



The Hunger But Mainly Death Games

By Bratniss Everclean

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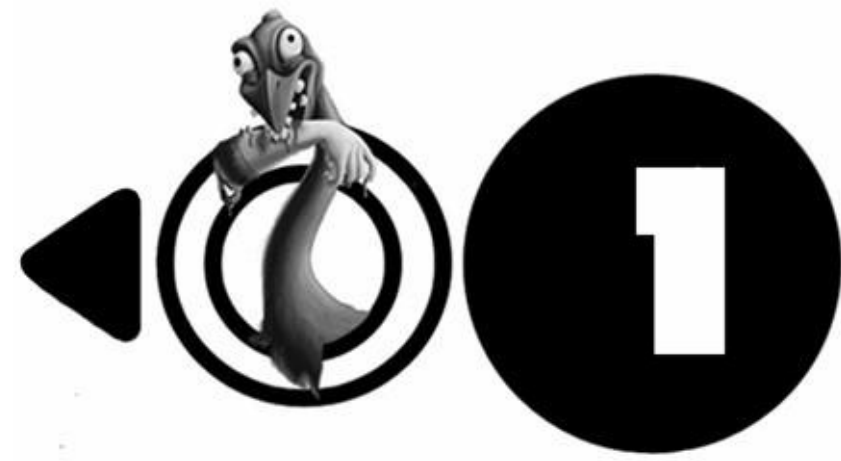
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When I wake up, my side of the trash heap is cold.

My quilt is missing. I lie there in the dark, rubbing my eyes, trying to think of where it could have gone. *I hope it didn't disintegrate*, I think. *After all, it's only some pieces of wet newspaper*. I reach out through the gloom, and find my answer: Pigrose, the disgusting little street urchin, has stolen from me. Pigrose is also my beautiful little sister.

As I lie here, shivering in the cold, I am left with one thought: *Could life get any worse?* Actually, it could. Because all of a sudden, I remember that today is no ordinary day. Today could end my very existence altogether.

Yes, that's right. Today is the first day of school.

Oh, and it's also Reaming Day, when kids between the ages of twelve and eighteen are chosen to participate in the Hunger But Mainly Death Games, which, as you might expect from the name, is a tournament in which they fight to the death, and occasionally experience hunger. The children picked are called "sacrifices," and they are almost guaranteed to die in an excruciating manner. But the Reaming isn't till the afternoon. On a day like this, you've got to take things one at a time. Besides, I'm sure I'll never get picked.

But with all of this on my mind, I'm also sure that I won't be falling back asleep. I clamber out of bed, rubbing the sleep and trash out of my eyes as I stretch my toes in the glass-filled mud floor. I glance over at Pig, who slumbers on peacefully. Pig is twelve. In our world, that's considered old enough—old enough to starve to death, to kill and to be killed. It's also old enough to see R-rated movies, so it's not all bad, I guess.

But Pig is my little sister, and some part of me will always see her as a baby. I let her slumber on and try to imagine what she's dreaming of. A warm bottle of formula? A new toy for bath time? A bright wooden block to bang up and down on the tray of her high chair? The inner workings of her baby-mind elude me.

Across the room, I can make out my mother's body curled up on a pile of old Styrofoam and greasy shirts. Fitting, the way she's claimed the best bed in the house for herself. Perhaps I should cut her some slack. She is my mother, after all. Then again, she's tried to bury me alive more times than I can count.

I stumble toward the shower and turn it on. When it's warm, I step in, trying to collect my thoughts as the garbage juice splashes over my long, brown hair. There's an old saying we have about garbage juice here: "It won't get you clean, but it probably won't make you any dirtier, and it might even knock off some of the old, dry trash that's stuck on you."

That's how things are in our region of Slum 12, known to most as the "Crack." Slum 12 is our nation's landfill, and the Crack is its most disgusting region. Any time there's a piece of trash that's deemed too gross to even be put in a landfill, it's smushed over into the Crack.

When I go downstairs, I see that Pig has left a present for me by the door. *How sweet*, I think, tearing off the bow. My jaw drops in horror as soon as I see what's inside: it's "cheese" from Acidbarf, the revolting and dangerous creature Pig refers to as her "cat." The cheese that dribbles from his four hundred pound body actually paints an accurate portrait of the creature himself: pitch black, oozy, and filled with semi-digested maggots. I'm repulsed by it, but I can't bring myself to tell Pig that. She loves Acidbarf too much. I'll never forget the day she brought him home: I was out from sweeping our dirt, when I looked up and saw Pig skipping towards me, with an unmistakably evil creature bounding towards her, about to tear her to shreds.

"Pig! Run!" I shouted, "MONSTER!"

"Don't be silly!" she called out. "This is my kitty."

"That is not a cat, Pig! THAT IS NOT A CAT!"

"Look! He's kissing me!" she exclaimed, as he batted her down and trapped her in his claws. "He's such a darling little—OW—fellow!"

I wasn't pleased by the thought of having another mouth to feed, and my body was already crawling with the ticks that dropped off Acidbarf's fur like dandruff. But when I looked into Pig's pleading eyes, I knew I couldn't disappoint her. And, to her credit, she's somehow convinced Acidbarf not to eat us. For our part, we pretend not to notice every time he drags the skinned corpse of a neighbor to our doorstep. Burying his kills in shallow graves, and not being eaten by him—this is the closest we will ever come to love. Which, from what I can tell, is how all relationships work, more or less.

Here in the present, the misery of my situation rushes back to me. I don't want to go back to school. Why do I even have to? Only a government as unjust as ours, which makes its own teenagers murder each other on national television, could cook up such a cruel form of torture. In some ways, I'd almost *rather* get stuck in the death tournament than sit through another school year. But we all know that never going to happen.

I step outside and gently shut the door—an egg carton and a rubber band—behind me. Without warning, I get the feeling that this will be the last time I see my home.

And then I remember. Every morning after I leave home, we move to a new home. That's because our "homes" are actually piles of trash that either blow away in the wind or get picked up by the sanitation department—which, for some reason, exists in our town made out of garbage.

It's still a bit early, so I take my time and stroll through the streets. I pass the homes of the Crack's least fortunate, who are so poor that they must spend their entire lives in used graves. I pass the Crack's sole restaurant, a Little Caesar's. A shiver runs down my spine.

When I come to the entrance of the Trash Mines, I pause for a moment. Trash mining is the only way of life for most in Slum 12. It's hard work, and it can often be humiliating, since the Mines also function as the entire nation's sewer system. This is bad enough in itself, but the government makes things even worse by forcing every worker to wear humiliating signs on their chests: "I Love Doody" runs a common one. Another, "Today, My Breakfast Was a Doody." A third, "Stay Out of My Mouth. Precious Doody Treasures Inside For Me to Munch On Later!"

But if you're a diligent worker, you can make something of yourself. Maybe your supervisor will notice you, and give you some of those plastic rings that hold soda cans, or an old hunk of mayonnaise that's turned hard. My father was one of the best trash miners, or so I'm told. When he proposed to my mother, he was able to give her an engagement ring with one of the biggest mayonnaise emeralds the Crack had ever seen.

But if my father's story illustrates the glitz and glamour of trash mining, it also shows just how dangerous it can be. I'll never forget the day he was swept away in an underground poop river. The currents were so fast that not even his life preserver diaper could save him.

I'm headed to the woods that surround the Crack right now. We call them "The Tires" because

well, that's what they are—stacks upon stacks of old tires, in a magnificent array of sizes and types and states of housing rattlesnake families.

I tread lightly as I near the electric fence meant to keep us out. We are told the Tires are too dangerous for teenagers. They were closed off a few years ago after some kids found a stash of old fireworks, and burned their hands a little while setting them off. You wouldn't expect a government like ours to lose sleep over their subjects' day-to-day safety, would you? But it's another example of their infinite evil: they want to make sure that teens don't get to kill each other the ways they naturally enjoy, like playing with things that explode and driving cars fast.

I've come to the Tires this morning in search of Greta. Greta is my best friend and closest confidant. We look like siblings, what with our dark coloring and thick unibrows; and we act like the kind of siblings who are secretly dating—or, as they like to call themselves, “twins.” Except that Greta and I are not in love. Not by a long shot.

What? Why are you looking at me like that? You think I don't know whether or not I'm in love with someone? Come on. Emotions and dating stuff can be pretty confusing, but give me credit when it comes to knowing my own mind. And it's not like every guy you're close with has to be a potential love interest.

Besides, Greta is great, but he's a little...extremely moody. Take my birthday last year. At the stroke of midnight, he appeared at my door.

“I wrote this poem for you,” he said, shoving a piece of crumpled paper into my hands.

The world must burn.

Lava exploding into faces.

