

SUZANNE COLLINS



**THE
HUNGER GAMES
TRILOGY**

The Hunger Games Trilogy

Suzanne Collins



SCHOLASTIC PRESS / NEW YORK

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THE HUNGER GAMES

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For James Proimos

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Part I
“THE TRIBUTES”

1

When I wake up, the other side of the bed is cold. My fingers stretch out, seeking Prim's warmth but finding only the rough canvas cover of the mattress. She must have had bad dreams and climbed in with our mother. Of course, she did. This is the day of the reaping.

I prop myself up on one elbow. There's enough light in the bedroom to see them. My little sister, Prim, curled up on her side, cocooned in my mother's body, their cheeks pressed together. In sleep, my mother looks younger, still worn but not so beaten-down. Prim's face is as fresh as a raindrop, as lovely as the primrose for which she was named. My mother was very beautiful once, too. Or so they tell me.

Sitting at Prim's knees, guarding her, is the world's ugliest cat. Mashed-in nose, half of one ear missing, eyes the color of rotting squash. Prim named him Buttercup, insisting that his muddy yellow coat matched the bright flower. He hates me. Or at least distrusts me. Even though it was years ago, I think he still remembers how I tried to drown him in a bucket when Prim brought him home. Scrawny kitten, belly swollen with worms, crawling with fleas. The last thing I needed was another mouth to feed. But Prim begged so hard, cried even, I had to let him stay. It turned out okay. My mother got rid of the vermin and he's a born mouser. Even catches the occasional rat. Sometimes, when I clean a kill, I feed Buttercup the entrails. He has stopped hissing at me.

Entrails. No hissing. This is the closest we will ever come to love.

I swing my legs off the bed and slide into my hunting boots. Supple leather that has molded to my feet. I pull on trousers, a shirt, tuck my long dark braid up into a cap, and grab my forage bag. On the table, under a wooden bowl to protect it from hungry rats and cats alike, sits a perfect little goat cheese wrapped in basil leaves. Prim's gift to me on reaping day. I put the cheese carefully in my pocket as I slip outside.

Our part of District 12, nicknamed the Seam, is usually crawling with coal miners heading out to the morning shift at this hour. Men and women with hunched shoulders, swollen knuckles, many who have long since

stopped trying to scrub the coal dust out of their broken nails, the lines of their sunken faces. But today the black cinder streets are empty. Shutters on the squat gray houses are closed. The reaping isn't until two. May as well sleep in. If you can.

Our house is almost at the edge of the Seam. I only have to pass a few gates to reach the scruffy field called the Meadow. Separating the Meadow from the woods, in fact enclosing all of District 12, is a high chain-link fence topped with barbed-wire loops. In theory, it's supposed to be electrified twenty-four hours a day as a deterrent to the predators that live in the woods—packs of wild dogs, lone cougars, bears—that used to threaten our streets. But since we're lucky to get two or three hours of electricity in the evenings, it's usually safe to touch. Even so, I always take a moment to listen carefully for the hum that means the fence is live. Right now, it's silent as a stone. Concealed by a clump of bushes, I flatten out on my belly and slide under a two-foot stretch that's been loose for years. There are several other weak spots in the fence, but this one is so close to home I almost always enter the woods here.

As soon as I'm in the trees, I retrieve a bow and sheath of arrows from a hollow log. Electrified or not, the fence has been successful at keeping the flesh-eaters out of District 12. Inside the woods they roam freely, and there are added concerns like venomous snakes, rabid animals, and no real paths to follow. But there's also food if you know how to find it. My father knew and he taught me some before he was blown to bits in a mine explosion. There was nothing even to bury. I was eleven then. Five years later, I still wake up screaming for him to run.

Even though trespassing in the woods is illegal and poaching carries the severest of penalties, more people would risk it if they had weapons. But most are not bold enough to venture out with just a knife. My bow is a rarity, crafted by my father along with a few others that I keep well hidden in the woods, carefully wrapped in waterproof covers. My father could have made good money selling them, but if the officials found out he would have been publicly executed for inciting a rebellion. Most of the Peacekeepers turn a blind eye to the few of us who hunt because they're as hungry for fresh meat as anybody is. In fact, they're among our best customers. But the idea that someone might be arming the Seam would never have been allowed.

In the fall, a few brave souls sneak into the woods to harvest apples. But always in sight of the Meadow. Always close enough to run back to the safety of District 12 if trouble arises. “District Twelve. Where you can starve to death in safety,” I mutter. Then I glance quickly over my shoulder. Even here, even in the middle of nowhere, you worry someone might overhear you.

When I was younger, I scared my mother to death, the things I would blurt out about District 12, about the people who rule our country, Panem, from the far-off city called the Capitol. Eventually I understood this would only lead us to more trouble. So I learned to hold my tongue and to turn my features into an indifferent mask so that no one could ever read my thoughts. Do my work quietly in school. Make only polite small talk in the public market. Discuss little more than trades in the Hob, which is the black market where I make most of my money. Even at home, where I am less pleasant, I avoid discussing tricky topics. Like the reaping, or food shortages, or the Hunger Games. Prim might begin to repeat my words and then where would we be?

In the woods waits the only person with whom I can be myself. Gale. I can feel the muscles in my face relaxing, my pace quickening as I climb the hills to our place, a rock ledge overlooking a valley. A thicket of berry bushes protects it from unwanted eyes. The sight of him waiting there brings on a smile. Gale says I never smile except in the woods.

“Hey, Catnip,” says Gale. My real name is Katniss, but when I first told him, I had barely whispered it. So he thought I’d said Catnip. Then when this crazy lynx started following me around the woods looking for handouts, it became his official nickname for me. I finally had to kill the lynx because he scared off game. I almost regretted it because he wasn’t bad company. But I got a decent price for his pelt.

“Look what I shot.” Gale holds up a loaf of bread with an arrow stuck in it, and I laugh. It’s real bakery bread, not the flat, dense loaves we make from our grain rations. I take it in my hands, pull out the arrow, and hold the puncture in the crust to my nose, inhaling the fragrance that makes my mouth flood with saliva. Fine bread like this is for special occasions.

“Mm, still warm,” I say. He must have been at the bakery at the crack of dawn to trade for it. “What did it cost you?”

“Just a squirrel. Think the old man was feeling sentimental this morning,” says Gale. “Even wished me luck.”

“Well, we all feel a little closer today, don’t we?” I say, not even bothering to roll my eyes. “Prim left us a cheese.” I pull it out.

His expression brightens at the treat. “Thank you, Prim. We’ll have a real feast.” Suddenly he falls into a Capitol accent as he mimics Effie Trinket, the maniacally upbeat woman who arrives once a year to read out the names at the reaping. “I almost forgot! Happy Hunger Games!” He plucks a few blackberries from the bushes around us. “And may the odds—” He tosses a berry in a high arc toward me.

I catch it in my mouth and break the delicate skin with my teeth. The sweet tartness explodes across my tongue. “—be *ever* in your favor!” I finish with equal verve. We have to joke about it because the alternative is to be scared out of your wits. Besides, the Capitol accent is so affected, almost anything sounds funny in it.

I watch as Gale pulls out his knife and slices the bread. He could be my brother. Straight black hair, olive skin, we even have the same gray eyes. But we’re not related, at least not closely. Most of the families who work the mines resemble one another this way.

That’s why my mother and Prim, with their light hair and blue eyes, always look out of place. They are. My mother’s parents were part of the small merchant class that caters to officials, Peacekeepers, and the occasional Seam customer. They ran an apothecary shop in the nicer part of District 12. Since almost no one can afford doctors, apothecaries are our healers. My father got to know my mother because on his hunts he would sometimes collect medicinal herbs and sell them to her shop to be brewed into remedies. She must have really loved him to leave her home for the Seam. I try to remember that when all I can see is the woman who sat by, blank and unreachable, while her children turned to skin and bones. I try to forgive her for my father’s sake. But to be honest, I’m not the forgiving type.

Gale spreads the bread slices with the soft goat cheese, carefully placing a basil leaf on each while I strip the bushes of their berries. We settle back in a nook in the rocks. From this place, we are invisible but have a clear view of the valley, which is teeming with summer life, greens to gather, roots to dig, fish iridescent in the sunlight. The day is glorious, with a blue sky and soft breeze. The food’s wonderful, with the cheese seeping into the warm bread and the berries bursting in our mouths. Everything would be perfect if this really was a holiday, if all the day off meant was roaming the mountains

with Gale, hunting for tonight's supper. But instead we have to be standing in the square at two o'clock waiting for the names to be called out.

"We could do it, you know," Gale says quietly.

"What?" I ask.

"Leave the district. Run off. Live in the woods. You and I, we could make it," says Gale.

I don't know how to respond. The idea is so preposterous.

"If we didn't have so many kids," he adds quickly.

They're not our kids, of course. But they might as well be. Gale's two little brothers and a sister. Prim. And you may as well throw in our mothers, too, because how would they live without us? Who would fill those mouths that are always asking for more? With both of us hunting daily, there are still nights when game has to be swapped for lard or shoelaces or wool, still nights when we go to bed with our stomachs growling.

"I never want to have kids," I say.

"I might. If I didn't live here," says Gale.

"But you do," I say, irritated.

"Forget it," he snaps back.

The conversation feels all wrong. Leave? How could I leave Prim, who is the only person in the world I'm certain I love? And Gale is devoted to his family. We can't leave, so why bother talking about it? And even if we did... even if we did...where did this stuff about having kids come from? There's never been anything romantic between Gale and me. When we met, I was a skinny twelve-year-old, and although he was only two years older, he already looked like a man. It took a long time for us to even become friends, to stop haggling over every trade and begin helping each other out.

Besides, if he wants kids, Gale won't have any trouble finding a wife. He's good-looking, he's strong enough to handle the work in the mines, and he can hunt. You can tell by the way the girls whisper about him when he walks by in school that they want him. It makes me jealous but not for the reason people would think. Good hunting partners are hard to find.

"What do you want to do?" I ask. We can hunt, fish, or gather.

"Let's fish at the lake. We can leave our poles and gather in the woods. Get something nice for tonight," he says.

Tonight. After the reaping, everyone is supposed to celebrate. And a lot of people do, out of relief that their children have been spared for another

year. But at least two families will pull their shutters, lock their doors, and try to figure out how they will survive the painful weeks to come.

We make out well. The predators ignore us on a day when easier, tastier prey abounds. By late morning, we have a dozen fish, a bag of greens and, best of all, a gallon of strawberries. I found the patch a few years ago, but Gale had the idea to string mesh nets around it to keep out the animals.

On the way home, we swing by the Hob, the black market that operates in an abandoned warehouse that once held coal. When they came up with a more efficient system that transported the coal directly from the mines to the trains, the Hob gradually took over the space. Most businesses are closed by this time on reaping day, but the black market's still fairly busy. We easily trade six of the fish for good bread, the other two for salt. Greasy Sae, the bony old woman who sells bowls of hot soup from a large kettle, takes half the greens off our hands in exchange for a couple of chunks of paraffin. We might do a tad better elsewhere, but we make an effort to keep on good terms with Greasy Sae. She's the only one who can consistently be counted on to buy wild dog. We don't hunt them on purpose, but if you're attacked and you take out a dog or two, well, meat is meat. "Once it's in the soup, I'll call it beef," Greasy Sae says with a wink. No one in the Seam would turn up their nose at a good leg of wild dog, but the Peacekeepers who come to the Hob can afford to be a little choosier.

When we finish our business at the market, we go to the back door of the mayor's house to sell half the strawberries, knowing he has a particular fondness for them and can afford our price. The mayor's daughter, Madge, opens the door. She's in my year at school. Being the mayor's daughter, you'd expect her to be a snob, but she's all right. She just keeps to herself. Like me. Since neither of us really has a group of friends, we seem to end up together a lot at school. Eating lunch, sitting next to each other at assemblies, partnering for sports activities. We rarely talk, which suits us both just fine.

Today her drab school outfit has been replaced by an expensive white dress, and her blonde hair is done up with a pink ribbon. Reaping clothes.

"Pretty dress," says Gale.

Madge shoots him a look, trying to see if it's a genuine compliment or if he's just being ironic. *It is* a pretty dress, but she would never be wearing it ordinarily. She presses her lips together and then smiles. "Well, if I end up going to the Capitol, I want to look nice, don't I?"

Now it's Gale's turn to be confused. Does she mean it? Or is she messing with him? I'm guessing the second.

"You won't be going to the Capitol," says Gale coolly. His eyes land on a small, circular pin that adorns her dress. Real gold. Beautifully crafted. It could keep a family in bread for months. "What can you have? Five entries? I had six when I was just twelve years old."

"That's not her fault," I say.

"No, it's no one's fault. Just the way it is," says Gale.

Madge's face has become closed off. She puts the money for the berries in my hand. "Good luck, Katniss."

"You, too," I say, and the door closes.

We walk toward the Seam in silence. I don't like that Gale took a dig at Madge, but he's right, of course. The reaping system is unfair, with the poor getting the worst of it. You become eligible for the reaping the day you turn twelve. That year, your name is entered once. At thirteen, twice. And so on and so on until you reach the age of eighteen, the final year of eligibility, when your name goes into the pool seven times. That's true for every citizen in all twelve districts in the entire country of Panem.

But here's the catch. Say you are poor and starving as we were. You can opt to add your name more times in exchange for tesserae. Each tessera is worth a meager year's supply of grain and oil for one person. You may do this for each of your family members as well. So, at the age of twelve, I had my name entered four times. Once, because I had to, and three times for tesserae for grain and oil for myself, Prim, and my mother. In fact, every year I have needed to do this. And the entries are cumulative. So now, at the age of sixteen, my name will be in the reaping twenty times. Gale, who is eighteen and has been either helping or single-handedly feeding a family of five for seven years, will have his name in forty-two times.

You can see why someone like Madge, who has never been at risk of needing a tessera, can set him off. The chance of her name being drawn is very slim compared to those of us who live in the Seam. Not impossible, but slim. And even though the rules were set up by the Capitol, not the districts, certainly not Madge's family, it's hard not to resent those who don't have to sign up for tesserae.

