

THE
HUNGER
BUT MAINLY
GREATSH



CHAPTER 1

A PARODY

**THE HUNGER
BUT MAINLY
DEATH GAMES:
A PARODY**

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CHAPTER 1

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 it 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, the day where the kids between the ages of twelve to 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 kids fight to the death, and occasionally experience hunger. The children picked are called "sacrifices," and they are almost guaranteed 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 certain that I won't be getting back to sleep. 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 sleep 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 definitely 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, oozing, and filled with semi-digested maggots. Personally, 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 front 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 basically how all relationships work.

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’s 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 for quite some time...perhaps the last time ever.

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 happen to 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 signs on their chests that make it seem as if they enjoy the conditions: "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 at all costs. We are told the Tires are too dangerous for teenagers. They were closed off a few years ago after some local 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. 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 when you’re a teen, but give me a little 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 muttered, 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. Gret 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 nothin’.

“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 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 dad’s 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 a 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, 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 it Poopytown or something. 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 an entire 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 lasso 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 massive, 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 all that stuff into the Slum 12 retirement village. All I know is that when you leave a fresh kill on its membrane, sometimes the Blob will slide out a few gold coins. That happens about a quarter 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 checkout 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.

“*Heeelp*,” 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. I hate to admit it, but it was so fun to pick them up, to shake and scare them.

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 a 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 stick 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 hand 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 *am* a little overprotective sometimes..."

Her frown begins to fade. Stepping forward, she wraps her arms around me and gives me a hug. I lean 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 quotes themselves. People say that in the Dark Days, our school was a maximum-security prison. Funny. 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 bitterly. 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 to 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. Woodruff asks if anybody has any questions, I do something that no self-respecting kid should ever do: I voluntarily ask one. The class turns and stares at me (as best they can, anyway, since our neck 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, trying to brush me off.

“Wouldn’t other ways work better? Like, what if they exclusively starved us? If that’s all they 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 out 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 crisply tailored black suit appears on it. He glares out at the audience with his piercing red eyes, softly 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 then continues.

“You’d *better* be ready. For, as we say in the Capitol, ‘Garbagemen deserve a garbage death, where garbage means painful.’”

With President Satanman done, the Mayor calls up a short, squat woman in a garish pink wig, with a garish living Furbie 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.

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