Their skeletons are screaming now.

No survivors.

-From, Greta.

“Oh...uh...wow...” I began.

“Don't bother thanking me,” he said. “I just wanted to comfort you for being one year closer to the grave. Of course, I failed miserably, because comfort doesn't exist in this universe.”

“Thanks all the same,” I said. “See you at the fort?”

That fort is where I'm headed now. Greta goes there whenever he wants to think, or melt action figures. When I reach the ramshackle gate he's erected around it, I nod at the Greta's “sentry,” and let myself in. It was a fun day when we found that cave with all the old skeletons.

When I come across Greta, he's hunched over something.

“Hey, Greta. Whatcha doing?”

He spins around in surprise.

“Bratniss!” he sputters, a brief flash of anger flickering across his eyes. “How many times have I told you not to question me about my dark experiments!”

“It looks to me like you're banging on some batteries with rocks.”

“I wanted to see what was inside,” he says. “Well, come on in...if you dare...”

I take a seat on a shower curtain, while Greta paces restlessly back and forth.

“Something wrong?” I ask.

“Not really,” he says, “Other than the fact that for all I know, I'll be condemned to an excruciatingly painful death in just a few hours.”

I stare at him blankly.

“Because I'll get picked to be in that death tournament.”

I shake my head. Still nothing.

“Bratniss, I’m talking about the Hunger But Mainly Death Games!”

~~The Hunger But Mainly Death Games. Wow. I somehow forgot about them in the last few minutes.~~ What’s going on with me today? Whatever it is, it’s probably another sign that I’m not going to be picked.

“Greta, there’s no use dwelling on it,” I tell him. “This is what every teenager has to go through even if they live in some crazy alternate universe without death tournaments. Even then, the things adults do to them are just as bad. Like not letting them have co-ed sleepovers, or asking them to go get the mail.”

“We could do it, you know,” he says, pacing faster.

“What are you talking about?”

“We could jam a lightning rod into a barrel of toxic waste and put it in the graveyard and hope that it makes an army of zombies to kill the adults!”

“Uh…”

“Forget it!” he shouts. “It’s obviously too deep and complicated for you to understand!” Then, with a flourish, he throws his black velvet cape across his face and turns his back to me.

“Have it your way,” I say. “But come on, let’s go hunt.”

We walk out to the old hollow tree where we conceal our weapons. Which one will I use today? Bazooka? Anti-matter ray? Poison grenade launcher? Man, I love hunting.

All the weapons in the tree were my father’s. He found them down in the mines, and taught me how to use them. He knew it was the only way to make sure I’d be safe from my mother if he died.

“Bratniss, before we start,” he said on our first training day, “I want you to know that your mother loves you very much, in her own, special way. Unfortunately, that way is trying to murder you because she’s batshit crazy. So grab hold of this attack-chainsaw and let’s begin.”

To some, it might have been a sad moment. I was overjoyed. That may sound cold, but when I was a toddler, this was one of my lullabies:

Rock-a-bye, Bratniss, in your safe cage,

These bars will protect you when mommy’s enraged.

If she should break through them,

Don’t have any fear,

I made a machine that shoots tranquilizer darts at her if she gets too near.

Of course, hunting is illegal here. But if it’s a choice between that and starving to death, I’ll take hunting every time. Especially since starving to death is also illegal, and the punishment is “painful lethal injection.” Anything that makes our capitol city, Big Huge Nice Capitol City, look bad is treasonous crime. Even saying our country’s name out loud is punishable by death: Pandumb. Sort of a crappy name, right? But the reason the Capitol (I’m just going to call it the Capitol from here on out) chose both for length-reasons and because not every name in a parody book can be a pun) chose it is all too clear, according to their Wikipedia page: *We, the most advanced city in the world, called on our greatest minds to devise the best name for our perfect country. If they chose something so remarkably stupid, imagine how dumb that makes you. You’re so stupid that you would have probably called Poopytown. Yep, that’s how stupid you are. So obviously you’re too stupid to ever stand up for yourselves or make us stop killing your children.*

“You know, all this talk of the Hunger But Mainly Death Games is making me wonder what it would be like to kill a person,” I say. “I’m not sure I could do it.”

“I have a feeling you’d be fine,” Greta replies. “You just killed a family of squirrels with a single ninja star.”

“But killing a person is different.”

~~“You just picked up a venomous snake, swung it around to break its spine, and used it to lass another snake, and now you’re eating that snake raw.”~~

True enough. But all the same, something inside me whispers that if I ever had to turn my mustard gas gun on a person, I simply wouldn’t be able to. Mustard gas costs upwards of one wood chip. No way I’m paying that much to kill only a single human being.

After a while, we decide we’ve caught enough for one day. I look over my catches happily: I’ve bagged enough kills to keep my family eating raccoon gallbladders all winter.

And because today is no ordinary day, Greta and I decide to reward ourselves. Why not? We may never get the chance to eat an entire fresh hornets nest again.

“And may the odds—” he begins, mocking Pandumb’s official slogan for the Games.

“—Make it true that when you’re mortally wounded in an excruciatingly painful way, your body goes into shock and you don’t feel anything as you die,” I finish. It’s not particularly encouraging, but it is realistic.

Before we head off to school, we decide to see if we can get anything for our haul at the Blob, which is a semi-conscious gelatinous creature that pulsates in the middle of the Tires. Nobody knows where the Blob came from. Some say it’s always been there, at least since that chemical factory leaked into the Slum 12 retirement village. All I know is that when you leave a fresh kill on its membrane, sometimes it’ll slide out a few gold coins. That happens about twenty-five percent of the time. The other seventy-five percent, the Blob shoots out hundreds of fanged tentacles and tries to kill us. But if you want to survive in the Crack, those are odds you have to take. There is no other choice.

I mean, I guess could always apply for a job at the supermarket. The starting salary for a checker girl isn’t half-bad. In fact, it’s way more than I ever get from the Blob.

But that sounds way boring—*AAH TENTACLE!*

Twenty minutes and twenty narrow escapes from death-by-digestion later, we head off to school. On our way out, we make sure to say goodbye to Garbage Sally, the Blob’s wife.

“See ya, Garbage Sally,” I call out, waving at her floating figure, deep inside the Blob.

“*Heelp,*” comes her tiny reply. Greta and I chuckle. It’s so Garbage Sally to joke around like that.

When we get to school, I notice a group of incoming freshmen clustered together, chattering nervously. Funny. When I was a freshman, I felt as if I had finally made it—as if I had become a real teenager, not just some kid who had celebrated a thirteenth birthday. But looking at this group, I’m astounded at how small they seem. Is that how we looked to the older kids when we were freshmen? Probably not. All three grades above us were born during famines, so they were much tinier and weaker than we were.

The bell rings, and we start walking towards the doors. That’s when Pig catches my eye—and what I see makes my heart stop.

“PIG!” I shout. “PIG!”

She glances around as if she hears something, but she doesn’t see me, and continues to walk towards the doors. I break into a sprint. I must do something, or it will all be over for her.

“Pig!” I exclaim, panting as I catch up to her just in time. “For God’s sake, fix your hair. There’s this weird chunk of it standing straight up.”

There are some things I’ll never get about little kids, and one of the biggest is why their hair sticks up in weird ways so often. It’s like, four out of the five school days, they’ll come in with one part of their hair defying gravity like it’s tied to the ceiling. And next to it is a chunk that’s matted down like oily beaver fur. I’m not criticizing them. It happened to me, too. I just don’t know how it’s scientifically possible.

“Bratniss!” she hisses, her face turning bright red. “You’re humiliating me!”

“No need to get fussy. I’ll use some of my mommy magic to get it down,” I say, licking my hair and stretching it out towards her.

“Stop!” she cries. “I’m not a baby, Bratniss!”

I want to protest, but in my heart, I know she’s right.

“Shoot, I’m sorry, Pig. It’s just, you’re my little sister. I guess I can be overprotective sometimes…”

Her frown begins to fade. Stepping forward, she wraps her arms around me and gives me a hug, leaning down to whisper in her ear.

“Now, I don’t want to embarrass you in front of your friends. But do you want to do a quick diaper check before you go inside?”

“AAARGH!” she yells, breaking free of my grasp and running inside.

The rest of us file in slowly, under the watchful eyes of the group of insane murderers the Capitol uses as a police force—the ‘Peace’keepers, a name so blatantly ironic that they added the quote to themselves. People say that in the Dark Days, our school was a maximum-security prison. Funny how it seems fitting, when you consider that both prisons and schools are known for serving sub-par food and having group exercise yards.

“All right, you worthless pieces of trash!” shouts a ‘Peace’keeper as the thick steel gate clangs shut behind us. “Into your holding cells!”