Gale knows his anger at Madge is misdirected. On other days, deep in the woods, I've listened to him rant about how the tesserae are just another tool

to cause misery in our district. A way to plant hatred between the starving workers of the Seam and those who can generally count on supper and thereby ensure we will never trust one another. "It's to the Capitol's advantage to have us divided among ourselves," he might say if there were no ears to hear but mine. If it wasn't reaping day. If a girl with a gold pin and no tesserae had not made what I'm sure she thought was a harmless comment.

As we walk, I glance over at Gale's face, still smoldering underneath his stony expression. His rages seem pointless to me, although I never say so. It's not that I don't agree with him. I do. But what good is yelling about the Capitol in the middle of the woods? It doesn't change anything. It doesn't make things fair. It doesn't fill our stomachs. In fact, it scares off the nearby game. I let him yell though. Better he does it in the woods than in the district.

Gale and I divide our spoils, leaving two fish, a couple of loaves of good bread, greens, a quart of strawberries, salt, paraffin, and a bit of money for each.

"See you in the square," I say.

"Wear something pretty," he says flatly.

At home, I find my mother and sister are ready to go. My mother wears a fine dress from her apothecary days. Prim is in my first reaping outfit, a skirt and ruffled blouse. It's a bit big on her, but my mother has made it stay with pins. Even so, she's having trouble keeping the blouse tucked in at the back.

A tub of warm water waits for me. I scrub off the dirt and sweat from the woods and even wash my hair. To my surprise, my mother has laid out one of her own lovely dresses for me. A soft blue thing with matching shoes.

"Are you sure?" I ask. I'm trying to get past rejecting offers of help from her. For a while, I was so angry, I wouldn't allow her to do anything for me. And this is something special. Her clothes from her past are very precious to her.

"Of course. Let's put your hair up, too," she says. I let her towel-dry it and braid it up on my head. I can hardly recognize myself in the cracked mirror that leans against the wall.

"You look beautiful," says Prim in a hushed voice.

"And nothing like myself," I say. I hug her, because I know these next few hours will be terrible for her. Her first reaping. She's about as safe as you can get, since she's only entered once. I wouldn't let her take out any tesserae. But she's worried about me. That the unthinkable might happen.

I protect Prim in every way I can, but I'm powerless against the reaping. The anguish I always feel when she's in pain wells up in my chest and threatens to register on my face. I notice her blouse has pulled out of her skirt in the back again and force myself to stay calm. "Tuck your tail in, little duck," I say, smoothing the blouse back in place.

Prim giggles and gives me a small "Quack."

"Quack yourself," I say with a light laugh. The kind only Prim can draw out of me. "Come on, let's eat," I say and plant a quick kiss on the top of her head.

The fish and greens are already cooking in a stew, but that will be for supper. We decide to save the strawberries and bakery bread for this evening's meal, to make it special we say. Instead we drink milk from Prim's goat, Lady, and eat the rough bread made from the tessera grain, although no one has much appetite anyway.

At one o'clock, we head for the square. Attendance is mandatory unless you are on death's door. This evening, officials will come around and check to see if this is the case. If not, you'll be imprisoned.

It's too bad, really, that they hold the reaping in the square—one of the few places in District 12 that can be pleasant. The square's surrounded by shops, and on public market days, especially if there's good weather, it has a holiday feel to it. But today, despite the bright banners hanging on the buildings, there's an air of grimness. The camera crews, perched like buzzards on rooftops, only add to the effect.

People file in silently and sign in. The reaping is a good opportunity for the Capitol to keep tabs on the population as well. Twelve-through eighteen-year-olds are herded into roped areas marked off by ages, the oldest in the front, the young ones, like Prim, toward the back. Family members line up around the perimeter, holding tightly to one another's hands. But there are others, too, who have no one they love at stake, or who no longer care, who slip among the crowd, taking bets on the two kids whose names will be drawn. Odds are given on their ages, whether they're Seam or merchant, if they will break down and weep. Most refuse dealing with the racketeers but carefully, carefully. These same people tend to be informers, and who hasn't broken the law? I could be shot on a daily basis for hunting, but the appetites of those in charge protect me. Not everyone can claim the same.

Anyway, Gale and I agree that if we have to choose between dying of hunger and a bullet in the head, the bullet would be much quicker.

The space gets tighter, more claustrophobic as people arrive. The square's quite large, but not enough to hold District 12's population of about eight thousand. Latecomers are directed to the adjacent streets, where they can watch the event on screens as it's televised live by the state.

I find myself standing in a clump of sixteens from the Seam. We all exchange terse nods then focus our attention on the temporary stage that is set up before the Justice Building. It holds three chairs, a podium, and two large glass balls, one for the boys and one for the girls. I stare at the paper slips in the girls' ball. Twenty of them have Katniss Everdeen written on them in careful handwriting.

Two of the three chairs fill with Madge's father, Mayor Undersee, who's a tall, balding man, and Effie Trinket, District 12's escort, fresh from the Capitol with her scary white grin, pinkish hair, and spring green suit. They murmur to each other and then look with concern at the empty seat.

Just as the town clock strikes two, the mayor steps up to the podium and begins to read. It's the same story every year. He tells of the history of Panem, the country that rose up out of the ashes of a place that was once called North America. He lists the disasters, the droughts, the storms, the fires, the encroaching seas that swallowed up so much of the land, the brutal war for what little sustenance remained. The result was Panem, a shining Capitol ringed by thirteen districts, which brought peace and prosperity to its citizens. Then came the Dark Days, the uprising of the districts against the Capitol. Twelve were defeated, the thirteenth obliterated. The Treaty of Treason gave us the new laws to guarantee peace and, as our yearly reminder that the Dark Days must never be repeated, it gave us the Hunger Games.

The rules of the Hunger Games are simple. In punishment for the uprising, each of the twelve districts must provide one girl and one boy, called tributes, to participate. The twenty-four tributes will be imprisoned in a vast outdoor arena that could hold anything from a burning desert to a frozen wasteland. Over a period of several weeks, the competitors must fight to the death. The last tribute standing wins.

Taking the kids from our districts, forcing them to kill one another while we watch—this is the Capitol's way of reminding us how totally we are at their mercy. How little chance we would stand of surviving another

rebellion. Whatever words they use, the real message is clear. “Look how we take your children and sacrifice them and there’s nothing you can do. If you lift a finger, we will destroy every last one of you. Just as we did in District Thirteen.”

To make it humiliating as well as torturous, the Capitol requires us to treat the Hunger Games as a festivity, a sporting event pitting every district against the others. The last tribute alive receives a life of ease back home, and their district will be showered with prizes, largely consisting of food. All year, the Capitol will show the winning district gifts of grain and oil and even delicacies like sugar while the rest of us battle starvation.

“It is both a time for repentance and a time for thanks,” intones the mayor.

Then he reads the list of past District 12 victors. In seventy-four years, we have had exactly two. Only one is still alive. Haymitch Abernathy, a paunchy, middle-aged man, who at this moment appears hollering something unintelligible, staggers onto the stage, and falls into the third chair. He’s drunk. Very. The crowd responds with its token applause, but he’s confused and tries to give Effie Trinket a big hug, which she barely manages to fend off.

The mayor looks distressed. Since all of this is being televised, right now District 12 is the laughingstock of Panem, and he knows it. He quickly tries to pull the attention back to the reaping by introducing Effie Trinket.

Bright and bubbly as ever, Effie Trinket trots to the podium and gives her signature, “Happy Hunger Games! And may the odds be *ever* in your favor!” Her pink hair must be a wig because her curls have shifted slightly off-center since her encounter with Haymitch. She goes on a bit about what an honor it is to be here, although everyone knows she’s just aching to get bumped up to a better district where they have proper victors, not drunks who molest you in front of the entire nation.

Through the crowd, I spot Gale looking back at me with a ghost of a smile. As reapings go, this one at least has a slight entertainment factor. But suddenly I am thinking of Gale and his forty-two names in that big glass ball and how the odds are not in his favor. Not compared to a lot of the boys. And maybe he’s thinking the same thing about me because his face darkens and he turns away. “But there are still thousands of slips,” I wish I could whisper to him.

It's time for the drawing. Effie Trinket says as she always does, "Ladies first!" and crosses to the glass ball with the girls' names. She reaches in, digs her hand deep into the ball, and pulls out a slip of paper. The crowd draws in a collective breath and then you can hear a pin drop, and I'm feeling nauseous and so desperately hoping that it's not me, that it's not me, that it's not me.

Effie Trinket crosses back to the podium, smooths the slip of paper, and reads out the name in a clear voice. And it's not me.

It's Primrose Everdeen.

2

One time, when I was in a blind in a tree, waiting motionless for game to wander by, I dozed off and fell ten feet to the ground, landing on my back. It was as if the impact had knocked every wisp of air from my lungs, and I lay there struggling to inhale, to exhale, to do anything.

That's how I feel now, trying to remember how to breathe, unable to speak, totally stunned as the name bounces around the inside of my skull. Someone is gripping my arm, a boy from the Seam, and I think maybe I started to fall and he caught me.

There must have been some mistake. This can't be happening. Prim was one slip of paper in thousands! Her chances of being chosen so remote that I'd not even bothered to worry about her. Hadn't I done everything? Taken the tesserae, refused to let her do the same? One slip. One slip in thousands. The odds had been entirely in her favor. But it hadn't mattered.

Somewhere far away, I can hear the crowd murmuring unhappily as they always do when a twelve-year-old gets chosen because no one thinks this is fair. And then I see her, the blood drained from her face, hands clenched in fists at her sides, walking with stiff, small steps up toward the stage, passing me, and I see the back of her blouse has become untucked and hangs out over her skirt. It's this detail, the untucked blouse forming a ducktail, that brings me back to myself.

"Prim!" The strangled cry comes out of my throat, and my muscles begin to move again. "Prim!" I don't need to shove through the crowd. The other kids make way immediately allowing me a straight path to the stage. I reach her just as she is about to mount the steps. With one sweep of my arm, I push her behind me.

"I volunteer!" I gasp. "I volunteer as tribute!"

There's some confusion on the stage. District 12 hasn't had a volunteer in decades and the protocol has become rusty. The rule is that once a tribute's name has been pulled from the ball, another eligible boy, if a boy's name has been read, or girl, if a girl's name has been read, can step forward to take his or her place. In some districts, in which winning the reaping is such a great

honor, people are eager to risk their lives, the volunteering is complicated. But in District 12, where the word *tribute* is pretty much synonymous with the word *corpse*, volunteers are all but extinct.

“Lovely!” says Effie Trinket. “But I believe there’s a small matter of introducing the reaping winner and then asking for volunteers, and if one does come forth then we, um...” she trails off, unsure herself.

“What does it matter?” says the mayor. He’s looking at me with a pained expression on his face. He doesn’t know me really, but there’s a faint recognition there. I am the girl who brings the strawberries. The girl his daughter might have spoken of on occasion. The girl who five years ago stood huddled with her mother and sister, as he presented her, the oldest child, with a medal of valor. A medal for her father, vaporized in the mines. Does he remember that? “What does it matter?” he repeats gruffly. “Let her come forward.”

Prim is screaming hysterically behind me. She’s wrapped her skinny arms around me like a vice. “No, Katniss! No! You can’t go!”

“Prim, let go,” I say harshly, because this is upsetting me and I don’t want to cry. When they televise the replay of the reapings tonight, everyone will make note of my tears, and I’ll be marked as an easy target. A weakling. I will give no one that satisfaction. “Let go!”

I can feel someone pulling her from my back. I turn and see Gale has lifted Prim off the ground and she’s thrashing in his arms. “Up you go, Catnip,” he says, in a voice he’s fighting to keep steady, and then he carries Prim off toward my mother. I steel myself and climb the steps.

“Well, bravo!” gushes Effie Trinket. “That’s the spirit of the Games!” She’s pleased to finally have a district with a little action going on in it. “What’s your name?”

I swallow hard. “Katniss Everdeen,” I say.

“I bet my buttons that was your sister. Don’t want her to steal all the glory, do we? Come on, everybody! Let’s give a big round of applause to our newest tribute!” trills Effie Trinket.

To the everlasting credit of the people of District 12, not one person claps. Not even the ones holding betting slips, the ones who are usually beyond caring. Possibly because they know me from the Hob, or knew my father, or have encountered Prim, who no one can help loving. So instead of acknowledging applause, I stand there unmoving while they take part in the

boldest form of dissent they can manage. Silence. Which says we do not agree. We do not condone. All of this is wrong.

Then something unexpected happens. At least, I don't expect it because I don't think of District 12 as a place that cares about me. But a shift has occurred since I stepped up to take Prim's place, and now it seems I have become someone precious. At first one, then another, then almost every member of the crowd touches the three middle fingers of their left hand to their lips and holds it out to me. It is an old and rarely used gesture of our district, occasionally seen at funerals. It means thanks, it means admiration, it means good-bye to someone you love.

Now I am truly in danger of crying, but fortunately Haymitch chooses this time to come staggering across the stage to congratulate me. "Look at her. Look at this one!" he hollers, throwing an arm around my shoulders. He's surprisingly strong for such a wreck. "I like her!" His breath reeks of liquor and it's been a long time since he's bathed. "Lots of..." He can't think of the word for a while. "Spunk!" he says triumphantly. "More than you!" he releases me and starts for the front of the stage. "More than you!" he shouts, pointing directly into a camera.

Is he addressing the audience or is he so drunk he might actually be taunting the Capitol? I'll never know because just as he's opening his mouth to continue, Haymitch plummets off the stage and knocks himself unconscious.

He's disgusting, but I'm grateful. With every camera gleefully trained on him, I have just enough time to release the small, choked sound in my throat and compose myself. I put my hands behind my back and stare into the distance. I can see the hills I climbed this morning with Gale. For a moment, I yearn for something...the idea of us leaving the district...making our way in the woods...but I know I was right about not running off. Because who else would have volunteered for Prim?

