

The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes

By Suzanne Collins

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Chapter One Excerpt

The grand staircase up to the Academy could hold the entire student body, so it easily accommodated the stream of officials, professors, and students headed for the reaping day festivities. Coriolanus climbed it slowly, attempting a casual dignity in case he caught anyone's eye. People knew him — or at least they had known his parents and grandparents — and there was a certain standard expected of a Snow. This year, beginning this very day, he was hoping to achieve personal recognition as well. Mentoring in the Hunger Games was his final project before graduating from the Academy in midsummer. If he gave an impressive performance as a mentor, with his outstanding academic record, Coriolanus should be awarded a monetary prize substantial enough to cover his tuition at the University.

There would be twenty-four tributes, one boy and one girl from each of the twelve defeated districts, drawn by lottery to be thrown into an arena to fight to the death in the Hunger Games. It was all laid out in the Treaty of Treason that had ended the Dark Days of the districts' rebellion, one of the many punishments borne by the rebels. As in the past, the tributes would be dumped into the Capitol Arena, a now-dilapidated amphitheater that had been used for sports and entertainment events before the war, along with some weapons to murder one another. Viewing was encouraged in the Capitol, but a lot of people avoided it. How to make it more engaging was the challenge.

With this in mind, for the first time the tributes were to be assigned mentors. Twenty-four of the Academy's best and brightest seniors had been tapped for the job. The specifics of what this entailed were still being worked out. There was talk of preparing each tribute for a personal interview, maybe some grooming for the cameras. Everyone agreed that if the Hunger Games were to continue, they needed to evolve into a more meaningful experience, and the pairing of the Capitol youth with the district tributes had people intrigued.

Coriolanus made his way through an entry draped in black banners, down a vaulted passage, and into cavernous Heavensbee Hall, where they would watch the broadcast of the reaping ceremony. He was by no means late, but the hall was already humming with faculty and students and a number of Games officials who were not required for the opening day's broadcast.

Avoxes wove through the crowd with trays of posca, a concoction of watery wine laced with honey and herbs. It was an intoxicating version of the sour stuff that had sustained the Capitol through the war, supposedly fending off illness. Coriolanus took a goblet and swished a little of the posca around his mouth, hopefully rinsing away any trace of cabbage breath. But he only allowed himself one swallow. It was stronger than most people thought, and in previous years he had seen upperclassmen make complete fools of themselves by imbibing too deeply.

The world still thought Coriolanus rich, but his only real currency was charm, which he spread liberally as he made his way through the crowd. Faces lit up as he gave friendly hellos to students and teachers alike, asking about family members, dropping compliments here and there.

“Your lecture on district retaliation haunts me.”

“Love the bangs!”

“How did your mother’s back surgery go? Well, tell her she’s my hero.”

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Dean Casca Highbottom, the man credited with the creation of the Hunger Games, was overseeing the mentor program personally. He presented himself to the students with all the verve of a sleepwalker, dreamy-eyed and, as usual, doped up on morphling. His once-fine physique was shrunken and draped with sagging skin. The close-clipped precision of a recent haircut and crisp suit only threw his deterioration into relief. Due to his fame as the Games’ inventor, he still had a tenuous hold on his position, but there were rumors that the Academy Board was losing patience.

“Ho there,” he slurred, waving a crumpled piece of paper over his head. “Reading the things off now.” The students hushed, trying hard to hear him above the din of the hall. “Read you a name, then you who gets that one. Right? So, fine. District One, boy, goes to . . .” Dean Highbottom squinted at the paper, trying hard to focus. “Glasses,” he mumbled. “Forgot them.” Everyone stared at his glasses, already perched on his nose, and waited while his fingers found them. “Ah, here we go. Livia Cardew.”

Livia’s pointed little face broke into a grin and she punched the air in victory, shouting “Yes!” in her shrill voice. She had always been prone to gloating. As if the plum assignment was solely a reflection on her, and not on her mother running the largest bank in the Capitol.

Coriolanus felt increasing desperation as Dean Highbottom stumbled through the list, assigning each district’s boy and girl a mentor. After ten years, a pattern had emerged. The better-fed, more Capitol-friendly districts of 1 and 2 produced more

victors, with the fishing and farming tributes from 4 and 11 also being contenders. Coriolanus had hoped for either a 1 or a 2, but neither was assigned to him, which was made more insulting when Sejanus Plinth scored the District 2 boy. District 4 passed without mention of his name, and his last real chance for a victor — the District 11 boy — was assigned to Clemensia Dovecote, daughter of the energies secretary. Unlike Livia, Clemensia received news of her good fortune with tact, pushing her sheet of raven hair over her shoulder as she studiously made note of her tribute in her binder.

Something was amiss when a Snow, who also happened to be one of the Academy's high-honor students, had gone unrecognized. Coriolanus was beginning to think they had forgotten him — perhaps they were giving him some special position? — when, to his horror, he heard Dean Highbottom mumble, “And last but not least, District Twelve girl . . . she belongs to Coriolanus Snow.”