A muscle-bound guard tosses me into the barbed wire enclosure that surrounds my desk. All around me, I hear the sounds of my classmates slamming into the rough floor, crying out in pain when they accidentally brush against the wire, that cursed devil’s rope, the bane of our existence. I sigh. *Back to the grind.*

“Hey, Bratniss! How was your summer?” comes a voice to the side of me.

It’s Magma, the daughter of Slum 12’s mayor. Her desk enclosure is right next to mine. Though we occasionally talk, I wouldn’t call her a friend. As the mayor’s daughter, she leads a life of luxury I can scarcely imagine: clothes not made out of briars and tumbleweeds, a water source that only has a few dead horses in it. As a result, there’s little we can connect over.

“Oh, pretty good. I found a new way to scrape rotting hunks of food out of deer intestines. It makes it a lot easier to dry the stomachs and make them into a tough jerky you can gnaw on while you’re hunting.”

From the look on her face, I can tell I’ve said the exact wrong thing. The barf that comes out of her mouth is probably another indication. I struggle to think of how to smooth things over, but never get the chance. The classroom door swings open, and in walks Ms. Woodruff. Tall, blond, and dressed in impeccably pressed rags, she cuts an imposing figure.

“Good morning, students. Let me be the first to say, ‘Welcome back.’ That, and, don’t forget that talking out of turn will result in immediate death by sniper. Now, what do we say to the sniper for giving his time to help us learn?”

“Thank you, Mr. Sniper,” we murmur.

“Have a good year, kids!” he replies with a cheery wave, up in his watchtower. I shake my head. How anyone can feel cheery on the first day of school is beyond me.

We start with history. I open my book to the first page. Like all pages of all schoolbooks in Pandumb, it is nothing but the sentence “Pandumb is great,” over and over. I take out my pen and begin to carefully trace every word, as is required by law. Call me a nerd if you want, but it’s sort of neat that to realize that by the end of the year, we’ll have gotten through this entire book!

As we trace, Ms. Woodruff relates the history of Pandumb, which we’ve heard countless times. How it rose out of the ruined societies of the Dark Days to bring stability and prosperity to the entire continent. How eventually, the government realized that, instead of peace and stability, what people

really like is evil and sadness and dying. How a group of traitors rebelled, lost, and were forced send their children to a yearly death tournament as punishment.

But suddenly, for the first time, something about it seems strange to me. So, when Ms. Woodru asks if anybody has any questions, I do something that no self-respecting kid should ever do: voluntarily ask one. The class turns and stares at me (as best they can, anyway, since our new shackles don't allow much head-movement).

"I don't get it," I say. "Why is that the only way?"

"I have no idea what you mean, Bratniss," she says.

"Wouldn't other ways work better? Like, what if they exclusively starved us? If that's all the focused on, we'd probably be much weaker, and just want to lie around on the dirt all day."

She shakes her head in exasperation. "You know as well as I do that scientists in the Capitol have proven that nobody *ever* rebels because of death tournaments. It's the Fifth Law of Thermodynamics for crying out loud. And you know that the Rebels themselves agreed to the Hunger But Mainly Death Games when they were invited to help the Capitol draft a new Constitution."

"If that's the case, why are the parts the Rebels signed filled with written-down screams of torture?"

"That was back when pens became sentient for a little while. The Rebels were probably squeezing them too hard."

My blood starts to rise. This is too much! Not *every* adult can be as insane as my mom. Some of them must like their kids! And for them, the very idea of the Hunger But Mainly Death Games must be infuriating beyond belief! Especially that year when there was no food in the arena, and the only weapons were machines that let you make bacon from humans!

But there's no time to dwell on it, because then the bell rings and, *Woo-hoo! Half day!* We rush off happily and run down to the Square, where the Reaming is about to take place. I know it's stupid for us to be excited - we're all aware that all half days, like snow days, end in utter misery.

When we reach the Square, we break out into groups and have to try to assign ourselves to the correct holding pen in order of birth month, all without speaking. Then we have to get in a circle and hold hands with people across from us in such a way that we form a "human knot," which we then have to untangle from without letting go of each other. Neither of these have anything to do with the Reaming—they're just stupid team-building games the government makes us play in an attempt to calm us down, so that the Square isn't flooded with nervous pee. After that, the Mayor takes the stage.

"Good afternoon, citizens," he says solemnly, looking out from the podium in his most formal full-body Uggs. "Today, we celebrate Reaming Day, which is sure to become yet another shining mayonnaise emerald in the exquisite diadem that is Slum 12's history. As is customary, I will now read a list of your fellow citizens' greatest accomplishments in the Games." He pulls out two note cards and begins to read.

"First, we had a winner one time." He moves on to his second card. "Second, when we died the other seventy-three times, it wasn't always accompanied by crying and pleading."

"Thank you," he concludes. "Now, please give your undivided attention to this message from President Satanman."

A large screen is unfurled at the back of the stage, and the image of a silver-haired man in a neatly tailored black suit appears on it. He glares out at the audience with his piercing red eyes, soft growling.

"Greetings, Slum 12," he begins, with a crooked sneer that exposes a row of razor-sharp steel teeth. "*Extremely evil* greetings. I have one question for you all: Are you ready to die?"

I shudder. For some reason, I can't shake the feeling that there's something...evil about this man. He licks his lips with his forked tongue and continues.

"You'd *better* be ready. For, as we say in the Capitol, 'Garbage men deserve a garbage death, when

garbage means painful.’”

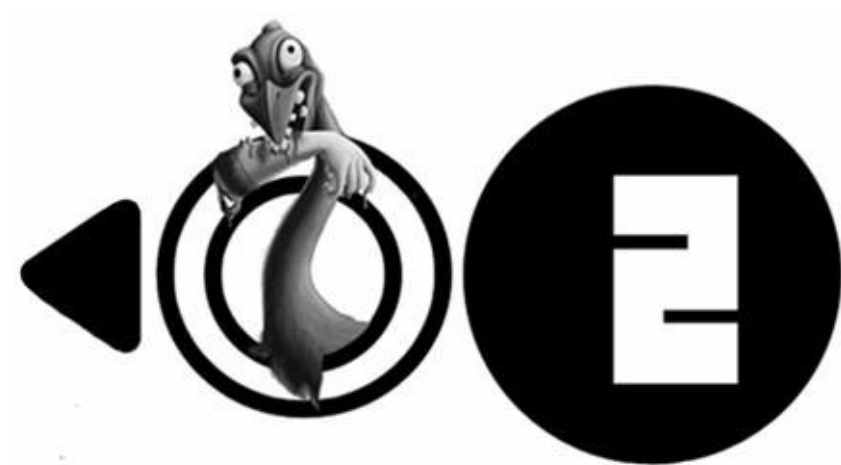
~~With President Satanman done, the Mayor calls up a short, squat woman in a garish pink wig, with a garish living Furby growing from the side of her head. Her name is Oofie Triptrip, and she is the official agent for Slum 12 sacrifices.~~

“Greetings, slaves!” she shouts merrily, as she heads over to the old Powerball machine. Inside there is a Powerball with each of our names on it. The crowd is getting tense, either because they’re wondering who will be picked, or because they have a vague feeling that even though lotteries no longer exist, they still have a chance to win.

The machine spits out a pink ball. So, a girl has been chosen first. That must be a good omen—I’m a girl, so the odds of them calling both a girl *and* one named Bratniss must be extremely low.

And I’m right. The name on that pink girl’s ball is not Bratniss.

It’s Pita Malarkey.



Every single person in the crowd bursts into laughter at the gender-based mix-up, as if it's the funniest thing that's ever happened in Slum 12. Come to think of it, it might be. As you've probably noticed, things are pretty grim around here. People have to devote so much of their time to surviving that they don't have much left over to develop senses of humor. I mean, this is Slum 12's most popular joke:

Q. What is black, filled with trash, and men work in it?

A. A mine.

So, yeah. Top Slum 12 woodchip dollar might be shelled out to put spoiled mustard on the dinner table, but ask a Slum 12 local why the chicken crossed the road and he might beat you up for knowing where a chicken is.

But the idea of suggesting that someone is the opposite gender is so earth-shatteringly hilarious to the townspeople that they can't help but laugh and laugh. It's a sound I've heard so few times before in Slum 12. And despite the joy behind it, to me the sound brings a sort of heartache. For this is the laughter of the destitute, the malnourished, and those mysteriously fat people that Third World societies always seem to have. These laughs are pained and shallow, interspersed with high, lonesome wails and barks followed by panting and sniffing, and then back to the bark—*Wait* a second! Get out here, hyenas! *Shoo! Shoo!*

The hyenas flee down the street. In the Square, their laughter has been replaced with shrill Pita shrieks. "I'm not a girl!" he cries. "Wait, I mean, don't make me go to the Games!"