Haymitch is whisked away on a stretcher, and Effie Trinket is trying to get the ball rolling again. "What an exciting day!" she warbles as she attempts to straighten her wig, which has listed severely to the right. "But more excitement to come! It's time to choose our boy tribute!" Clearly hoping to contain her tenuous hair situation, she plants one hand on her head as she crosses to the ball that contains the boys' names and grabs the first slip she

encounters. She zips back to the podium, and I don't even have time to wish for Gale's safety when she's reading the name. "Peeta Mellark."

Peeta Mellark!

Oh, no, I think. *Not him*. Because I recognize this name, although I have never spoken directly to its owner. Peeta Mellark.

No, the odds are not in my favor today.

I watch him as he makes his way toward the stage. Medium height, stocky build, ashy blond hair that falls in waves over his forehead. The shock of the moment is registering on his face, you can see his struggle to remain emotionless, but his blue eyes show the alarm I've seen so often in prey. Yet he climbs steadily onto the stage and takes his place.

Effie Trinket asks for volunteers, but no one steps forward. He has two older brothers, I know, I've seen them in the bakery, but one is probably too old now to volunteer and the other won't. This is standard. Family devotion only goes so far for most people on reaping day. What I did was the radical thing.

The mayor begins to read the long, dull Treaty of Treason as he does every year at this point—it's required—but I'm not listening to a word.

Why him? I think. Then I try to convince myself it doesn't matter. Peeta Mellark and I are not friends. Not even neighbors. We don't speak. Our only real interaction happened years ago. He's probably forgotten it. But I haven't and I know I never will...

It was during the worst time. My father had been killed in the mine accident three months earlier in the bitterest January anyone could remember. The numbness of his loss had passed, and the pain would hit me out of nowhere, doubling me over, racking my body with sobs. *Where are you?* I would cry out in my mind. *Where have you gone?* Of course, there was never any answer.

The district had given us a small amount of money as compensation for his death, enough to cover one month of grieving at which time my mother would be expected to get a job. Only she didn't. She didn't do anything but sit propped up in a chair or, more often, huddled under the blankets on her bed, eyes fixed on some point in the distance. Once in a while, she'd stir, get up as if moved by some urgent purpose, only to then collapse back into stillness. No amount of pleading from Prim seemed to affect her.

I was terrified. I suppose now that my mother was locked in some dark world of sadness, but at the time, all I knew was that I had lost not only a father, but a mother as well. At eleven years old, with Prim just seven, I took over as head of the family. There was no choice. I bought our food at the market and cooked it as best I could and tried to keep Prim and myself looking presentable. Because if it had become known that my mother could no longer care for us, the district would have taken us away from her and placed us in the community home. I'd grown up seeing those home kids at school. The sadness, the marks of angry hands on their faces, the hopelessness that curled their shoulders forward. I could never let that happen to Prim. Sweet, tiny Prim who cried when I cried before she even knew the reason, who brushed and plaited my mother's hair before we left for school, who still polished my father's shaving mirror each night because he'd hated the layer of coal dust that settled on everything in the Seam. The community home would crush her like a bug. So I kept our predicament a secret.

But the money ran out and we were slowly starving to death. There's no other way to put it. I kept telling myself if I could only hold out until May, just May 8th, I would turn twelve and be able to sign up for the tesserae and get that precious grain and oil to feed us. Only there were still several weeks to go. We could well be dead by then.

Starvation's not an uncommon fate in District 12. Who hasn't seen the victims? Older people who can't work. Children from a family with too many to feed. Those injured in the mines. Straggling through the streets. And one day, you come upon them sitting motionless against a wall or lying in the Meadow, you hear the wails from a house, and the Peacekeepers are called in to retrieve the body. Starvation is never the cause of death officially. It's always the flu, or exposure, or pneumonia. But that fools no one.

On the afternoon of my encounter with Peeta Mellark, the rain was falling in relentless icy sheets. I had been in town, trying to trade some threadbare old baby clothes of Prim's in the public market, but there were no takers. Although I had been to the Hob on several occasions with my father, I was too frightened to venture into that rough, gritty place alone. The rain had soaked through my father's hunting jacket, leaving me chilled to the bone. For three days, we'd had nothing but boiled water with some old dried mint leaves I'd found in the back of a cupboard. By the time the market closed, I

was shaking so hard I dropped my bundle of baby clothes in a mud puddle. I didn't pick it up for fear I would keel over and be unable to regain my feet. Besides, no one wanted those clothes.

I couldn't go home. Because at home was my mother with her dead eyes and my little sister, with her hollow cheeks and cracked lips. I couldn't walk into that room with the smoky fire from the damp branches I had scavenged at the edge of the woods after the coal had run out, my hands empty of any hope.

I found myself stumbling along a muddy lane behind the shops that serve the wealthiest townspeople. The merchants live above their businesses, so I was essentially in their backyards. I remember the outlines of garden beds not yet planted for the spring, a goat or two in a pen, one sodden dog tied to a post, hunched defeated in the muck.

All forms of stealing are forbidden in District 12. Punishable by death. But it crossed my mind that there might be something in the trash bins, and those were fair game. Perhaps a bone at the butcher's or rotted vegetables at the grocer's, something no one but my family was desperate enough to eat. Unfortunately, the bins had just been emptied.

When I passed the baker's, the smell of fresh bread was so overwhelming I felt dizzy. The ovens were in the back, and a golden glow spilled out the open kitchen door. I stood mesmerized by the heat and the luscious scent until the rain interfered, running its icy fingers down my back, forcing me back to life. I lifted the lid to the baker's trash bin and found it spotlessly, heartlessly bare.

Suddenly a voice was screaming at me and I looked up to see the baker's wife, telling me to move on and did I want her to call the Peacekeepers and how sick she was of having those brats from the Seam pawing through her trash. The words were ugly and I had no defense. As I carefully replaced the lid and backed away, I noticed him, a boy with blond hair peering out from behind his mother's back. I'd seen him at school. He was in my year, but I didn't know his name. He stuck with the town kids, so how would I? His mother went back into the bakery, grumbling, but he must have been watching me as I made my way behind the pen that held their pig and leaned against the far side of an old apple tree. The realization that I'd have nothing to take home had finally sunk in. My knees buckled and I slid down the tree trunk to its roots. It was too much. I was too sick and weak and tired, oh, so tired. *Let*

them call the Peacekeepers and take us to the community home, I thought. Or better yet, let me die right here in the rain.

There was a clatter in the bakery and I heard the woman screaming again and the sound of a blow, and I vaguely wondered what was going on. Feet sloshed toward me through the mud and I thought, *It's her. She's coming to drive me away with a stick.* But it wasn't her. It was the boy. In his arms, he carried two large loaves of bread that must have fallen into the fire because the crusts were scorched black.

His mother was yelling, "Feed it to the pig, you stupid creature! Why not? No one decent will buy burned bread!"

He began to tear off chunks from the burned parts and toss them into the trough, and the front bakery bell rung and the mother disappeared to help a customer.

The boy never even glanced my way, but I was watching him. Because of the bread, because of the red weal that stood out on his cheekbone. What had she hit him with? My parents never hit us. I couldn't even imagine it. The boy took one look back to the bakery as if checking that the coast was clear, then, his attention back on the pig, he threw a loaf of bread in my direction. The second quickly followed, and he sloshed back to the bakery, closing the kitchen door tightly behind him.

I stared at the loaves in disbelief. They were fine, perfect really, except for the burned areas. Did he mean for me to have them? He must have. Because there they were at my feet. Before anyone could witness what had happened I shoved the loaves up under my shirt, wrapped the hunting jacket tightly about me, and walked swiftly away. The heat of the bread burned into my skin, but I clutched it tighter, clinging to life.

By the time I reached home, the loaves had cooled somewhat, but the insides were still warm. When I dropped them on the table, Prim's hands reached to tear off a chunk, but I made her sit, forced my mother to join us at the table, and poured warm tea. I scraped off the black stuff and sliced the bread. We ate an entire loaf, slice by slice. It was good hearty bread, filled with raisins and nuts.

I put my clothes to dry at the fire, crawled into bed, and fell into a dreamless sleep. It didn't occur to me until the next morning that the boy might have burned the bread on purpose. Might have dropped the loaves into the flames, knowing it meant being punished, and then delivered them to me.

But I dismissed this. It must have been an accident. Why would he have done it? He didn't even know me. Still, just throwing me the bread was an enormous kindness that would have surely resulted in a beating if discovered. I couldn't explain his actions.

We ate slices of bread for breakfast and headed to school. It was as if spring had come overnight. Warm sweet air. Fluffy clouds. At school, I passed the boy in the hall, his cheek had swelled up and his eye had blackened. He was with his friends and didn't acknowledge me in any way. But as I collected Prim and started for home that afternoon, I found him staring at me from across the school yard. Our eyes met for only a second, then he turned his head away. I dropped my gaze, embarrassed, and that's when I saw it. The first dandelion of the year. A bell went off in my head. I thought of the hours spent in the woods with my father and I knew how we were going to survive.

To this day, I can never shake the connection between this boy, Peeta Mellark, and the bread that gave me hope, and the dandelion that reminded me that I was not doomed. And more than once, I have turned in the school hallway and caught his eyes trained on me, only to quickly flit away. I feel like I owe him something, and I hate owing people. Maybe if I had thanked him at some point, I'd be feeling less conflicted now. I thought about it a couple of times, but the opportunity never seemed to present itself. And now it never will. Because we're going to be thrown into an arena to fight to the death. Exactly how am I supposed to work in a thank-you in there? Somehow it just won't seem sincere if I'm trying to slit his throat.

The mayor finishes the dreary Treaty of Treason and motions for Peeta and me to shake hands. His are as solid and warm as those loaves of bread. Peeta looks me right in the eye and gives my hand what I think is meant to be a reassuring squeeze. Maybe it's just a nervous spasm.

We turn back to face the crowd as the anthem of Panem plays.

Oh, well, I think. There will be twenty-four of us. Odds are someone else will kill him before I do.

Of course, the odds have not been very dependable of late.

3

The moment the anthem ends, we are taken into custody. I don't mean we're handcuffed or anything, but a group of Peacekeepers marches us through the front door of the Justice Building. Maybe tributes have tried to escape in the past. I've never seen that happen though.

Once inside, I'm conducted to a room and left alone. It's the richest place I've ever been in, with thick, deep carpets and a velvet couch and chairs. I know velvet because my mother has a dress with a collar made of the stuff. When I sit on the couch, I can't help running my fingers over the fabric repeatedly. It helps to calm me as I try to prepare for the next hour. The time allotted for the tributes to say good-bye to their loved ones. I cannot afford to get upset, to leave this room with puffy eyes and a red nose. Crying is not an option. There will be more cameras at the train station.

My sister and my mother come first. I reach out to Prim and she climbs on my lap, her arms around my neck, head on my shoulder, just like she did when she was a toddler. My mother sits beside me and wraps her arms around us. For a few minutes, we say nothing. Then I start telling them all the things they must remember to do, now that I will not be there to do them for them.

Prim is not to take any tesserae. They can get by, if they're careful, on selling Prim's goat milk and cheese and the small apothecary business my mother now runs for the people in the Seam. Gale will get her the herbs she doesn't grow herself, but she must be very careful to describe them because he's not as familiar with them as I am. He'll also bring them game—he and I made a pact about this a year or so ago—and will probably not ask for compensation, but they should thank him with some kind of trade, like milk or medicine.

I don't bother suggesting Prim learn to hunt. I tried to teach her a couple of times and it was disastrous. The woods terrified her, and whenever I shot something, she'd get teary and talk about how we might be able to heal it if we got it home soon enough. But she makes out well with her goat, so I concentrate on that.

When I am done with instructions about fuel, and trading, and staying in school, I turn to my mother and grip her arm, hard. "Listen to me. Are you listening to me?" She nods, alarmed by my intensity. She must know what's coming. "You can't leave again," I say.

My mother's eyes find the floor. "I know. I won't. I couldn't help what ___,"

"Well, you have to help it this time. You can't clock out and leave Prim on her own. There's no me now to keep you both alive. It doesn't matter what happens. Whatever you see on the screen. You have to promise me you'll fight through it!" My voice has risen to a shout. In it is all the anger, all the fear I felt at her abandonment.

She pulls her arm from my grasp, moved to anger herself now. "I was ill. I could have treated myself if I'd had the medicine I have now."

That part about her being ill might be true. I've seen her bring back people suffering from immobilizing sadness since. Perhaps it is a sickness, but it's one we can't afford.

"Then take it. And take care of her!" I say.

"I'll be all right, Katniss," says Prim, clasping my face in her hands. "But you have to take care, too. You're so fast and brave. Maybe you can win."

I can't win. Prim must know that in her heart. The competition will be far beyond my abilities. Kids from wealthier districts, where winning is a huge honor, who've been trained their whole lives for this. Boys who are two to three times my size. Girls who know twenty different ways to kill you with a knife. Oh, there'll be people like me, too. People to weed out before the real fun begins.

"Maybe," I say, because I can hardly tell my mother to carry on if I've already given up myself. Besides, it isn't in my nature to go down without a fight, even when things seem insurmountable. "Then we'd be rich as Haymitch."

"I don't care if we're rich. I just want you to come home. You will try, won't you? Really, really try?" asks Prim.

"Really, really try. I swear it," I say. And I know, because of Prim, I'll have to.

And then the Peacekeeper is at the door, signaling our time is up, and we're all hugging one another so hard it hurts and all I'm saying is "I love you. I love you both." And they're saying it back and then the Peacekeeper

orders them out and the door closes. I bury my head in one of the velvet pillows as if this can block the whole thing out.

