to think that way—strategically, logically. She missed him every waking minute, though memories of him and her yearning for his presence was stationed towards the back of her mind these days. After all, it was crunch time. Could she do this alone? Could she do this without him?

She had to. If she wanted to make him proud beyond the grave, she had no choice. Because, had it been the other way around, Seneca wouldn't have quit fighting for her district and its tributes until they won or he was forced out of his position, by murder or promotion, whichever came first.

Effie lifted one of the frames she carried with her almost everywhere from her bedside table. In the photo, a beaming, clean-shaven Seneca Crane had his arm draped around her shoulders. She was wearing a denim jumpsuit that he'd bought her for good fun (because she loathed denim) as a belated birthday present. There was a hint of affectionate annoyance in Effie's gaze, as she glare-stared up at Seneca, her cheeks taut. Portia had opted to take the picture while Seneca held Effie down, but, to everyone's surprise, she didn't put up much of a fight. The sloppily written text in the bottom corner of the photograph read: Crane and Trinket, 3rd year. Go 12! It was his handwriting. She pored over the words for longer than was healthy.

Then, she sobbed.

OOO

Dinner was an uneasy affair for Haymitch that night. Trinket wasn't paying him any attention, not even the negative kind, and it irked him to wonder what exactly she had under her sleeve. What if whatever it was put him in bad standing with his father? He was much too prideful to simply apologize and ask her about the sponsor thing. Haymitch resolved to let fate control their situation, for now, not that it calmed him one bit. He tried not to look at or listen to Effie, instead focusing more heavily on the children than ever. Katniss and Peeta enthusiastically informed their mentor and escort of their training accomplishments, from Peeta's painting to Katniss' skills with tying vines and such together. It went in one ear and out of the other.

OOO

Perhaps to solidify his lack of perceived interest in his tributes' welfare, Haymitch scheduled a 1-on-1 basketball session with Chaff the following morning. Again, Effie interrupted them, except this time she was sporting a more casual look, both in her attire and her expression. The hem of her pantsuit scraped the court as she bent over to pick up Haymitch's basketball, which had gone astray.
"You came back to get an earful, did you? I didn't peg you for that kind," Chaff teased, his face drenched in liquid; Haymitch's own wasn't much better.

"No," Effie responded, simply. "I came to play."

The men exchanged an incredulous look, and then Haymitch straightened up. "I don't have time for this, Trinket."

"You don't have time for a lot of things, Abernathy. Just play me. You already see me as a terrible opponent. Take the win."

Haymitch sized her up, crossing his arms as he did. "And what do I get out of it?"

"I won't bother you with Games stuff for the rest of our time here."

"Interesting. And if you win?"

"You're obligated to help me out with Peeta and Katniss. Deal?"

Haymitch pulled Chaff aside and they whispered to each other for a couple of minutes. When they separated, Haymitch shot her a grin. "Deal, sweetheart."

OOO

She was much better than he'd imagined. Of course, he'd significantly underestimated her, but that was beside the point. Effie Trinket was the scam artist that sat on a bench at the park, near the basketball court, and had some confident idiot choose her as the "weak link" that would partner up with his opponent for a 2-on-2 game. Only, she was the polar opposite and she'd most likely wind up beating them to a pulp.

Haymitch was a formidable player. Initially, he'd been going easy on her; however, Effie quickly proved that she didn't need any favors from the likes of him. They trailed each other in points so closely, switching the lead every few shots, that it was almost the equivalent of a Chaff-Haymitch game. Chaff served as the referee. As the game grew more intense, people crowded into the gym to watch the game progress. Haymitch could've sworn he saw a watchdog or two weave their way through the multitude of people. Cameras flashed at all angles, catching shots for stories that were, for the time, without headlines.

In the end, Haymitch won by two points. He threw up his arms and allowed Chaff to lift him onto his shoulders, as he roared gutturally in response to the crowd's thunderous applause and cheers.

Effie didn't so much as scowl when Haymitch attempted to rub his win in her face while the throng of spectators dispersed. "That's not the reaction I'd expect when I clearly let you win," she said, in a singsong voice. "See you at dinner." She practically skipped out of the place, expertly dodging reporters on her way.

Bemused, Haymitch twisted around to face Chaff. "Did she—?"

"She's totally bluffing." Even so, Chaff's reassurance sounded slightly patronizing.

The reporters swarmed to Haymitch's side, asking him questions about his "relationship" with Effie Trinket. He vehemently denied any romantic involvement between them. The next day, the papers said differently.
Why did I make Chaff a bit of a prick? Because he is a prick! Nah, just kidding. But I figured that if he's seriously a Capitol, he wouldn't be the Chaff we all know and love. He's not a total jerk, either. He's just been brainwashed.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!