But the crowd is having none of it, and has begun chanting at him:

*Pita is a girl,
Pita is a girl,
Rah, rah, shish-koom-ba,
Pita is a girl.*

But not everyone in Slum 12 is so mean-spirited. Some of them chant something moderately encouraging:

*Pita is a girl,
Pita is a girl,
We hope you do well in the tournament, Pita,
But still you are a girl.*

One man begins to belt out something a little different...

Party rock is in the house tonight,

Everybody just have a good—BZZZZZT

BZZZZZT BZZZZZT BZZZZZT

...before a line of laser beams quickly cuts him down. The ‘Peace’keepers are stridently anti-LMFAO. Of course, they’re also anti-laughter. But the politicians would never ban laughter outright since they enjoy laughing at people who are worse off than they are. After the lasering, the ‘Peace’keepers make their way through the crowd, showing anybody who’s laughing sad pictures, like puppies stranded in the rain and that sort of thing. Gradually, there is silence, aside from a group of boys in my class high-fiving each other to celebrate their successful pranking of Pita, and, in the distance, the gentle drizzle of hyenas peeing on our buildings.

Up onstage, Pita looks more helpless and pee-pantsed than ever. The Malarkeys are bakers by tradition, not scariness-of-being-selected-for-a-death-tournament-ignorers, and Pita is no exception. In fact, he might be the most unsuitable choice for the Games in Slum 12 history. Ah, wait, what am I talking about? That’s always going to be that boy who was born without bones.

But Pita might be a close second. How close? Well, he’s so afraid of bees that he won’t even spell the word. Instead, he writes it as “b - -”, which doesn’t solve anything, because as soon as he sees it, he remembers that the letter and the word sound the same, and he starts screaming because, “Ahh! It’s a bee shooting its stingers at me!”

Another example: you’ll often see him walking around the Crack carrying a seatbelt. No, there aren’t any cars in Slum 12. He uses that seatbelt to strap himself into regular seats. Ask him why and he’ll solemnly explain that “a chair is unsafe at *any* speed.”

So, does that clear things up for you?

As he stares out at the crowd in terror, our eyes meet for a moment. I quickly avert my gaze. Not because I can’t stand to see him like this. But, because, well...there’s one little thing I forgot to mention about Pita. He’s in love with me. Madly, insanely, stalkerishly in love with me. And it’s been that way for as long as I can remember.

I think back to the first day of nursery school. When my father dropped me off that morning, I had cried and screamed: I was worried that it might disrupt my plans to hunt one million percent of the time, and, of course, I was correct. Even worse, it was clear that none of my classmates shared my interests. They were way more interested in learning the alphabet or whatever than they were in learning how to rip a moose in half with their bare hands. Then make a helmet out of its skull. Then use that helmet to help kill more moose. Collect the skull helmets. Combine. Assemble. Super moose skull helmet. Infinite power.

But shortly after I arrived, I saw a dress-up chest in the corner. My spirits rose: I could hurl myself through one of the windows and escape! I rushed over. When I picked it up, though, its top flew open and a boy popped his head up out of the layers of clothing.

“Hi,” he said. “I’m Pita.”

“Why are you wearing a tiara?” I asked.

“Because when I grow up, I’m going to be the prettiest prince in all the land! And you,” he said, hopping out, “Will be my pretty pretty Princess!”

“Nuh-uh,” I said, astounded.

“Yes-huh,” he replied. “Maybe you aren’t ready yet. I get it. This is a new situation, you want time to explore it, play with a block or two, eat some Play-Doh. I get it. Go wild. But one day, I’m going to make you mine.”

I couldn’t believe the audacity of this tiara-wearing three-year-old boy. Who was he to talk to a three-and-a-half-year-old this way?

“You’re wrong!” I shouted. “I’m never going to be--”

The next thing I knew, Pita smashed through the very window I had been planning to escape from.

“Aaah!” I could hear him shouting as he ran out deep into the woods, “Bee! BEEEEEEEEEE BEEEEEEEEEEEE! BE-e-E-e-EEE-e-E-eeee!”

Since that day, Pita Malarkey has pursued me relentlessly. He’s tried to snare me with gifts, like the time in second grade that he got me a Barbie, which is this kind of prehistoric doll my father would occasionally dig up and give to me to show how fat people used to be.

When gifts failed, he tried to snare me by becoming a sort of platonic best friend, which he hoped would eventually lead to me falling in love with him, after we became close enough for me to see “the real Pita.”

“Who are the hot boys? Dish it, sista!” he would say, “Let’s rollerblade over to their houses, so you can flirt!”

All of this is bad enough, but recently, there’s been a development that’s even worse: I think Pita might be getting a bit...stalkery. I can’t be sure, but there was an incident a few months ago that got me thinking. Thinking that maybe, Pita was trying another route to my heart. One through my father.

Or rather, by replacing my father. Because one afternoon, the doorbell rang, and there on our doorstep sat a massive loaf of bread in the shape of a human, with a big nametag that read “Loaf Erickson.” My mom looked the crusty Nordic breadfellow over and screamed with joy, “I am instantly in love with you!”

Like any stepfather made entirely of bread, Loaf had some curious habits. He would lie completely still for incredibly long periods of time and, each week without fail, he would grow what I had sworn was a full-body mold beard. But that didn’t matter. He was warm, soft, and smelled of butter. My mother swooned. Meanwhile, I noticed that one of Loaf’s eyes was a video camera.

I also noticed that inside Loaf’s stomach was a sound recorder, that one of his feet had a vacuum that collected hair, and that higher up, in the calf, was a hair-doll maker. Loaf’s right eye had what appeared to be an infrared camera. For a supposedly normal bread-stepdad, he had a lot of stalking gadgetry baked inside him. In other words, Loaf Erickson *stunk* of Pita.

I sent Loaf to bread hell on a stormy night. “What are you doing?!” shouted my mother when she walked into the kitchen to find me assembling knives, cups of water and other bread-unfriendly weapons. But before I could explain that this was a routine surgery and that no, no, nothing to see here, move along please, ignore any yeasty screams, she had brandished a blade from her mom can and told me that whatever I did unto Loaf would befall me, except tenfold.

“Why are you suddenly speaking in biblical terms, mo—”

“Layeth thou one fingereth on my Loaf, and thou shalt die, daughter of thine.”

“Mine. You mean *mine*.”

“Whatever. Also no allowance for one *week*.”

“Mom, you’ve never given me an allowance.”

“I’ll kill you!”

So it came down to a simple choice: kill Loaf and be killed by mom, or let Pita spy on me. The choice was simple.

It’s incredible how easily a wet knife slides through a bread-man’s neck. I’ll never forget the sound of my mother’s hatchet scraping against the walls as she methodically pursued me that night. “Bratniss, Bratniss, come meet your new daddy. He’s long and hatchet-y, and he can’t wait to meet you,” she sang out.

I’m pulled back to the present by Pita’s shrieks. “No! I am *not* a girl!” he wails through his shirt, which he has stretched over his head in an attempt to hide his tears. He’s crying so hard now that he looks like he’s getting that fat kid in a white t-shirt at a pool look. “How can this be happening to me? Mr. Bear, *what are we going to do?*” He glances down at his side, and his face turns white. “Oh my God. Mr. Bear

where are you? Are you hiding behind my bed again? This is no time for your silly bear games! I need you right now!”

We’re all victims, here: Pita, the crowd, and, most importantly, me. Every cell of my body is crying out for me to end this. It’s just too mortifying.

Wait, wait, wait. Come on. I can deal with thirty seconds of seeing someone embarrass themselves. I don’t even need to look! I’ll just stare at the ground, and ride this out. And, already, I can feel the beginning to pass!

And now that I’ve successfully overcome it, I can look up again! I do, and Pita’s halfway naked.

“Remember what they say, Pita,” he says under his breath, “If you get nervous onstage, imagine the entire crowd...sees you naked. That’s it, right?” He begins unzipping his jeans. “Right?”

Well, that’s it for me. “I’LL DO IT!” I shout, “I’LL TAKE HIS PLACE!”

A deep silence falls over the crowd. Ah, crud. I did it. I went and volunteered for a death tournament. I see Oofie’s bedazzled finger pointing at me. Her voice booms demonically.

“YOU!”

She takes a nip from her helium flask and her voice returns to normal.

“You...are a girl?” she repeats, as Pita nervously twirls one of his braids.

“Uh, yeah, technically, but maybe we can look past that, and—”

“And you wish to TAKE HIS PLACE AT THE—OH DAMNIT, HOLD ON.”