Someone else enters the room, and when I look up, I'm surprised to see it's the baker, Peeta Mellark's father. I can't believe he's come to visit me. After all, I'll be trying to kill his son soon. But we do know each other a bit, and he knows Prim even better. When she sells her goat cheeses at the Hob, she puts two of them aside for him and he gives her a generous amount of bread in return. We always wait to trade with him when his witch of a wife isn't around because he's so much nicer. I feel certain he would never have hit his son the way she did over the burned bread. But why has he come to see me?

The baker sits awkwardly on the edge of one of the plush chairs. He's a big, broad-shouldered man with burn scars from years at the ovens. He must have just said good-bye to his son.

He pulls a white paper package from his jacket pocket and holds it out to me. I open it and find cookies. These are a luxury we can never afford.

"Thank you," I say. The baker's not a very talkative man in the best of times, and today he has no words at all. "I had some of your bread this morning. My friend Gale gave you a squirrel for it." He nods, as if remembering the squirrel. "Not your best trade," I say. He shrugs as if it couldn't possibly matter.

Then I can't think of anything else, so we sit in silence until a Peacemaker summons him. He rises and coughs to clear his throat. "I'll keep an eye on the little girl. Make sure she's eating."

I feel some of the pressure in my chest lighten at his words. People deal with me, but they are genuinely fond of Prim. Maybe there will be enough fondness to keep her alive.

My next guest is also unexpected. Madge walks straight to me. She is not weepy or evasive, instead there's an urgency about her tone that surprises me. "They let you wear one thing from your district in the arena. One thing to remind you of home. Will you wear this?" She holds out the circular gold pin that was on her dress earlier. I hadn't paid much attention to it before, but now I see it's a small bird in flight.

"Your pin?" I say. Wearing a token from my district is about the last thing on my mind.

“Here, I’ll put it on your dress, all right?” Madge doesn’t wait for an answer, she just leans in and fixes the bird to my dress. “Promise you’ll wear it into the arena, Katniss?” she asks. “Promise?”

“Yes,” I say. Cookies. A pin. I’m getting all kinds of gifts today. Madge gives me one more. A kiss on the cheek. Then she’s gone and I’m left thinking that maybe Madge really has been my friend all along.

Finally, Gale is here and maybe there is nothing romantic between us, but when he opens his arms I don’t hesitate to go into them. His body is familiar to me—the way it moves, the smell of wood smoke, even the sound of his heart beating I know from quiet moments on a hunt—but this is the first time I really feel it, lean and hard-muscled against my own.

“Listen,” he says. “Getting a knife should be pretty easy, but you’ve got to get your hands on a bow. That’s your best chance.”

“They don’t always have bows,” I say, thinking of the year there were only horrible spiked maces that the tributes had to bludgeon one another to death with.

“Then make one,” says Gale. “Even a weak bow is better than no bow at all.”

I have tried copying my father’s bows with poor results. It’s not that easy. Even he had to scrap his own work sometimes.

“I don’t even know if there’ll be wood,” I say. Another year, they tossed everybody into a landscape of nothing but boulders and sand and scruffy bushes. I particularly hated that year. Many contestants were bitten by venomous snakes or went insane from thirst.

“There’s almost always some wood,” Gale says. “Since that year half of them died of cold. Not much entertainment in that.”

It’s true. We spent one Hunger Games watching the players freeze to death at night. You could hardly see them because they were just huddled in balls and had no wood for fires or torches or anything. It was considered very anticlimactic in the Capitol, all those quiet, bloodless deaths. Since then, there’s usually been wood to make fires.

“Yes, there’s usually some,” I say.

“Katniss, it’s just hunting. You’re the best hunter I know,” says Gale.

“It’s not just hunting. They’re armed. They think,” I say.

“So do you. And you’ve had more practice. Real practice,” he says. “You know how to kill.”

“Not people,” I say.

“How different can it be, really?” says Gale grimly.

The awful thing is that if I can forget they’re people, it will be no different at all.

The Peacekeepers are back too soon and Gale asks for more time, but they’re taking him away and I start to panic. “Don’t let them starve!” I cry out, clinging to his hand.

“I won’t! You know I won’t! Katniss, remember I—” he says, and they yank us apart and slam the door and I’ll never know what it was he wanted me to remember.

It’s a short ride from the Justice Building to the train station. I’ve never been in a car before. Rarely even ridden in wagons. In the Seam, we travel on foot.

I’ve been right not to cry. The station is swarming with reporters with their insectlike cameras trained directly on my face. But I’ve had a lot of practice at wiping my face clean of emotions and I do this now. I catch a glimpse of myself on the television screen on the wall that’s airing my arrival live and feel gratified that I appear almost bored.

Peeta Mellark, on the other hand, has obviously been crying and interestingly enough does not seem to be trying to cover it up. I immediately wonder if this will be his strategy in the Games. To appear weak and frightened, to reassure the other tributes that he is no competition at all, and then come out fighting. This worked very well for a girl, Johanna Mason, from District 7 a few years back. She seemed like such a sniveling, cowardly fool that no one bothered about her until there were only a handful of contestants left. It turned out she could kill viciously. Pretty clever, the way she played it. But this seems an odd strategy for Peeta Mellark because he’s a baker’s son. All those years of having enough to eat and hauling bread trays around have made him broad-shouldered and strong. It will take an awful lot of weeping to convince anyone to overlook him.

We have to stand for a few minutes in the doorway of the train while the cameras gobble up our images, then we’re allowed inside and the doors close mercifully behind us. The train begins to move at once.

The speed initially takes my breath away. Of course, I’ve never been on a train, as travel between the districts is forbidden except for officially sanctioned duties. For us, that’s mainly transporting coal. But this is no

ordinary coal train. It's one of the high-speed Capitol models that average 250 miles per hour. Our journey to the Capitol will take less than a day.

In school, they tell us the Capitol was built in a place once called the Rockies. District 12 was in a region known as Appalachia. Even hundreds of years ago, they mined coal here. Which is why our miners have to dig so deep.

Somehow it all comes back to coal at school. Besides basic reading and math most of our instruction is coal-related. Except for the weekly lecture on the history of Panem. It's mostly a lot of blather about what we owe the Capitol. I know there must be more than they're telling us, an actual account of what happened during the rebellion. But I don't spend much time thinking about it. Whatever the truth is, I don't see how it will help me get food on the table.

The tribute train is fancier than even the room in the Justice Building. We are each given our own chambers that have a bedroom, a dressing area, and a private bathroom with hot and cold running water. We don't have hot water at home, unless we boil it.

There are drawers filled with fine clothes, and Effie Trinket tells me to do anything I want, wear anything I want, everything is at my disposal. Just be ready for supper in an hour. I peel off my mother's blue dress and take a hot shower. I've never had a shower before. It's like being in a summer rain, only warmer. I dress in a dark green shirt and pants.

At the last minute, I remember Madge's little gold pin. For the first time, I get a good look at it. It's as if someone fashioned a small golden bird and then attached a ring around it. The bird is connected to the ring only by its wing tips. I suddenly recognize it. A mockingjay.

They're funny birds and something of a slap in the face to the Capitol. During the rebellion, the Capitol bred a series of genetically altered animals as weapons. The common term for them was *muttations*, or sometimes *mutts* for short. One was a special bird called a jabberjay that had the ability to memorize and repeat whole human conversations. They were homing birds, exclusively male, that were released into regions where the Capitol's enemies were known to be hiding. After the birds gathered words, they'd fly back to centers to be recorded. It took people awhile to realize what was going on in the districts, how private conversations were being transmitted. Then, of course, the rebels fed the Capitol endless lies, and the joke was on

it. So the centers were shut down and the birds were abandoned to die off in the wild.

Only they didn't die off. Instead, the jabberjays mated with female mockingbirds, creating a whole new species that could replicate both bird whistles and human melodies. They had lost the ability to enunciate words but could still mimic a range of human vocal sounds, from a child's high-pitched warble to a man's deep tones. And they could re-create songs. Not just a few notes, but whole songs with multiple verses, if you had the patience to sing them and if they liked your voice.

My father was particularly fond of mockingjays. When we went hunting, he would whistle or sing complicated songs to them and, after a polite pause, they'd always sing back. Not everyone is treated with such respect. But whenever my father sang, all the birds in the area would fall silent and listen. His voice was that beautiful, high and clear and so filled with life it made you want to laugh and cry at the same time. I could never bring myself to continue the practice after he was gone. Still, there's something comforting about the little bird. It's like having a piece of my father with me, protecting me. I fasten the pin onto my shirt, and with the dark green fabric as a background, I can almost imagine the mockingjay flying through the trees.

Effie Trinket comes to collect me for supper. I follow her through the narrow, rocking corridor into a dining room with polished paneled walls. There's a table where all the dishes are highly breakable. Peeta Mellark sits waiting for us, the chair next to him empty.

"Where's Haymitch?" asks Effie Trinket brightly.

"Last time I saw him, he said he was going to take a nap," says Peeta.

"Well, it's been an exhausting day," says Effie Trinket. I think she's relieved by Haymitch's absence, and who can blame her?

The supper comes in courses. A thick carrot soup, green salad, lamb chops and mashed potatoes, cheese and fruit, a chocolate cake. Throughout the meal, Effie Trinket keeps reminding us to save space because there's more to come. But I'm stuffing myself because I've never had food like this, so good and so much, and because probably the best thing I can do between now and the Games is put on a few pounds.

"At least, you two have decent manners," says Effie as we're finishing the main course. "The pair last year ate everything with their hands like a couple of savages. It completely upset my digestion."

The pair last year were two kids from the Seam who'd never, not one day of their lives, had enough to eat. And when they did have food, table manners were surely the last thing on their minds. Peeta's a baker's son. My mother taught Prim and me to eat properly, so yes, I can handle a fork and knife. But I hate Effie Trinket's comment so much I make a point of eating the rest of my meal with my fingers. Then I wipe my hands on the tablecloth. This makes her purse her lips tightly together.

Now that the meal's over, I'm fighting to keep the food down. I can see Peeta's looking a little green, too. Neither of our stomachs is used to such rich fare. But if I can hold down Greasy Sae's concoction of mice meat, pig entrails, and tree bark—a winter specialty—I'm determined to hang on to this.

We go to another compartment to watch the recap of the reapings across Panem. They try to stagger them throughout the day so a person could conceivably watch the whole thing live, but only people in the Capitol could really do that, since none of them have to attend reapings themselves.

One by one, we see the other reapings, the names called, the volunteers stepping forward or, more often, not. We examine the faces of the kids who will be our competition. A few stand out in my mind. A monstrous boy who lunges forward to volunteer from District 2. A fox-faced girl with sleek red hair from District 5. A boy with a crippled foot from District 10. And most hauntingly, a twelve-year-old girl from District 11. She has dark brown skin and eyes, but other than that, she's very like Prim in size and demeanor. Only when she mounts the stage and they ask for volunteers, all you can hear is the wind whistling through the decrepit buildings around her. There's no one willing to take her place.

Last of all, they show District 12. Prim being called, me running forward to volunteer. You can't miss the desperation in my voice as I shove Prim behind me, as if I'm afraid no one will hear and they'll take Prim away. But, of course, they do hear. I see Gale pulling her off me and watch myself mount the stage. The commentators are not sure what to say about the crowd's refusal to applaud. The silent salute. One says that District 12 has always been a bit backward but that local customs can be charming. As if on cue, Haymitch falls off the stage, and they groan comically. Peeta's name is drawn, and he quietly takes his place. We shake hands. They cut to the anthem again, and the program ends.

Effie Trinket is disgruntled about the state her wig was in. “Your mentor has a lot to learn about presentation. A lot about televised behavior.”

Peeta unexpectedly laughs. “He was drunk,” says Peeta. “He’s drunk every year.”

“Every day,” I add. I can’t help smirking a little. Effie Trinket makes it sound like Haymitch just has somewhat rough manners that could be corrected with a few tips from her.

“Yes,” hisses Effie Trinket. “How odd you two find it amusing. You know your mentor is your lifeline to the world in these Games. The one who advises you, lines up your sponsors, and dictates the presentation of any gifts. Haymitch can well be the difference between your life and your death!”

Just then, Haymitch staggers into the compartment. “I miss supper?” he says in a slurred voice. Then he vomits all over the expensive carpet and falls in the mess.

“So laugh away!” says Effie Trinket. She hops in her pointy shoes around the pool of vomit and flees the room.

For a few moments, Peeta and I take in the scene of our mentor trying to rise out of the slippery vile stuff from his stomach. The reek of vomit and raw spirits almost brings my dinner up. We exchange a glance. Obviously Haymitch isn't much, but Effie Trinket is right about one thing, once we're in the arena he's all we've got. As if by some unspoken agreement, Peeta and I each take one of Haymitch's arms and help him to his feet.

"I tripped?" Haymitch asks. "Smells bad." He wipes his hand on his nose, smearing his face with vomit.

"Let's get you back to your room," says Peeta. "Clean you up a bit."

We half-lead half-carry Haymitch back to his compartment. Since we can't exactly set him down on the embroidered bedspread, we haul him into the bathtub and turn the shower on him. He hardly notices.

"It's okay," Peeta says to me. "I'll take it from here."

I can't help feeling a little grateful since the last thing I want to do is strip down Haymitch, wash the vomit out of his chest hair, and tuck him into bed. Possibly Peeta is trying to make a good impression on him, to be his favorite once the Games begin. But judging by the state he's in, Haymitch will have no memory of this tomorrow.

"All right," I say. "I can send one of the Capitol people to help you." There's any number on the train. Cooking for us. Waiting on us. Guarding us. Taking care of us is their job.

"No. I don't want them," says Peeta.

I nod and head to my own room. I understand how Peeta feels. I can't stand the sight of the Capitol people myself. But making them deal with Haymitch might be a small form of revenge. So I'm pondering the reason why he insists on taking care of Haymitch and all of a sudden I think, *It's because he's being kind. Just as he was kind to give me the bread.*

The idea pulls me up short. A kind Peeta Mellark is far more dangerous to me than an unkind one. Kind people have a way of working their way inside me and rooting there. And I can't let Peeta do this. Not where we're

going. So I decide, from this moment on, to have as little as possible to do with the baker's son.