She takes a long, hard slug from the bottle, really choking that helium down. Tears stream from her face as the sludge slides down her throat. She polishes off the entire thing and sloppily wipes her mouth in that way that people with problems do. “Okay, that should hold me until dusk,” she says. “So, you want to take his place? That is so brave of you, darling. Especially because we were actually going to just pick another name.”

“Oh, great! Let’s do that, and forget about this whole—”

“But this makes everything so much easier. Who has time to pick a single ball from a Powerball machine these days? Get onstage.”

I realize then what a catastrophic mistake I’ve made. But perhaps there is still a way to escape...

“Sounds good, Oofie,” I say, with a big smile. “But do you mind if I give my sister Pig a hug?”

She beams at me. “Not at all, sweetheart.”

I rush over to Pig and embrace her tightly.

“Listen,” I whisper in her ear, “They just called your name. Go on up there, be strong for me. No tears, now.”

“Uh...Bratniss? You’re mic’d up, hon,” Oofie calls out from the stage.

“Ha ha! Of course, of course,” I reply, “Just a little joke between sisters, you know how it is! Now I’ll simply start walking up to the stage. Here I am, getting closer. Closer still!” But my trick of sprinting directly out of the Square fools no one, and I am dragged onto the stage. My God, this is actually happening. I’m going to die.

Then it hits me. Death isn’t even the worst part of this. Oh, no, not by a long shot. Because I just saved Pita: *he must think I like him now*. And if I don’t live to survive the Games and tell him otherwise, he’ll go to his grave thinking it, and so will everyone else.

But before I can find a different boy and make him my boyfriend, Oofie grabs my hand, and places a small, plastic-wrapped item in it. When I look closer, my heart begins to race. *Candy*.

This is only the second piece of candy I’ve had in my life, after that hunk of rat meat that fell in the sugar jar once. All thoughts of death and Pita-liking slip away for the moment as I gaze at it, imagining what it would feel like on my tongue, and my second and third tongues, which humans eventually got from using cell phones too much. Then, as quickly as it was given, the candy is taken away.

“It’s a ritual,” Oofie explains, casually pocketing the shit-flavored lollipop. “Sorry, kid.” Then she jumps right back into the Reaming, directing her anger at the schoolboys who pranked Pita.

“All right, you little twerps, I hope you know what karma is, because it’s right about to bite you on your butts. There’s a higher power, who makes sure we all get what we deserve, not factoring in kids with cancer and all those people who die unhappy. Mark my words...”

Looking at the schoolboys of Slum 12, I can’t help but feel a bit of comfort. Their work in the mines has made them strong and brave, and having one of them as something of a partner in the Games wouldn’t be too bad. I’d even be happy with a kid from the one place here that’s worse than the Crack: a quaint underground township known as the Taint, which is the spot where Slum 12’s sewage and corpse streams converge. I bet those Taint kids would love a chance to get their sludgy paws on some surface-dwellers. And you never know, maybe I’ll even get that one boy standing at the corner of the stage: the incredibly handsome, incredibly honorable Peeta Mellark.

“And with that *lesson* in mind,” continues Oofie, glaring, “the Slum 12 male sacrifice for this year’s Hunger But Mainly Death Games is...”

Oofie reads the Powerball.

“Damnit. Pita Malarkey.”

The roar of the crowd almost drowns out Pita’s wails. Almost. But nobody takes notice, because they’re all too busy celebrating the fact that they haven’t been chosen this year, by performing the Slum 12 Slide, a traditional dance with urban undertones. A DJ’s voice booms out over the loudspeakers:

Two steps to the right!

Two steps to the left!

Now stand up straight, cuz you’s not dead!

As the crowd dances on, Oofie gravely electric slides over toward us. “It’s time to meet your mentor, kiddos,” she says, artfully pulling jazz fingers across her face.

She then Crip-walks over to the end of the stage, where she beckons to a big, bedraggled, bearded bear of a man who, despite the five foot high stage upon which Oofie stands, still towers over her. Over the clamor of the crowd, I can hear only snippets of what Oofie is yelling at the man. From what I can make out, it’s...*a harsh warning about copyright laws?*

Finally, the giant man steps on stage with her and dougies over to us. When he speaks, it’s in a booming brogue, “Pleased ter meetcha! Hagridmitch be the name. An’ you must be th’ newest students o’ Hogwar—”

SLAP! Oofie’s hand leaves a bright red mark on Hagridmitch’s face.

“What did I *tell* you? You’ll get us all canned! His name is *Pita*. And her name is *Ratface*.”

“It’s Bratniss,” I say.

“Ratlips?”

“Bratniss.”

“Catpiss?”

“Fine,” I sigh. “Catpiss.”

“No, no, I’ll meet you halfway,” she replies. “Stacey it is.”

“Looks more like a Hermione ter me, but—” Hagridmitch interjects. But before he can finish, Oofie pulls a collapsible spiked bat out of her purse, and begins whacking him with it.

“Bad Hagridmitch! Bad, bad Hagridmitch! What did I tell you about copyright laws? Do you want to get *sued*? Is that what you want?”

Slowly, remorsefully, Hagridmitch gets to his feet. “Aw, I’m sorry, Oofie. I am, I tell ye. But I’ve

got jes' the thing ter make it up ter you's kids," he says, reaching into his bag.

"Hagridmitch, you shouldn't have," Oofie responds.

"Now, now, it ain't nothin'!" he says with a wide grin.

"No, I mean you shouldn't have by law," says Oofie. "Even *giving gifts* is illegal here!" We all crack a smile, because *wow we live in a cruddy place*.

"Slum 12 laws be darned," Hagridmitch says, pushing Oofie to the side and opening his satchel to reveal...a basket of fresh eggs.

The eggs give us all pause. Even Oofie is taken aback by the gesture. In Slum 12, you see, eggs cost more than human life (which is, of course, incredibly cheap here, but you get the point). As you know, an egg comes from a chicken. And we all know where that chicken comes from. Yes, that's right, the Chicken Overlord, a hermit who lives deep in the forest and is a *notorious* jerk when it comes to bartering. We're talking your wife for an eggshell; that brand of jerk.

"Thank you, Hagridmitch," I say. "They look delicious."

"*Delicious?*" he sputters. "Why, I never hard a such a thing! These be none o' yer normal *eating* eggs, child" he responds, looking into the TV cameras and cocking an eyebrow, "These be *dragon* eggs."

Oofie's hands curl into fists and she barks, "Get him out of here! You're *done!* *Canned!*"

Meanwhile, Hagridmitch squats down so that he's eye level with us and asks, "Do ye want to meet my pet giant-spider? His name is—" Oofie tackles Hagridmitch.

As we are being led away from the rather one-sided brawl, Magma, the mayor's daughter brushes by me. And as she does, I'm pinned to the floor by something she discretely tosses at me. I push it off of me to find that it's an enormous gold pin of a huge, flightless bird with a stupendously idiotic smile on its face—a mockstrich, the creature the Capitol once tried to turn genetically engineer into a war machine to help put an end to the rebellion. The plan fizzled after it became clear that the bird preferred laughing at people and collecting shiny pipe-cleaners more than killing rebels.

"Magma!" I yell after her. "Why did you give me this? Is it a present?"

She whips around, eyes wide with horror. "*Don't say the p-word!*" she whispers desperately. But it's too late.

"Who here engaged in present-distribution?" shouts the leader of the 'Peace'keepers present task force that's zoomed down from a helicopter to surround us.

"Nobody!" I manage. "This isn't a present. It's my grandmother's lucky mockstrich pin. I was just saying how much I wish my grandmother were *present* today."

"Why the heck would you wish that?" the leader asks. "This would be a terrible moment for her."

"Look, are you going to laser me or not?" I ask.

The leader eyes us suspiciously, and then turns to walk away. "I guess today's your lucky day, apart from the Hunger But Mainly Death Games thing," he says.

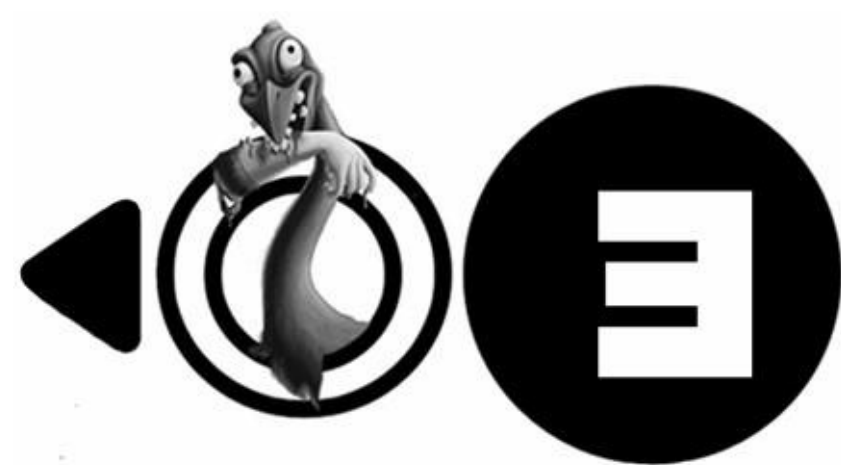
But I avoid that trap only to fall straight into another. Because when I turn around, I see something that fills me with terror.

No. No, no, no, no, no. This can't be happening.

Pita is on one knee, looking in my direction.

And he is asking me something.

"Will you marry me?"



Pita sweeps past me and grasps the hands of his best friend: Will Umarimi.

Phew, that was close. But I'll have to be more careful going forward. Pandumb is a nation in which improbable twists occur with terrifying frequency, and if you're not vigilant you can end up dead after which M. Night Shyamalan might use you in whatever his latest abysmally bad movie is.

Pita bends down to speak with his friend. Will Umarimi is a small person. No, not a "*midget*." Or "*dwarf*." Those are hateful terms, And shame on you for thinking them. Will is a *dwidget*, which is super-helpful, non-offensive term if you don't want to sit there and guess which kind of short person you're looking at. I should probably mention here that no one has ever had the heart to inform Will that he's a *dwidget*.

"I'm telling you," Will says to Pita, "you need to hide as much as you can in the arena. Holes in trees, cupboards. Backpacks will do, too."

"I can't, I'm..." Pita's voice drifts off.

"You're what? Why can't you just hide in small places? If it works for me, it'll work for you. We're best friends, remember?"

"Okay, fine," says Pita. "I'll hide in small places. Anything else?"

"I guess just that if you want to stay alive, you have to be ready to do what it takes."

Pita nods solemnly in understanding. So, he realizes that he'll have to drop his pursuit of me. I'm a bit relieved to know that on top of everything else, I won't have to grapple with any teen love issues in the arena.

"And what it takes," Will continues, "Is the power of love! If you love something, never let it go. Totally latch onto it and turn it into your kissing post! Only then can you win the Hunger But Main Death Games!"

Pita nods his head in vigorous, celebratory understanding, all while maintaining unblinking, drooling eye contact with me, and howling in that wolfy way cartoon characters in love do. Then Pita gently punts Will back into the crowd. He soars gracefully through the air, too high for me to grab and strangle.

But I have to remind myself that some of my anger is misplaced. After all, it's not Will's fault that I'm about to be shuttled off to the Games with a guy who has an insane crush on me. No, the real villains here are the people who enforce Pandumb's evil policies. The people who, out of their wild lust for kid death-based basic programming, host a nationwide, televised event in which teenagers are forced to kill each other in a dynamic, action-packed arena, with lots of cool, futuristic weapons and amazing traps, and...

And the more I think about it, the more amazing this all sounds on the spectators' end. I guess the only thing I can actually get angry about is that my own best friend hasn't come to say goodbye to me and maybe to smack some sense into Pita, too. Where can he be? Where can Kobayashi the talking dog be?

Oh, wait, I mean, “Greta.” Perhaps he’s too busy with his experiments. After all, Mondays are when he tapes pencils to his canines and puts on his walrus simulator hat.

But these are my final moments in Slum 12. I’d have hoped I’d be able to share them with someone I cared for. So I guess there’s just you, diary, or whatever it is that I’m writing in/talking into. I suppose that you will have to provide the comfort I would have received from—AGH! An arm thrust around my neck in a headlock from behind, and I’m slammed into the ground.

“Cross-face chicken wing,” Greta hisses into my ear, tightening his grip. “Go ahead, try to escape.”

But I can’t. Greta’s forearm is jammed against my throat and, nice as escaping sounds, lack of oxygen has always weakened my body for some reason.

“Now, quick, stand up so I can show you how to take a punch in the face.”

With what little air I have left I manage to squeak out a few words, “Greta, let go! I just want to say goodbye to you.”

And then, as quickly as he was on me, Greta releases the hold.

“Sorry, Bratniss. No time for that. Only time for chokeholds. I’ve got to get back to the factory immediately. I’m making a…” Greta glances around furtively and cuts his voice down to a whisper. “...b-o-a-m-b.”

So, that’s what he’s been doing all along! Building a boomb! I should have known that Greta would stop at nothing to save me, regardless of his terrible spelling! Still, I can’t believe how daring his plan is—to bomb the Hunger But Mainly Death Games arena!

“That’s right,” he says, “Blowing up the Blob is the only way to make it rain free sandwiches.”

“Oh.”

“Here,” he says, handing me a slip of paper, “take this poem with you. I’ve really gotta get back,”

I look at the paper. It’s not a poem.

“Greta, this is just a page torn out of your diary! It says here that if there’s one girl at school whom you want to run your experiments on, it’s—”

“Wrong poem!” he says, snatching the paper out of my hand. He replaces it with a new page before slinking as mysteriously as he can back into the crowd. I put the shard of beer bottle glass I used as a monocle in front of my eye and read:

There was once a Sweet Princess

SCHFFPLLLLTTT

Wait a second where is her head

Hand me those pliers, Intern Larry

These wires are all on wrong you fool

ZZT ZZT ZZT

All systems are go

Robot princess up and running

But we are not done here

Readjust those ear-pegs, Larry

Thank you, Larry

Okay now we are done

Charming guy, that Greta. Helpful, too. Just then, a ‘Peace’keeper grabs me by the arm and begins leading me and Pita to the outskirts of town, where we’ll be held until our transport to the Capitol arrives. For the first time, it hits me: they’re actually going to make me do this. My mind races—what was it that my grandfather told me when I was little, as I sat upon his knee? What was that advice he had about accidentally volunteering for a death tournament? Oh, yeah: “Do not ever do that, Bratniss”

Not in a million years.” Crap.

~~But when we arrive at my new quarters, I can't help but remember grandpa was kind of an idiot because this is the nicest cage I've ever seen! Shiny metal bars on all sides and wheels on the underside bars for easy transporting. So, the housewidow tales were true: the Capitol really does know how to treat a prisoner. “You go to the bathroom through the bars on the floor,” the guard says sweetly.~~

But the wonders don't end there: the town mule drags the cage up to the administrative building where the cage is picked up and tossed inside the most beautiful room I have ever seen in my life. It has all the comforts of home—no couch, no rug, and huge, human-hating bats on the ceiling, right down to the black mold that covers basically everything. But the Capitol hasn't stopped there—no, not at all. They've gone so far as to install a table! And not just an ordinary table. Ordinary tables are battered and broken and on fire. This table has four entire legs, and a bowl filled to the brim with a slice of bread.

I'm inspecting the slice for rats when my mother and Pigrose show up. I quickly pocket it, knowing that if mom sees sliced bread she'll have a full-on Loaf flashback and probably try to kill me.

“What bread, you old loon?” I accidentally blurt out.

“How could you leave us!?” my mom yells at me through the bars. For a second, I think about trying to explain that the Reaming is a lottery and that it wasn't my *choice* to—oh wait, it was totally my choice. I *volunteered* to go to the Hunger But Mainly Death Games. Damn it. Mom kind of has no choice there.

“You're out of this family now,” she spits, desperately trying to wiggle her head through the bars so she can get a clean bite at me. “No more Sunday family trips to rat church, no more waking up each morning to the friendly neighborhood doo-doo man Luigi, calmly screaming to let him inside before the street-badgers eat him! And need I remind you, you're leaving it all for a lousy death tournament!”

My mom may hook up with bread, but she has a point. And for the first time, I start to feel terribly sad about leaving these two behind. My mother must realize it, because she pockets her knife and opens her arms. But when I go in for a hug, I lean too far forward, and the slice of bread falls out. *Crisis averted*—

“WHAT is my husband's severed hand doing on the floor!?” she shouts, shaking the bars of my cage. “MURDERER! You *murderer!*”

The ‘Peace’keepers come to grab her, but she's too strong for them, and bursts free. Fortunately, their highly trained anti-mom gorilla is stronger. “I want my husband back, you bread-racists!” she shrieks through Koko's thick fur, as he carries her out.

I'm left alone with Pigrose. Here, in the few moments I have left with precious little Pig, I need to sum up all my older sisterly knowledge into a few parting words. As I gaze at her, she still seems so small, so vulnerable. But she was right this morning. She's not a baby anymore. And now, she'll have to fend for herself entirely. All I can do to help is speak from the heart.

I grab her by the cheeks, force her face between the bars and say to her, “Cow says ‘moo,’ Pig says ‘Moouoo.’”