When I get back to my room, the train is pausing at a platform to refuel. I quickly open the window, toss the cookies Peeta's father gave me out of the train, and slam the glass shut. No more. No more of either of them.

Unfortunately, the packet of cookies hits the ground and bursts open in a patch of dandelions by the track. I only see the image for a moment, because the train is off again, but it's enough. Enough to remind me of that other dandelion in the school yard years ago...

I had just turned away from Peeta Mellark's bruised face when I saw the dandelion and I knew hope wasn't lost. I plucked it carefully and hurried home. I grabbed a bucket and Prim's hand and headed to the Meadow and yes, it was dotted with the golden-headed weeds. After we'd harvested those, we scrounged along inside the fence for probably a mile until we'd filled the bucket with the dandelion greens, stems, and flowers. That night, we gorged ourselves on dandelion salad and the rest of the bakery bread.

"What else?" Prim asked me. "What other food can we find?"

"All kinds of things," I promised her. "I just have to remember them."

My mother had a book she'd brought with her from the apothecary shop. The pages were made of old parchment and covered in ink drawings of plants. Neat handwritten blocks told their names, where to gather them, when they came in bloom, their medical uses. But my father added other entries to the book. Plants for eating, not healing. Dandelions, pokeweed, wild onions, pines. Prim and I spent the rest of the night poring over those pages.

The next day, we were off school. For a while I hung around the edges of the Meadow, but finally I worked up the courage to go under the fence. It was the first time I'd been there alone, without my father's weapons to protect me. But I retrieved the small bow and arrows he'd made me from a hollow tree. I probably didn't go more than twenty yards into the woods that day. Most of the time, I perched up in the branches of an old oak, hoping for game to come by. After several hours, I had the good luck to kill a rabbit. I'd shot a few rabbits before, with my father's guidance. But this I'd done on my own.

We hadn't had meat in months. The sight of the rabbit seemed to stir something in my mother. She roused herself, skinned the carcass, and made a stew with the meat and some more greens Prim had gathered. Then she acted

confused and went back to bed, but when the stew was done, we made her eat a bowl.

The woods became our savior, and each day I went a bit farther into its arms. It was slow-going at first, but I was determined to feed us. I stole eggs from nests, caught fish in nets, sometimes managed to shoot a squirrel or rabbit for stew, and gathered the various plants that sprung up beneath my feet. Plants are tricky. Many are edible, but one false mouthful and you're dead. I checked and double-checked the plants I harvested with my father's pictures. I kept us alive.

Any sign of danger, a distant howl, the inexplicable break of a branch, sent me flying back to the fence at first. Then I began to risk climbing trees to escape the wild dogs that quickly got bored and moved on. Bears and cats lived deeper in, perhaps disliking the sooty reek of our district.

On May 8th, I went to the Justice Building, signed up for my tesserae, and pulled home my first batch of grain and oil in Prim's toy wagon. On the eighth of every month, I was entitled to do the same. I couldn't stop hunting and gathering, of course. The grain was not enough to live on, and there were other things to buy, soap and milk and thread. What we didn't absolutely have to eat, I began to trade at the Hob. It was frightening to enter that place without my father at my side, but people had respected him, and they accepted me. Game was game after all, no matter who'd shot it. I also sold at the back doors of the wealthier clients in town, trying to remember what my father had told me and learning a few new tricks as well. The butcher would buy my rabbits but not squirrels. The baker enjoyed squirrel but would only trade for one if his wife wasn't around. The Head Peacekeeper loved wild turkey. The mayor had a passion for strawberries.

In late summer, I was washing up in a pond when I noticed the plants growing around me. Tall with leaves like arrowheads. Blossoms with three white petals. I knelt down in the water, my fingers digging into the soft mud, and I pulled up handfuls of the roots. Small, bluish tubers that don't look like much but boiled or baked are as good as any potato. "Katniss," I said aloud. It's the plant I was named for. And I heard my father's voice joking, "As long as you can find yourself, you'll never starve." I spent hours stirring up the pond bed with my toes and a stick, gathering the tubers that floated to the top. That night, we feasted on fish and katniss roots until we were all, for the first time in months, full.

Slowly, my mother returned to us. She began to clean and cook and preserve some of the food I brought in for winter. People traded us or paid money for her medical remedies. One day, I heard her singing.

Prim was thrilled to have her back, but I kept watching, waiting for her to disappear on us again. I didn't trust her. And some small gnarled place inside me hated her for her weakness, for her neglect, for the months she had put us through. Prim forgave her, but I had taken a step back from my mother, put up a wall to protect myself from needing her, and nothing was ever the same between us again.

Now I was going to die without that ever being set right. I thought of how I had yelled at her today in the Justice Building. I had told her I loved her, too, though. So maybe it would all balance out.

For a while I stand staring out the train window, wishing I could open it again, but unsure of what would happen at such high speed. In the distance, I see the lights of another district. 7? 10? I don't know. I think about the people in their houses, settling in for bed. I imagine my home, with its shutters drawn tight. What are they doing now, my mother and Prim? Were they able to eat supper? The fish stew and the strawberries? Or did it lie untouched on their plates? Did they watch the recap of the day's events on the battered old TV that sits on the table against the wall? Surely, there were more tears. Is my mother holding up, being strong for Prim? Or has she already started to slip away, leaving the weight of the world on my sister's fragile shoulders?

Prim will undoubtedly sleep with my mother tonight. The thought of that scruffy old Buttercup posting himself on the bed to watch over Prim comforts me. If she cries, he will nose his way into her arms and curl up there until she calms down and falls asleep. I'm so glad I didn't drown him.

Imagining my home makes me ache with loneliness. This day has been endless. Could Gale and I have been eating blackberries only this morning? It seems like a lifetime ago. Like a long dream that deteriorated into a nightmare. Maybe, if I go to sleep, I will wake up back in District 12, where I belong.

Probably the drawers hold any number of nightgowns, but I just strip off my shirt and pants and climb into bed in my underwear. The sheets are made of soft, silky fabric. A thick fluffy comforter gives immediate warmth.

If I'm going to cry, now is the time to do it. By morning, I'll be able to wash the damage done by the tears from my face. But no tears come. I'm too

tired or too numb to cry. The only thing I feel is a desire to be somewhere else. So I let the train rock me into oblivion.

Gray light is leaking through the curtains when the rapping rouses me. I hear Effie Trinket's voice, calling me to rise. "Up, up, up! It's going to be a big, big, big day!" I try and imagine, for a moment, what it must be like inside that woman's head. What thoughts fill her waking hours? What dreams come to her at night? I have no idea.

I put the green outfit back on since it's not really dirty, just slightly crumpled from spending the night on the floor. My fingers trace the circle around the little gold mockingjay and I think of the woods, and of my father, and of my mother and Prim waking up, having to get on with things. I slept in the elaborate braided hair my mother did for the reaping and it doesn't look too bad, so I just leave it up. It doesn't matter. We can't be far from the Capitol now. And once we reach the city, my stylist will dictate my look for the opening ceremonies tonight anyway. I just hope I get one who doesn't think nudity is the last word in fashion.

As I enter the dining car, Effie Trinket brushes by me with a cup of black coffee. She's muttering obscenities under her breath. Haymitch, his face puffy and red from the previous day's indulgences, is chuckling. Peeta holds a roll and looks somewhat embarrassed.

"Sit down! Sit down!" says Haymitch, waving me over. The moment I slide into my chair I'm served an enormous platter of food. Eggs, ham, piles of fried potatoes. A tureen of fruit sits in ice to keep it chilled. The basket of rolls they set before me would keep my family going for a week. There's an elegant glass of orange juice. At least, I think it's orange juice. I've only even tasted an orange once, at New Year's when my father bought one as a special treat. A cup of coffee. My mother adores coffee, which we could almost never afford, but it only tastes bitter and thin to me. A rich brown cup of something I've never seen.

"They call it hot chocolate," says Peeta. "It's good."

I take a sip of the hot, sweet, creamy liquid and a shudder runs through me. Even though the rest of the meal beckons, I ignore it until I've drained my cup. Then I stuff down every mouthful I can hold, which is a substantial amount, being careful to not overdo it on the richest stuff. One time, my mother told me that I always eat like I'll never see food again. And I said, "I won't unless I bring it home." That shut her up.

When my stomach feels like it's about to split open, I lean back and take in my breakfast companions. Peeta is still eating, breaking off bits of roll and dipping them in hot chocolate. Haymitch hasn't paid much attention to his platter, but he's knocking back a glass of red juice that he keeps thinning with a clear liquid from a bottle. Judging by the fumes, it's some kind of spirit. I don't know Haymitch, but I've seen him often enough in the Hob, tossing handfuls of money on the counter of the woman who sells white liquor. He'll be incoherent by the time we reach the Capitol.

I realize I detest Haymitch. No wonder the District 12 tributes never stand a chance. It isn't just that we've been underfed and lack training. Some of our tributes have still been strong enough to make a go of it. But we rarely get sponsors and he's a big part of the reason why. The rich people who back tributes—either because they're betting on them or simply for the bragging rights of picking a winner—expect someone classier than Haymitch to deal with.

"So, you're supposed to give us advice," I say to Haymitch.

"Here's some advice. Stay alive," says Haymitch, and then bursts out laughing. I exchange a look with Peeta before I remember I'm having nothing more to do with him. I'm surprised to see the hardness in his eyes. He generally seems so mild.

"That's very funny," says Peeta. Suddenly he lashes out at the glass in Haymitch's hand. It shatters on the floor, sending the bloodred liquid running toward the back of the train. "Only not to us."

Haymitch considers this a moment, then punches Peeta in the jaw, knocking him from his chair. When he turns back to reach for the spirits, I drive my knife into the table between his hand and the bottle, barely missing his fingers. I brace myself to deflect his hit, but it doesn't come. Instead he sits back and squints at us.

"Well, what's this?" says Haymitch. "Did I actually get a pair of fighters this year?"

Peeta rises from the floor and scoops up a handful of ice from under the fruit tureen. He starts to raise it to the red mark on his jaw.

"No," says Haymitch, stopping him. "Let the bruise show. The audience will think you've mixed it up with another tribute before you've even made it to the arena."

"That's against the rules," says Peeta.

“Only if they catch you. That bruise will say you fought, you weren’t caught, even better,” says Haymitch. He turns to me. “Can you hit anything with that knife besides a table?”

The bow and arrow is my weapon. But I’ve spent a fair amount of time throwing knives as well. Sometimes, if I’ve wounded an animal with an arrow, it’s better to get a knife into it, too, before I approach it. I realize that if I want Haymitch’s attention, this is my moment to make an impression. I yank the knife out of the table, get a grip on the blade, and then throw it into the wall across the room. I was actually just hoping to get a good solid stick, but it lodges in the seam between two panels, making me look a lot better than I am.

“Stand over here. Both of you,” says Haymitch, nodding to the middle of the room. We obey and he circles us, prodding us like animals at times, checking our muscles, examining our faces. “Well, you’re not entirely hopeless. Seem fit. And once the stylists get hold of you, you’ll be attractive enough.”

Peeta and I don’t question this. The Hunger Games aren’t a beauty contest, but the best-looking tributes always seem to pull more sponsors.

“All right, I’ll make a deal with you. You don’t interfere with my drinking, and I’ll stay sober enough to help you,” says Haymitch. “But you have to do exactly what I say.”

It’s not much of a deal but still a giant step forward from ten minutes ago when we had no guide at all.

“Fine,” says Peeta.

“So help us,” I say. “When we get to the arena, what’s the best strategy at the Cornucopia for someone—”

“One thing at a time. In a few minutes, we’ll be pulling into the station. You’ll be put in the hands of your stylists. You’re not going to like what they do to you. But no matter what it is, don’t resist,” says Haymitch.

“But—” I begin.

“No buts. Don’t resist,” says Haymitch. He takes the bottle of spirits from the table and leaves the car. As the door swings shut behind him, the car goes dark. There are still a few lights inside, but outside it’s as if night has fallen again. I realize we must be in the tunnel that runs up through the mountains into the Capitol. The mountains form a natural barrier between the Capitol and the eastern districts. It is almost impossible to enter from the east except

through the tunnels. This geographical advantage was a major factor in the districts losing the war that led to my being a tribute today. Since the rebels had to scale the mountains, they were easy targets for the Capitol's air forces.

Peeta Mellark and I stand in silence as the train speeds along. The tunnel goes on and on and I think of the tons of rock separating me from the sky, and my chest tightens. I hate being encased in stone this way. It reminds me of the mines and my father, trapped, unable to reach sunlight, buried forever in the darkness.

The train finally begins to slow and suddenly bright light floods the compartment. We can't help it. Both Peeta and I run to the window to see what we've only seen on television, the Capitol, the ruling city of Panem. The cameras haven't lied about its grandeur. If anything, they have not quite captured the magnificence of the glistening buildings in a rainbow of hues that tower into the air, the shiny cars that roll down the wide paved streets, the oddly dressed people with bizarre hair and painted faces who have never missed a meal. All the colors seem artificial, the pinks too deep, the greens too bright, the yellows painful to the eyes, like the flat round disks of hard candy we can never afford to buy at the tiny sweet shop in District 12.

The people begin to point at us eagerly as they recognize a tribute train rolling into the city. I step away from the window, sickened by their excitement, knowing they can't wait to watch us die. But Peeta holds his ground, actually waving and smiling at the gawking crowd. He only stops when the train pulls into the station, blocking us from their view.

He sees me staring at him and shrugs. "Who knows?" he says. "One of them may be rich."

I have misjudged him. I think of his actions since the reaping began. The friendly squeeze of my hand. His father showing up with the cookies and promising to feed Prim...did Peeta put him up to that? His tears at the station. Volunteering to wash Haymitch but then challenging him this morning when apparently the nice-guy approach had failed. And now the waving at the window, already trying to win the crowd.

All of the pieces are still fitting together, but I sense he has a plan forming. He hasn't accepted his death. He is already fighting hard to stay alive. Which also means that kind Peeta Mellark, the boy who gave me the bread, is fighting hard to kill me.

R-i-i-i-p! I grit my teeth as Venia, a woman with aqua hair and gold tattoos above her eyebrows, yanks a strip of fabric from my leg, tearing out the hair beneath it. “Sorry!” she pipes in her silly Capitol accent. “You’re just so hairy!”

Why do these people speak in such a high pitch? Why do their jaws barely open when they talk? Why do the ends of their sentences go up as if they’re asking a question? Odd vowels, clipped words, and always a hiss on the letter *s*...no wonder it’s impossible not to mimic them.

Venia makes what’s supposed to be a sympathetic face. “Good news, though. This is the last one. Ready?” I get a grip on the edges of the table I’m seated on and nod. The final swathe of my leg hair is uprooted in a painful jerk.

I’ve been in the Remake Center for more than three hours and I still haven’t met my stylist. Apparently he has no interest in seeing me until Venia and the other members of my prep team have addressed some obvious problems. This has included scrubbing down my body with a gritty foam that has removed not only dirt but at least three layers of skin, turning my nails into uniform shapes, and primarily, ridding my body of hair. My legs, arms, torso, underarms, and parts of my eyebrows have been stripped of the stuff, leaving me like a plucked bird, ready for roasting. I don’t like it. My skin feels sore and tingling and intensely vulnerable. But I have kept my side of the bargain with Haymitch, and no objection has crossed my lips.

“You’re doing very well,” says some guy named Flavius. He gives his orange corkscrew locks a shake and applies a fresh coat of purple lipstick to his mouth. “If there’s one thing we can’t stand, it’s a whiner. Grease her down!”

Venia and Octavia, a plump woman whose entire body has been dyed a pale shade of pea green, rub me down with a lotion that first stings but then soothes my raw skin. Then they pull me from the table, removing the thin robe I’ve been allowed to wear off and on. I stand there, completely naked, as the three circle me, wielding tweezers to remove any last bits of hair. I

know I should be embarrassed, but they're so unlike people that I'm no more self-conscious than if a trio of oddly colored birds were pecking around my feet.

The three step back and admire their work. "Excellent! You almost look like a human being now!" says Flavius, and they all laugh.

I force my lips up into a smile to show how grateful I am. "Thank you," I say sweetly. "We don't have much cause to look nice in District Twelve."

This wins them over completely. "Of course, you don't, you poor darling!" says Octavia clasping her hands together in distress for me.

"But don't worry," says Venia. "By the time Cinna is through with you, you're going to be absolutely gorgeous!"

"We promise! You know, now that we've gotten rid of all the hair and filth, you're not horrible at all!" says Flavius encouragingly. "Let's call Cinna!"

They dart out of the room. It's hard to hate my prep team. They're such total idiots. And yet, in an odd way, I know they're sincerely trying to help me.

I look at the cold white walls and floor and resist the impulse to retrieve my robe. But this Cinna, my stylist, will surely make me remove it at once. Instead my hands go to my hairdo, the one area of my body my prep team had been told to leave alone. My fingers stroke the silky braids my mother so carefully arranged. My mother. I left her blue dress and shoes on the floor of my train car, never thinking about retrieving them, of trying to hold on to a piece of her, of home. Now I wish I had.

The door opens and a young man who must be Cinna enters. I'm taken aback by how normal he looks. Most of the stylists they interview on television are so dyed, stenciled, and surgically altered they're grotesque. But Cinna's close-cropped hair appears to be its natural shade of brown. He's in a simple black shirt and pants. The only concession to self-alteration seems to be metallic gold eyeliner that has been applied with a light hand. It brings out the flecks of gold in his green eyes. And, despite my disgust with the Capitol and their hideous fashions, I can't help thinking how attractive it looks.

"Hello, Katniss. I'm Cinna, your stylist," he says in a quiet voice somewhat lacking in the Capitol's affectations.

"Hello," I venture cautiously.

“Just give me a moment, all right?” he asks. He walks around my naked body, not touching me, but taking in every inch of it with his eyes. I resist the impulse to cross my arms over my chest. “Who did your hair?”

“My mother,” I say.

“It’s beautiful. Classic really. And in almost perfect balance with your profile. She has very clever fingers,” he says.

I had expected someone flamboyant, someone older trying desperately to look young, someone who viewed me as a piece of meat to be prepared for a platter. Cinna has met none of these expectations.

“You’re new, aren’t you? I don’t think I’ve seen you before,” I say. Most of the stylists are familiar, constants in the ever-changing pool of tributes. Some have been around my whole life.

“Yes, this is my first year in the Games,” says Cinna.

“So they gave you District Twelve,” I say. Newcomers generally end up with us, the least desirable district.

“I asked for District Twelve,” he says without further explanation. “Why don’t you put on your robe and we’ll have a chat.”

Pulling on my robe, I follow him through a door into a sitting room. Two red couches face off over a low table. Three walls are blank, the fourth is entirely glass, providing a window to the city. I can see by the light that it must be around noon, although the sunny sky has turned overcast. Cinna invites me to sit on one of the couches and takes his place across from me. He presses a button on the side of the table. The top splits and from below rises a second tabletop that holds our lunch. Chicken and chunks of oranges cooked in a creamy sauce laid on a bed of pearly white grain, tiny green peas and onions, rolls shaped like flowers, and for dessert, a pudding the color of honey.

I try to imagine assembling this meal myself back home. Chickens are too expensive, but I could make do with a wild turkey. I’d need to shoot a second turkey to trade for an orange. Goat’s milk would have to substitute for cream. We can grow peas in the garden. I’d have to get wild onions from the woods. I don’t recognize the grain, our own tessera ration cooks down to an unattractive brown mush. Fancy rolls would mean another trade with the baker, perhaps for two or three squirrels. As for the pudding, I can’t even guess what’s in it. Days of hunting and gathering for this one meal and even then it would be a poor substitution for the Capitol version.

What must it be like, I wonder, to live in a world where food appears at the press of a button? How would I spend the hours I now commit to combing the woods for sustenance if it were so easy to come by? What do they do all day, these people in the Capitol, besides decorating their bodies and waiting around for a new shipment of tributes to roll in and die for their entertainment?

I look up and find Cinna's eyes trained on mine. "How despicable we must seem to you," he says.

Has he seen this in my face or somehow read my thoughts? He's right, though. The whole rotten lot of them is despicable.

"No matter," says Cinna. "So, Katniss, about your costume for the opening ceremonies. My partner, Portia, is the stylist for your fellow tribute, Peeta. And our current thought is to dress you in complementary costumes," says Cinna. "As you know, it's customary to reflect the flavor of the district."

For the opening ceremonies, you're supposed to wear something that suggests your district's principal industry. District 11, agriculture. District 4, fishing. District 3, factories. This means that coming from District 12, Peeta and I will be in some kind of coal miner's getup. Since the baggy miner's jumpsuits are not particularly becoming, our tributes usually end up in skimpy outfits and hats with headlamps. One year, our tributes were stark naked and covered in black powder to represent coal dust. It's always dreadful and does nothing to win favor with the crowd. I prepare myself for the worst.

"So, I'll be in a coal miner outfit?" I ask, hoping it won't be indecent.

"Not exactly. You see, Portia and I think that coal miner thing's very overdone. No one will remember you in that. And we both see it as our job to make the District Twelve tributes unforgettable," says Cinna.

I'll be naked for sure, I think.

"So rather than focus on the coal mining itself, we're going to focus on the coal," says Cinna.

Naked and covered in black dust, I think.

"And what do we do with coal? We burn it," says Cinna. "You're not afraid of fire, are you, Katniss?" He sees my expression and grins.

A few hours later, I am dressed in what will either be the most sensational or the deadliest costume in the opening ceremonies. I'm in a simple black unitard that covers me from ankle to neck. Shiny leather boots

lace up to my knees. But it's the fluttering cape made of streams of orange, yellow, and red and the matching headpiece that define this costume. Cinna plans to light them on fire just before our chariot rolls into the streets.

"It's not real flame, of course, just a little synthetic fire Portia and I came up with. You'll be perfectly safe," he says. But I'm not convinced I won't be perfectly barbecued by the time we reach the city's center.

My face is relatively clear of makeup, just a bit of high-lighting here and there. My hair has been brushed out and then braided down my back in my usual style. "I want the audience to recognize you when you're in the arena," says Cinna dreamily. "Katniss, the girl who was on fire."

It crosses my mind that Cinna's calm and normal demeanor masks a complete madman.

Despite this morning's revelation about Peeta's character, I'm actually relieved when he shows up, dressed in an identical costume. He should know about fire, being a baker's son and all. His stylist, Portia, and her team accompany him, and everyone is absolutely giddy with excitement over what a splash we'll make. Except Cinna. He just seems a bit weary as he accepts congratulations.

We're whisked down to the bottom level of the Remake Center, which is essentially a gigantic stable. The opening ceremonies are about to start. Pairs of tributes are being loaded into chariots pulled by teams of four horses. Ours are coal black. The animals are so well trained, no one even needs to guide their reins. Cinna and Portia direct us into the chariot and carefully arrange our body positions, the drape of our capes, before moving off to consult with each other.

"What do you think?" I whisper to Peeta. "About the fire?"

"I'll rip off your cape if you'll rip off mine," he says through gritted teeth.

"Deal," I say. Maybe, if we can get them off soon enough, we'll avoid the worst burns. It's bad though. They'll throw us into the arena no matter what condition we're in. "I know we promised Haymitch we'd do exactly what they said, but I don't think he considered this angle."

"Where is Haymitch, anyway? Isn't he supposed to protect us from this sort of thing?" says Peeta.

"With all that alcohol in him, it's probably not advisable to have him around an open flame," I say.

And suddenly we're both laughing. I guess we're both so nervous about the Games and more pressingly, petrified of being turned into human torches, we're not acting sensibly.

The opening music begins. It's easy to hear, blasted around the Capitol. Massive doors slide open revealing the crowd-lined streets. The ride lasts about twenty minutes and ends up at the City Circle, where they will welcome us, play the anthem, and escort us into the Training Center, which will be our home/prison until the Games begin.

The tributes from District 1 ride out in a chariot pulled by snow-white horses. They look so beautiful, spray-painted silver, in tasteful tunics glittering with jewels. District 1 makes luxury items for the Capitol. You can hear the roar of the crowd. They are always favorites.

District 2 gets into position to follow them. In no time at all, we are approaching the door and I can see that between the overcast sky and evening hour the light is turning gray. The tributes from District 11 are just rolling out when Cinna appears with a lighted torch. "Here we go then," he says, and before we can react he sets our capes on fire. I gasp, waiting for the heat, but there is only a faint tickling sensation. Cinna climbs up before us and ignites our headdresses. He lets out a sigh of relief. "It works." Then he gently tucks a hand under my chin. "Remember, heads high. Smiles. They're going to love you!"

Cinna jumps off the chariot and has one last idea. He shouts something up at us, but the music drowns him out. He shouts again and gestures.

"What's he saying?" I ask Peeta. For the first time, I look at him and realize that ablaze with the fake flames, he is dazzling. And I must be, too.

"I think he said for us to hold hands," says Peeta. He grabs my right hand in his left, and we look to Cinna for confirmation. He nods and gives a thumbs-up, and that's the last thing I see before we enter the city.

The crowd's initial alarm at our appearance quickly changes to cheers and shouts of "District Twelve!" Every head is turned our way, pulling the focus from the three chariots ahead of us. At first, I'm frozen, but then I catch sight of us on a large television screen and am floored by how breathtaking we look. In the deepening twilight, the firelight illuminates our faces. We seem to be leaving a trail of fire off the flowing capes. Cinna was right about the minimal makeup, we both look more attractive but utterly recognizable.

Remember, heads high. Smiles. They're going to love you! I hear Cinna's voice in my head. I lift my chin a bit higher, put on my most winning smile, and wave with my free hand. I'm glad now I have Peeta to clutch for balance, he is so steady, solid as a rock. As I gain confidence, I actually blow a few kisses to the crowd. The people of the Capitol are going nuts, showering us with flowers, shouting our names, our first names, which they have bothered to find on the program.

The pounding music, the cheers, the admiration work their way into my blood, and I can't suppress my excitement. Cinna has given me a great advantage. No one will forget me. Not my look, not my name. Katniss. The girl who was on fire.

For the first time, I feel a flicker of hope rising up in me. Surely, there must be one sponsor willing to take me on! And with a little extra help, some food, the right weapon, why should I count myself out of the Games?

Someone throws me a red rose. I catch it, give it a delicate sniff, and blow a kiss back in the general direction of the giver. A hundred hands reach up to catch my kiss, as if it were a real and tangible thing.

"Katniss! Katniss!" I can hear my name being called from all sides. Everyone wants my kisses.

It's not until we enter the City Circle that I realize I must have completely stopped the circulation in Peeta's hand. That's how tightly I've been holding it. I look down at our linked fingers as I loosen my grasp, but he regains his grip on me. "No, don't let go of me," he says. The firelight flickers off his blue eyes. "Please. I might fall out of this thing."

"Okay," I say. So I keep holding on, but I can't help feeling strange about the way Cinna has linked us together. It's not really fair to present us as a team and then lock us into the arena to kill each other.

The twelve chariots fill the loop of the City Circle. On the buildings that surround the Circle, every window is packed with the most prestigious citizens of the Capitol. Our horses pull our chariot right up to President Snow's mansion, and we come to a halt. The music ends with a flourish.

The president, a small, thin man with paper-white hair, gives the official welcome from a balcony above us. It is traditional to cut away to the faces of the tributes during the speech. But I can see on the screen that we are getting way more than our share of airtime. The darker it becomes, the more difficult it is to take your eyes off our flickering. When the national anthem plays, they

do make an effort to do a quick cut around to each pair of tributes, but the camera holds on the District 12 chariot as it parades around the circle one final time and disappears into the Training Center.