Pita's cage has been set down next to mine, and he's saying goodbye to his parents, Clark Malarkey and #0432, a mom-bot.

“Watch out for bugs, kiddo!” says Clark, slapping a can of bug spray into Pita's palm. “And remember that old saying: ‘if it's leaves of three, that's just for wiping pee.’ Or maybe it's ‘when the leaves is four, yo' butt's gon' be sore...’”

Clark pauses, deep in thought, before saying, “You know what, to be safe maybe just wipe your butt with rocks.”

“HELLO PITA,” says #0432, clamping her metal pincers onto Pita's shoulder. “I AM YOUR MOTHER. BIRTHING A

“Wait,” says Pita. “You guys realize this isn’t camp I’m going to, right?”

“Here, son,” says Pita’s dad, handing him a plastic bag through the bars of the cage, “I brought some swim trunks and your sun tan lotion. But you know how sensitive your skin is, so don’t push it. If you think you’re getting a burn, stay indoors at all times. The counselors will understand, and the other boys will respect you.”

The Malarkeys are ushered out and Pita and I are left alone. “Whew!” Pita exclaims as the door slams shut, “I thought those totally lame bozos would never leave us alone!”

Oh my God. It’s already begun. Does anybody know if there’s some way to turn off your hearing? Like, I don’t know, a secret button you can press on your head, or some kind of meditation?

Pita’s tone softens. “I...look, I know I’m a real idiot sometimes, so I’ll shut up now. But I need to tell you something: I appreciate what you did out there today, all right? And I’m sorry. I’m sorry that our first day of going out has to be this way.”

“Pita, listen to me: that was not—”

“Shh, shh,” he says. “You don’t have to hide it. Neither of us has to, anymore. We’re in love.”

“No, we are not!”

“Say what you want, Bratniss, but your actions have spoken louder than a trillion words. And I want to do the same: so I’m giving up my former ways. I know you see me as a dangerous man, something of a playboy. But I’m ready to leave all of that behind for you. I’m sorry you had to do something so drastic to get me to realize that.”

Before I can answer or vomit, the doors are flung open and we’re carried out to the train that will take us to the Capitol. A small crowd has formed to watch us go, and there, at the front, struggling to break through a line of ‘Peace’keepers.

“Bratniss!” he calls, “Bratniss!” But he can’t get through. Before the doors of the train slide shut, I can hear his final message to me. “Always remember, it doesn’t matter if you die, because this is probably just the dream of some dinosaur, anyway!”

The moment I step inside, I have to cover my eyes from the unbearable brightness. As it turns out, Capitol folks live by the light of stuff other than fire. The Capitol lights its rooms with tiny glass beads filled with distilled light-juice, which are powered by a colony of inch-long bunnies that live on the walls. At least that’s what Oofie tells me. I don’t have a clue why she’s laughing so hard, but I can’t think of a better explanation.

I am taken to my room, which is actually just a larger cage for my cage to be locked into. It’s filled with the strangest objects, and Oofie can tell I’m confused.

“Do you know what any of this is?” she coos.

“Not exactly.”

She points to a stack of big, cushiony chairs and says, “Let’s start simple. Massage chairs. With a special massage chair massage chair on the bottom to massage the massage chairs. Keeps ’em happy and healthy. Makes sense now, right?”

Kind of. Well, not really. Why would they need multiple massage chairs? And what the heck is a massa—

“Cat got your mouthsnake?” Oofie says, handing me a tin can. “Let’s start even simpler. Look. A watch in a can. Now, you see the genius of it all.”

“But why do you need these things?” I ask.

“Why does anyone need anything?” Oofie replies breezily. “You own things so you can have them. Then you don’t need them anymore.”

She has me there, I guess. Wait, no she doesn’t—

“Let’s level with each other, Brat,” Oofie says. “We both want the same thing here: Dumbbuxx@”

I'm your agent, and I get you sponsors. Sponsors get you and me money. And Dumbbuxx® buys u
stuff like hovercars and pocketdogs.”

“No! What I want is to not die in the arena!” I pause. “And maybe a pocketdog or two if I survive
I add.

“You're not listening, beb. Think of it this way. Some rich benefactor sees you in the arena an
takes a shining to you. He likes your moves. He digs your style. ‘Hey,’ he thinks to himself, ‘I
going to spend one billion dollars to get that little missy a toothbrush.’”

“But I brought my own toothbrush,” I say. “And, anyway, a toothbrush isn't going to help me w
the Hunger But Mainly Death Games.”

Oofie's eyes narrow. “That attitude is gonna get you killed. And even worse, prevent me from
getting my bonus. So when I say jump, you jump. And when I tell you that *Dr. Doolittle 7: Rise of th
Planet of the Hermit Crabs* is a good idea, you throw on your animal doctor lab coat, and goddamn
you learn how to talk to hermit crabs. So you'd better listen to me when I say you need sponsors
survive. Now why don't us girls do some window shopping?” she says with a conspiratorial a
handing me a catalog.

On its cover is an illustration of a man in a mirror tuxedo throwing a lavish party on the roof-de
of his hot air balloon yacht. Far below, you can see innocent children struggling to survive in th
Hunger But Mainly Death Games. Disgusted, I flip past the cover and open to a random page:

“Two pine needles,” it reads. “Who KNOWS what a resourceful sacrifice could do with the
rascals! Just thinking about it fills us with wonder and amazement. \$20 billion.”

I flip to the next page.

“Water! The most vital substance on Earth (at least for those poors outside the Capitol who don
hydrate using Water 2: Sprite®). Any sacrifice who doesn't have it is sure to die. So send them som
of this thirst-quenching liquid and watch them rise to the top! You can also just buy it and throw
out, so that the sacrifice will be more likely to die of thirst. Either way, you will get a tax deductio
\$1 trillion per bubble wrap bubble-worth of water (bubbles may include large portions of air).”

I keep flipping, trying to find something, *anything*, that could be useful to me. One ‘gently-use
earplug? The dust from a moth that flew into a windshield? Suddenly, I realize something:

“Oofie, these all suck.”

“I can't help you if you won't help yourself, Bratniss!” she says briskly.

“You don't need to help me. I don't want any of this. Bye,” I say, as I dramatically turn and wal
into the bars of my cage.

Later that evening, I'm let out and escorted down to the dining room. After I've been given m
rabies vaccine, and the standard “You start foaming at the mouth at the table then we put you *down*
girlie” talk, we're seated. Our group consists of me, Pita, Oofie, Hagridmitch, several of th
technicians who tend to our cages, and a few Xeroxes. Xeroxes are the poor souls who have bee
sentenced to a life of servitude in the Capitol for committing some trivial crime back in the Slum
According to the company handbook, they're referred to as “personal assistants,” but if you ask m
they're little more than slaves.

The Xeroxes are famed for their encyclopedic knowledge, which they obtain in arduous trainin
sessions. Of course, Oofie is as eager to show off her possession's skills as if they were her own.

“You two simply must see what the Capitol has been kind enough to train these Xeroxes to do. Siri
Which one of you is Siri? Present yourself!” A young Xerox with flowing blond hair steps forward an
curtsies.

“Good evening, Miss Triptrip. How may I serve you?” she asks softly, her hands clasped togeth
and her eyes turned towards the floor.

Oofie pokes me. “These freaks know the answer to everything, darling. Go ahead, try her out.”

“Hmm...” I say, ~~trying to think of something that won't insult the intelligence of this bright-eyed~~ girl. “Okay. Siri, what is the meaning of life?”

She responds with a demure smile. “All evidence to date suggests that it's successfully avoiding suicide.”

“Ahh-ha-ha, charming, simply charming!” says Oofie. “Who knew that they would have taught you to be so deliciously funny! Well, off to the gallows, Siri. That's your punishment for failure.”

“No! Wait!” I protest. But she's already gone, and dinner is being served. Life, it would appear, is cheap to the Capitol. Or maybe that was already clear from everything else.

When the first course is placed in front of me, I can hardly believe my eyes: the meat that they're serving looks nothing at all like roadkill. But, weirdly, this doesn't appear to be meat at all. It's a plate of pale green mush with some brown mush on the side.

“Oofie, what is this?”

She rolls her eyes. “It's organic, grass fed, rehydrated Alsatian snow peas with kale sausage. It'll help you cut some unwanted fat off those bones. Wouldn't want you to die of fat cancer before you started the games.”

Unwanted fat? Last time I checked, in Slum 12, 4'3" and 64 pounds is perfectly normal. I distinctly remember the girls at school being amazed at how much I could eat on Thursday pizza box lunches. “Eat the cardboard, rat-girl! Eat the cardboard!” they'd chant, cheering me on like the good friends they were.