The doors have only just shut behind us when we're engulfed by the prep teams, who are nearly unintelligible as they babble out praise. As I glance around, I notice a lot of the other tributes are shooting us dirty looks, which confirms what I've suspected, we've literally outshone them all. Then Cinna and Portia are there, helping us down from the chariot, carefully removing our flaming capes and headdresses. Portia extinguishes them with some kind of spray from a canister.

I realize I'm still glued to Peeta and force my stiff fingers to open. We both massage our hands.

"Thanks for keeping hold of me. I was getting a little shaky there," says Peeta.

"It didn't show," I tell him. "I'm sure no one noticed."

"I'm sure they didn't notice anything but you. You should wear flames more often," he says. "They suit you." And then he gives me a smile that seems so genuinely sweet with just the right touch of shyness that unexpected warmth rushes through me.

A warning bell goes off in my head. *Don't be so stupid. Peeta is planning how to kill you, I remind myself. He is luring you in to make you easy prey. The more likable he is, the more deadly he is.*

But because two can play at this game, I stand on tiptoe and kiss his cheek. Right on his bruise.

6

The Training Center has a tower designed exclusively for the tributes and their teams. This will be our home until the actual Games begin. Each district has an entire floor. You simply step onto an elevator and press the number of your district. Easy enough to remember.

I've ridden the elevator a couple of times in the Justice Building back in District 12. Once to receive the medal for my father's death and then yesterday to say my final good-byes to my friends and family. But that's a dark and creaky thing that moves like a snail and smells of sour milk. The walls of this elevator are made of crystal so that you can watch the people on the ground floor shrink to ants as you shoot up into the air. It's exhilarating and I'm tempted to ask Effie Trinket if we can ride it again, but somehow that seems childish.

Apparently, Effie Trinket's duties did not conclude at the station. She and Haymitch will be overseeing us right into the arena. In a way, that's a plus because at least she can be counted on to corral us around to places on time whereas we haven't seen Haymitch since he agreed to help us on the train. Probably passed out somewhere. Effie Trinket, on the other hand, seems to be flying high. We're the first team she's ever chaperoned that made a splash at the opening ceremonies. She's complimentary about not just our costumes but how we conducted ourselves. And, to hear her tell it, Effie knows everyone who's anyone in the Capitol and has been talking us up all day, trying to win us sponsors.

"I've been very mysterious, though," she says, her eyes squint half shut. "Because, of course, Haymitch hasn't bothered to tell me your strategies. But I've done my best with what I had to work with. How Katniss sacrificed herself for her sister. How you've both successfully struggled to overcome the barbarism of your district."

Barbarism? That's ironic coming from a woman helping to prepare us for slaughter. And what's she basing our success on? Our table manners?

"Everyone has their reservations, naturally. You being from the coal district. But I said, and this was very clever of me, I said, 'Well, if you put

enough pressure on coal it turns to pearls!” Effie beams at us so brilliantly that we have no choice but to respond enthusiastically to her cleverness even though it’s wrong.

Coal doesn’t turn to pearls. They grow in shellfish. Possibly she meant coal turns to diamonds, but that’s untrue, too. I’ve heard they have some sort of machine in District 1 that can turn graphite into diamonds. But we don’t mine graphite in District 12. That was part of District 13’s job until they were destroyed.

I wonder if the people she’s been plugging us to all day either know or care.

“Unfortunately, I can’t seal the sponsor deals for you. Only Haymitch can do that,” says Effie grimly. “But don’t worry, I’ll get him to the table at gunpoint if necessary.”

Although lacking in many departments, Effie Trinket has a certain determination I have to admire.

My quarters are larger than our entire house back home. They are plush, like the train car, but also have so many automatic gadgets that I’m sure I won’t have time to press all the buttons. The shower alone has a panel with more than a hundred options you can choose regulating water temperature, pressure, soaps, shampoos, scents, oils, and massaging sponges. When you step out on a mat, heaters come on that blow-dry your body. Instead of struggling with the knots in my wet hair, I merely place my hand on a box that sends a current through my scalp, untangling, parting, and drying my hair almost instantly. It floats down around my shoulders in a glossy curtain.

I program the closet for an outfit to my taste. The windows zoom in and out on parts of the city at my command. You need only whisper a type of food from a gigantic menu into a mouthpiece and it appears, hot and steamy, before you in less than a minute. I walk around the room eating goose liver and puffy bread until there’s a knock on the door. Effie’s calling me to dinner.

Good. I’m starving.

Peeta, Cinna, and Portia are standing out on a balcony that overlooks the Capitol when we enter the dining room. I’m glad to see the stylists, particularly after I hear that Haymitch will be joining us. A meal presided over by just Effie and Haymitch is bound to be a disaster. Besides, dinner isn’t really about food, it’s about planning out our strategies, and Cinna and Portia have already proven how valuable they are.

A silent young man dressed in a white tunic offers us all stemmed glasses of wine. I think about turning it down, but I've never had wine, except the homemade stuff my mother uses for coughs, and when will I get a chance to try it again? I take a sip of the tart, dry liquid and secretly think it could be improved by a few spoonfuls of honey.

Haymitch shows up just as dinner is being served. It looks as if he's had his own stylist because he's clean and groomed and about as sober as I've ever seen him. He doesn't refuse the offer of wine, but when he starts in on his soup, I realize it's the first time I've ever seen him eat. Maybe he really will pull himself together long enough to help us.

Cinna and Portia seem to have a civilizing effect on Haymitch and Effie. At least they're addressing each other decently. And they both have nothing but praise for our stylists' opening act. While they make small talk, I concentrate on the meal. Mushroom soup, bitter greens with tomatoes the size of peas, rare roast beef sliced as thin as paper, noodles in a green sauce, cheese that melts on your tongue served with sweet blue grapes. The servers, all young people dressed in white tunics like the one who gave us wine, move wordlessly to and from the table, keeping the platters and glasses full.

About halfway through my glass of wine, my head starts feeling foggy, so I change to water instead. I don't like the feeling and hope it wears off soon. How Haymitch can stand walking around like this full-time is a mystery.

I try to focus on the talk, which has turned to our interview costumes, when a girl sets a gorgeous-looking cake on the table and deftly lights it. It blazes up and then the flames flicker around the edges awhile until it finally goes out. I have a moment of doubt. "What makes it burn? Is it alcohol?" I say, looking up at the girl. "That's the last thing I wa—oh! I know you!"

I can't place a name or time to the girl's face. But I'm certain of it. The dark red hair, the striking features, the porcelain white skin. But even as I utter the words, I feel my insides contracting with anxiety and guilt at the sight of her, and while I can't pull it up, I know some bad memory is associated with her. The expression of terror that crosses her face only adds to my confusion and unease. She shakes her head in denial quickly and hurries away from the table.

When I look back, the four adults are watching me like hawks.

"Don't be ridiculous, Katniss. How could you possibly know an Avox?" snaps Effie. "The very thought."

“What’s an Avox?” I ask stupidly.

“Someone who committed a crime. They cut her tongue so she can’t speak,” says Haymitch. “She’s probably a traitor of some sort. Not likely you’d know her.”

“And even if you did, you’re not to speak to one of them unless it’s to give an order,” says Effie. “Of course, you don’t really know her.”

But I do know her. And now that Haymitch has mentioned the word *traitor* I remember from where. The disapproval is so high I could never admit it. “No, I guess not, I just—” I stammer, and the wine is not helping.

Peeta snaps his fingers. “Delly Cartwright. That’s who it is. I kept thinking she looked familiar as well. Then I realized she’s a dead ringer for Delly.”

Delly Cartwright is a pasty-faced, lumpy girl with yellowish hair who looks about as much like our server as a beetle does a butterfly. She may also be the friendliest person on the planet—she smiles constantly at everybody in school, even me. I have never seen the girl with the red hair smile. But I jump on Peeta’s suggestion gratefully. “Of course, that’s who I was thinking of. It must be the hair,” I say.

“Something about the eyes, too,” says Peeta.

The energy at the table relaxes. “Oh, well. If that’s all it is,” says Cinna. “And yes, the cake has spirits, but all the alcohol has burned off. I ordered it specially in honor of your fiery debut.”

We eat the cake and move into a sitting room to watch the replay of the opening ceremonies that’s being broadcast. A few of the other couples make a nice impression, but none of them can hold a candle to us. Even our own party lets out an “Ahh!” as they show us coming out of the Remake Center.

“Whose idea was the hand holding?” asks Haymitch.

“Cinna’s,” says Portia.

“Just the perfect touch of rebellion,” says Haymitch. “Very nice.”

Rebellion? I have to think about that one a moment. But when I remember the other couples, standing stiffly apart, never touching or acknowledging each other, as if their fellow tribute did not exist, as if the Games had already begun, I know what Haymitch means. Presenting ourselves not as adversaries but as friends has distinguished us as much as the fiery costumes.

“Tomorrow morning is the first training session. Meet me for breakfast and I’ll tell you exactly how I want you to play it,” says Haymitch to Peeta

and me. “Now go get some sleep while the grown-ups talk.”

Peeta and I walk together down the corridor to our rooms. When we get to my door, he leans against the frame, not blocking my entrance exactly but insisting I pay attention to him. “So, Delly Cartwright. Imagine finding her lookalike here.”

He’s asking for an explanation, and I’m tempted to give him one. We both know he covered for me. So here I am in his debt again. If I tell him the truth about the girl, somehow that might even things up. How can it hurt really? Even if he repeated the story, it couldn’t do me much harm. It was just something I witnessed. And he lied as much as I did about Delly Cartwright.

I realize I do want to talk to someone about the girl. Someone who might be able to help me figure out her story. Gale would be my first choice, but it’s unlikely I’ll ever see Gale again. I try to think if telling Peeta could give him any possible advantage over me, but I don’t see how. Maybe sharing a confidence will actually make him believe I see him as a friend.

Besides, the idea of the girl with her maimed tongue frightens me. She has reminded me why I’m here. Not to model flashy costumes and eat delicacies. But to die a bloody death while the crowds urge on my killer.

To tell or not to tell? My brain still feels slow from the wine. I stare down the empty corridor as if the decision lies there.

Peeta picks up on my hesitation. “Have you been on the roof yet?” I shake my head. “Cinna showed me. You can practically see the whole city. The wind’s a bit loud, though.”

I translate this into “No one will overhear us talking” in my head. You do have the sense that we might be under surveillance here. “Can we just go up?”

“Sure, come on,” says Peeta. I follow him to a flight of stairs that lead to the roof. There’s a small dome-shaped room with a door to the outside. As we step into the cool, windy evening air, I catch my breath at the view. The Capitol twinkles like a vast field of fireflies. Electricity in District 12 comes and goes, usually we only have it a few hours a day. Often the evenings are spent in candlelight. The only time you can count on it is when they’re airing the Games or some important government message on television that it’s mandatory to watch. But here there would be no shortage. Ever.

Peeta and I walk to a railing at the edge of the roof. I look straight down the side of the building to the street, which is buzzing with people. You can

hear their cars, an occasional shout, and a strange metallic tinkling. In District 12, we'd all be thinking about bed right now.

"I asked Cinna why they let us up here. Weren't they worried that some of the tributes might decide to jump right over the side?" says Peeta.

"What'd he say?" I ask.

"You can't," says Peeta. He holds out his hand into seemingly empty space. There's a sharp zap and he jerks it back. "Some kind of electric field throws you back on the roof."

"Always worried about our safety," I say. Even though Cinna has shown Peeta the roof, I wonder if we're supposed to be up here now, so late and alone. I've never seen tributes on the Training Center roof before. But that doesn't mean we're not being taped. "Do you think they're watching us now?"

"Maybe," he admits. "Come see the garden."

On the other side of the dome, they've built a garden with flower beds and potted trees. From the branches hang hundreds of wind chimes, which account for the tinkling I heard. Here in the garden, on this windy night, it's enough to drown out two people who are trying not to be heard. Peeta looks at me expectantly.

I pretend to examine a blossom. "We were hunting in the woods one day. Hidden, waiting for game," I whisper.

"You and your father?" he whispers back.

"No, my friend Gale. Suddenly all the birds stopped singing at once. Except one. As if it were giving a warning call. And then we saw her. I'm sure it was the same girl. A boy was with her. Their clothes were tattered. They had dark circles under their eyes from no sleep. They were running as if their lives depended on it," I say.

For a moment I'm silent, as I remember how the sight of this strange pair, clearly not from District 12, fleeing through the woods immobilized us. Later, we wondered if we could have helped them escape. Perhaps we might have. Concealed them. If we'd moved quickly. Gale and I were taken by surprise, yes, but we're both hunters. We know how animals look at bay. We knew the pair was in trouble as soon as we saw them. But we only watched.

"The hovercraft appeared out of nowhere," I continue to Peeta. "I mean, one moment the sky was empty and the next it was there. It didn't make a sound, but they saw it. A net dropped down on the girl and carried her up,

fast, so fast like the elevator. They shot some sort of spear through the boy. It was attached to a cable and they hauled him up as well. But I'm certain he was dead. We heard the girl scream once. The boy's name, I think. Then it was gone, the hovercraft. Vanished into thin air. And the birds began to sing again, as if nothing had happened."

"Did they see you?" Peeta asked.

"I don't know. We were under a shelf of rock," I reply. But I do know. There was a moment, after the birdcall, but before the hovercraft, where the girl had seen us. She'd locked eyes with me and called out for help. But neither Gale or I had responded.

"You're shivering," says Peeta.

The wind and the story have blown all the warmth from my body. The girl's scream. Had it been her last?

Peeta takes off his jacket and wraps it around my shoulders. I start to take a step back, but then I let him, deciding for a moment to accept both his jacket and his kindness. A friend would do that, right?

"They were from here?" he asks, and he secures a button at my neck.

I nod. They'd had that Capitol look about them. The boy and the girl.

"Where do you suppose they were going?" he asks.