Oofie continues explaining the menu. On the train, our food will be “gluten-free vegan,” and “macrobiotic, probiotic, antibiotic and neurobiotic...”

I decide against using my spork and tentatively stick my spoonfe into the mush, which causes a yellowish ooze to spill out. Everything smells like mulch.

“There aren't any other options on the menu, are there?” I ask with a grimace. To my surprise, the people around me erupt in pained cries.

“This must be some sick ploy!” shouts one of the cage technicians. “What if she's trying to give you cancer? Oh my God, I think that just hearing what she said gave my ears cancer. I THINK I HAVE EAR CANCER!”

Even Oofie looks terrified. “Take it back! Take it back!” she pleads. “You may have nothing to live for, but there's no reason to sentence us to cancer-death! And eating algae we scraped off the seafloor is clearly the only way to avoid that!”

“Sheesh! All right!” I exclaim. “I take it back!” These people may be crazy, but Pita has to know what I'm talking about!

But he doesn't. Or at least that's how he acts. I guess the last thing I should expect from the boy who is madly in love with me is for him to stick up for me at a dinner. How totally unreasonable of me. Instead he just kind of sits there, in his chair, like an empty, empty chair—wait. Pita isn't in his chair.

That's when I realize that there's no way the table leg could have been painting my toenails and blowing on them underneath the table this entire time. I lift up the table cover and sure enough, there he is, bottle of polish in hand, and...well, my nails look really good. One toenail is a little smudged from what appears to be drool but I'd happily give take that in exchange for—No! What am I thinking?! “Get away, Pita!”

He scurries up from under the table.

“You know what they say, Bratniss,” he tells me with a grin. “If a man can't handle giving the woman of his dreams an expert mani-pedi, he doesn't deserve getting lots of kisses from her at the end of their romantic first date!”

“This isn’t a date!”

“Then why has everybody left us alone?” I look around, and he’s right. The room is empty. Then the door slides open and a man in a Hazmat suit steps in.

“Sorry to break up the date, you two. But this room has been declared a potential Cancer Zone. Something to do with someone speaking negatively about our dining staff’s delicious offerings. I know, I know, it all sounds a bit far-fetched, but to be on the safe side, you’re going to have to vacate immediately.”

I rush out, desperate to avoid further “date” time with Pita. It’s not only annoying, it’s also such an insane way to waste time. With the tournament rapidly approaching, I need to stop thinking about anything except how to survive. I need someone who can put things into perspective for me; someone who knows the Hunger But Mainly Death Games, but won’t be insane. If possible, even, someone who won’t be drunk and babble on about wizards and magic. With that in mind, I stupidly seek out Hagridmitch.

I find him on the floor of the train’s wine cellar, where all the moonshine is kept. But I can’t get him to wake up. I look around the cellar for something that might rouse him. Hey, over there’s a bucket that says “hydrochloric acid” on it. Whatever that stuff is I’m sure it will do the trick. But then I notice the pail of water in the far corner. That could definitely work, too.

But that’s the far corner. Way too far to walk. Let’s try this acid stuff. I’m midway through tipping the bucket over when Hagridmitch shoots up off the ground—“Deatheaters! Look out, child!” he says, as he scoops me up in his massive arms and dives behind a cardboard box.

“Hagridmitch, what are you—”

A finger the size of my head mashes against my face. “Shhhh…” he says, nervously glancing over the box.

Hagridmitch finally begins to trust the silence of the wine cellar and calms down. I figure it’s finally time to get some answers. “Hagridmitch, can you tell me—”

“O’ course,” he says, and instantly launches into a long explanation of this super weird story. Now I honestly have no idea what Hagridmitch is talking about, nor do I get what Oofie is so worried about him getting us in trouble for, so I won’t ruin any part of his story, except to provide you with a few details for some general background: Dumbledore dies in the next-to-last book, Snape is a double agent for the good guys, and Voldemort’s soul is in seven different objects that Harry destroys.”

I’m not going to lie. His story is really crazy. But, as he’s finishing up, I start to get the impression that he’s at least telling the truth. “...and then ol’ Hagridmitch finally had his way with Hermione. And we’re not talkin’ one ‘n done here,” he says, raising his eyebrows.

“Hagridmitch, listen to me for a second. I need to talk to you.”

And finally, he stops and listens to me. So I ask him about the Games, and how to survive, and what the title of the games is about food when the games are really just about killing each other, and several other in-Games girl-hygiene related questions I won’t share here (but will post on the book’s official website: www.hungergamesparody.com).

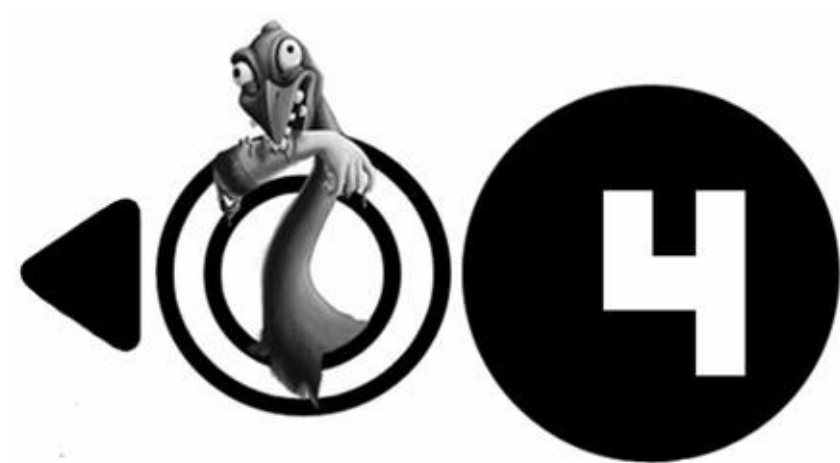
Hagridmitch considers me sadly for a moment, before bowing his head. “I can’t help ye,” he says.

“But *why*? Why can’t you help me?!”

“I’m terribly sorry. But thar’s a very good reason ’n deed.”

But I think he knows that I deserve an answer. Hagridmitch looks around the cellar, making sure no one is there to hear, before he leans in and whispers into my ear...

“The reason I can’t tell ye...is that I’m pooping me pants right now.”



"Quit playing around, Hagridmitch," I say. But, boy oh boy, I realize pretty quickly that this may ain't playin', as I reluctantly become a member of the "I've Seen Someone's Pants Inflate Like a Balloon Club." The force of it has caused Hagridmitch to pass out, so I survey the scene in silence. I grimace, all right. This isn't even the kind of situation where it'd be best to throw the underwear out. I think the only option here might be to throw Hagridmitch himself out.

Pita pops his head out of a nearby vase.

"All this hubbub has awoken the Pita-snake from his snake-charming basket!" he says, rolling his shoulders all around and waving his arms up and down.

"Pita, what the hell are you doing in there?" I ask, even though I already know the answer. "And do you really think those binoculars would work from inside a sealed ceramic container?"

"Sss!" he says. "You must leave immediately! The venom of the Pita-snake is dangerous; very dangerous indeed! One ounce could fill you with endless love for the first boy you lay eyes on." Pita wiggles his neck and moves towards me with puckered lips. "Now, let's spice things up a little," he says. "Put this on."

"No! I am not putting on a neon green leather snake costume! How did you even get it?"

"That's not important. The only thing that matters is to not put it on all that convincingly, because I'm really scared of snakes. Maybe put a t-shirt on over it? Or wear one of those hats that looks like a baby rabbit."

"I'll *consider* putting it on if you take care of this mess."

"Deal! Deal deal deal!"

"Deal," I agree, throwing the costume in the trash and running up the stairs two at a time. But as I shut the door behind me, another thought comes into my mind. What if Pita is doing this as part of some cunning ploy to win the Hunger But Mainly Death Games? Getting our mentor on his side, how can I help ensure that he is the last kid standing?

It's tough to say. On the one hand, I sometimes have a hard time understanding the intentions of others. I wonder if I might even be a tiny bit autistic. But then the train hits a bump, and I brush another thought of that aside as a box of toothpicks falls and spills its contents across the floor.

"Two-hundred-seventeen," I say.

Anyway, there's a much more likely explanation for Pita's behavior: he's trying to guilt me into liking him. If you've ever been the object of a sort of nerdy guy's love, you know the drill. My guess is that it's, quite literally, the oldest trick in the book. Like, way long ago, a group of young cavemen got together to attempt to solve their biggest problem: lack of girlfriends. They didn't have girlfriends for a number of reasons: they were no good at hunting; they couldn't perform any daring feats of strength and bravery; they were so allergic to pollen, and dust, and bright light, that they had to spend most of their time in-cave. And don't get me started on their little peach-fuzz mustaches that they were too clueless about to get rid of.

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