"I don't know that," I say. District 12 is pretty much the end of the line. Beyond us, there's only wilderness. If you don't count the ruins of District 13 that still smolder from the toxic bombs. They show it on television occasionally, just to remind us. "Or why they would leave here." Haymitch had called the Avoxes traitors. Against what? It could only be the Capitol. But they had everything here. No cause to rebel.

"I'd leave here," Peeta blurts out. Then he looks around nervously. It was loud enough to hear above the chimes. He laughs. "I'd go home now if they let me. But you have to admit, the food's prime."

He's covered again. If that's all you'd heard it would just sound like the words of a scared tribute, not someone contemplating the unquestionable goodness of the Capitol.

"It's getting chilly. We better go in," he says. Inside the dome, it's warm and bright. His tone is conversational. "Your friend Gale. He's the one who took your sister away at the reaping?"

"Yes. Do you know him?" I ask.

“Not really. I hear the girls talk about him a lot. I thought he was your cousin or something. You favor each other,” he says.

“No, we’re not related,” I say.

Peeta nods, unreadable. “Did he come to say good-bye to you?”

“Yes,” I say, observing him carefully. “So did your father. He brought me cookies.”

Peeta raises his eyebrows as if this is news. But after watching him lie so smoothly, I don’t give this much weight. “Really? Well, he likes you and your sister. I think he wishes he had a daughter instead of a houseful of boys.”

The idea that I might ever have been discussed, around the dinner table, at the bakery fire, just in passing in Peeta’s house gives me a start. It must have been when the mother was out of the room.

“He knew your mother when they were kids,” says Peeta.

Another surprise. But probably true. “Oh, yes. She grew up in town,” I say. It seems impolite to say she never mentioned the baker except to compliment his bread.

We’re at my door. I give back his jacket. “See you in the morning then.”

“See you,” he says, and walks off down the hall.

When I open my door, the redheaded girl is collecting my unitard and boots from where I left them on the floor before my shower. I want to apologize for possibly getting her in trouble earlier. But I remember I’m not supposed to speak to her unless I’m giving her an order.

“Oh, sorry,” I say. “I was supposed to get those back to Cinna. I’m sorry. Can you take them to him?”

She avoids my eyes, gives a small nod, and heads out the door.

I’d set out to tell her I was sorry about dinner. But I know that my apology runs much deeper. That I’m ashamed I never tried to help her in the woods. That I let the Capitol kill the boy and mutilate her without lifting a finger.

Just like I was watching the Games.

I kick off my shoes and climb under the covers in my clothes. The shivering hasn’t stopped. Perhaps the girl doesn’t even remember me. But I know she does. You don’t forget the face of the person who was your last hope. I pull the covers up over my head as if this will protect me from the redheaded girl who can’t speak. But I can feel her eyes staring at me, piercing through walls and doors and bedding.

I wonder if she'll enjoy watching me die.

My slumbers are filled with disturbing dreams. The face of the redheaded girl intertwines with gory images from earlier Hunger Games, with my mother withdrawn and unreachable, with Prim emaciated and terrified. I bolt up screaming for my father to run as the mine explodes into a million deadly bits of light.

Dawn is breaking through the windows. The Capitol has a misty, haunted air. My head aches and I must have bitten into the side of my cheek in the night. My tongue probes the ragged flesh and I taste blood.

Slowly, I drag myself out of bed and into the shower. I arbitrarily punch buttons on the control board and end up hopping from foot to foot as alternating jets of icy cold and steaming hot water assault me. Then I'm deluged in lemony foam that I have to scrape off with a heavy bristled brush. Oh, well. At least my blood is flowing.

When I'm dried and moisturized with lotion, I find an outfit has been left for me at the front of the closet. Tight black pants, a long-sleeved burgundy tunic, and leather shoes. I put my hair in the single braid down my back. This is the first time since the morning of the reaping that I resemble myself. No fancy hair and clothes, no flaming capes. Just me. Looking like I could be headed for the woods. It calms me.

Haymitch didn't give us an exact time to meet for breakfast and no one has contacted me this morning, but I'm hungry so I head down to the dining room, hoping there will be food. I'm not disappointed. While the table is empty, a long board off to the side has been laid with at least twenty dishes. A young man, an Avox, stands at attention by the spread. When I ask if I can serve myself, he nods assent. I load a plate with eggs, sausages, batter cakes covered in thick orange preserves, slices of pale purple melon. As I gorge myself, I watch the sun rise over the Capitol. I have a second plate of hot grain smothered in beef stew. Finally, I fill a plate with rolls and sit at the table, breaking off bits and dipping them into hot chocolate, the way Peeta did on the train.

My mind wanders to my mother and Prim. They must be up. My mother getting their breakfast of mush. Prim milking her goat before school. Just two mornings ago, I was home. Can that be right? Yes, just two. And now how empty the house feels, even from a distance. What did they say last night about my fiery debut at the Games? Did it give them hope, or simply add to their terror when they saw the reality of twenty-four tributes circled together, knowing only one could live?

Haymitch and Peeta come in, bid me good morning, fill their plates. It makes me irritated that Peeta is wearing exactly the same outfit I am. I need to say something to Cinna. This twins act is going to blow up in our faces once the Games begin. Surely, they must know this. Then I remember Haymitch telling me to do exactly what the stylists tell me to do. If it was anyone but Cinna, I might be tempted to ignore him. But after last night's triumph, I don't have a lot of room to criticize his choices.

I'm nervous about the training. There will be three days in which all the tributes practice together. On the last afternoon, we'll each get a chance to perform in private before the Gamemakers. The thought of meeting the other tributes face-to-face makes me queasy. I turn the roll I have just taken from the basket over and over in my hands, but my appetite is gone.

When Haymitch has finished several platters of stew, he pushes back his plate with a sigh. He takes a flask from his pocket and takes a long pull on it and leans his elbows on the table. "So, let's get down to business. Training. First off, if you like, I'll coach you separately. Decide now."

"Why would you coach us separately?" I ask.

"Say if you had a secret skill you might not want the other to know about," says Haymitch.

I exchange a look with Peeta. "I don't have any secret skills," he says. "And I already know what yours is, right? I mean, I've eaten enough of your squirrels."

I never thought about Peeta eating the squirrels I shot. Somehow I always pictured the baker quietly going off and frying them up for himself. Not out of greed. But because town families usually eat expensive butcher meat. Beef and chicken and horse.

"You can coach us together," I tell Haymitch. Peeta nods.

"All right, so give me some idea of what you can do," says Haymitch.

"I can't do anything," says Peeta. "Unless you count baking bread."

“Sorry, I don’t. Katniss. I already know you’re handy with a knife,” says Haymitch.

“Not really. But I can hunt,” I say. “With a bow and arrow.”

“And you’re good?” asks Haymitch.

I have to think about it. I’ve been putting food on the table for four years. That’s no small task. I’m not as good as my father was, but he’d had more practice. I’ve better aim than Gale, but I’ve had more practice. He’s a genius with traps and snares. “I’m all right,” I say.

“She’s excellent,” says Peeta. “My father buys her squirrels. He always comments on how the arrows never pierce the body. She hits every one in the eye. It’s the same with the rabbits she sells the butcher. She can even bring down deer.”

This assessment of my skills from Peeta takes me totally by surprise. First, that he ever noticed. Second, that he’s talking me up. “What are you doing?” I ask him suspiciously.

“What are you doing? If he’s going to help you, he has to know what you’re capable of. Don’t underrate yourself,” says Peeta.

I don’t know why, but this rubs me the wrong way. “What about you? I’ve seen you in the market. You can lift hundred-pound bags of flour,” I snap at him. “Tell him that. That’s not nothing.”

“Yes, and I’m sure the arena will be full of bags of flour for me to chuck at people. It’s not like being able to use a weapon. You know it isn’t,” he shoots back.

“He can wrestle,” I tell Haymitch. “He came in second in our school competition last year, only after his brother.”

“What use is that? How many times have you seen someone wrestle someone to death?” says Peeta in disgust.

“There’s always hand-to-hand combat. All you need is to come up with a knife, and you’ll at least stand a chance. If I get jumped, I’m dead!” I can hear my voice rising in anger.

“But you won’t! You’ll be living up in some tree eating raw squirrels and picking off people with arrows. You know what my mother said to me when she came to say good-bye, as if to cheer me up, she says maybe District Twelve will finally have a winner. Then I realized, she didn’t mean me, she meant you!” bursts out Peeta.

“Oh, she meant you,” I say with a wave of dismissal.

“She said, ‘She’s a survivor, that one.’ *She* is,” says Peeta.

That pulls me up short. Did his mother really say that about me? Did she rate me over her son? I see the pain in Peeta’s eyes and know he isn’t lying.

Suddenly I’m behind the bakery and I can feel the chill of the rain running down my back, the hollowness in my belly. I sound eleven years old when I speak. “But only because someone helped me.”

Peeta’s eyes flicker down to the roll in my hands, and I know he remembers that day, too. But he just shrugs. “People will help you in the arena. They’ll be tripping over each other to sponsor you.”

“No more than you,” I say.

Peeta rolls his eyes at Haymitch. “She has no idea. The effect she can have.” He runs his fingernail along the wood grain in the table, refusing to look at me.

What on earth does he mean? People help me? When we were dying of starvation, no one helped me! No one except Peeta. Once I had something to barter with, things changed. I’m a tough trader. Or am I? What effect do I have? That I’m weak and needy? Is he suggesting that I got good deals because people pitied me? I try to think if this is true. Perhaps some of the merchants were a little generous in their trades, but I always attributed that to their long-standing relationship with my father. Besides, my game is first-class. No one pitied me!

I glower at the roll sure he meant to insult me.

After about a minute of this, Haymitch says, “Well, then. Well, well, well. Katniss, there’s no guarantee there’ll be bows and arrows in the arena, but during your private session with the Gamemakers, show them what you can do. Until then, stay clear of archery. Are you any good at trapping?”

“I know a few basic snares,” I mutter.

“That may be significant in terms of food,” says Haymitch. “And, Peeta, she’s right, never underestimate strength in the arena. Very often, physical power tilts the advantage to a player. In the Training Center, they will have weights, but don’t reveal how much you can lift in front of the other tributes. The plan’s the same for both of you. You go to group training. Spend the time trying to learn something you don’t know. Throw a spear. Swing a mace. Learn to tie a decent knot. Save showing what you’re best at until your private sessions. Are we clear?” says Haymitch.

Peeta and I nod.

“One last thing. In public, I want you by each other’s side every minute,” says Haymitch. We both start to object, but Haymitch slams his hand on the table. “Every minute! It’s not open for discussion! You agreed to do as I said! You will be together, you will appear amiable to each other. Now get out. Meet Effie at the elevator at ten for training.”

I bite my lip and stalk back to my room, making sure Peeta can hear the door slam. I sit on the bed, hating Haymitch, hating Peeta, hating myself for mentioning that day long ago in the rain.

It’s such a joke! Peeta and I going along pretending to be friends! Talking up each other’s strengths, insisting the other take credit for their abilities. Because, in fact, at some point, we’re going to have to knock it off and accept we’re bitter adversaries. Which I’d be prepared to do right now if it wasn’t for Haymitch’s stupid instruction that we stick together in training. It’s my own fault, I guess, for telling him he didn’t have to coach us separately. But that didn’t mean I wanted to do everything with Peeta. Who, by the way, clearly doesn’t want to be partnering up with me, either.

I hear Peeta’s voice in my head. *She has no idea. The effect she can have.* Obviously meant to demean me. Right? But a tiny part of me wonders if this was a compliment. That he meant I was appealing in some way. It’s weird, how much he’s noticed me. Like the attention he’s paid to my hunting. And apparently, I have not been as oblivious to him as I imagined, either. The flour. The wrestling. I have kept track of the boy with the bread.

It’s almost ten. I clean my teeth and smooth back my hair again. Anger temporarily blocked out my nervousness about meeting the other tributes, but now I can feel my anxiety rising again. By the time I meet Effie and Peeta at the elevator, I catch myself biting my nails. I stop at once.

The actual training rooms are below ground level of our building. With these elevators, the ride is less than a minute. The doors open into an enormous gymnasium filled with various weapons and obstacle courses. Although it’s not yet ten, we’re the last ones to arrive. The other tributes are gathered in a tense circle. They each have a cloth square with their district number on it pinned to their shirts. While someone pins the number 12 on my back, I do a quick assessment. Peeta and I are the only two dressed alike.

As soon as we join the circle, the head trainer, a tall, athletic woman named Atala steps up and begins to explain the training schedule. Experts in each skill will remain at their stations. We will be free to travel from area to

area as we choose, per our mentor's instructions. Some of the stations teach survival skills, others fighting techniques. We are forbidden to engage in any combative exercise with another tribute. There are assistants on hand if we want to practice with a partner.

When Atala begins to read down the list of the skill stations, my eyes can't help flitting around to the other tributes. It's the first time we've been assembled, on level ground, in simple clothes. My heart sinks. Almost all of the boys and at least half of the girls are bigger than I am, even though many of the tributes have never been fed properly. You can see it in their bones, their skin, the hollow look in their eyes. I may be smaller naturally, but overall my family's resourcefulness has given me an edge in that area. I stand straight, and while I'm thin, I'm strong. The meat and plants from the woods combined with the exertion it took to get them have given me a healthier body than most of those I see around me.

The exceptions are the kids from the wealthier districts, the volunteers, the ones who have been fed and trained throughout their lives for this moment. The tributes from 1, 2, and 4 traditionally have this look about them. It's technically against the rules to train tributes before they reach the Capitol but it happens every year. In District 12, we call them the Career Tributes, or just the Careers. And like as not, the winner will be one of them.

The slight advantage I held coming into the Training Center, my fiery entrance last night, seems to vanish in the presence of my competition. The other tributes were jealous of us, but not because we were amazing, because our stylists were. Now I see nothing but contempt in the glances of the Career Tributes. Each must have fifty to a hundred pounds on me. They project arrogance and brutality. When Atala releases us, they head straight for the deadliest-looking weapons in the gym and handle them with ease.

I'm thinking that it's lucky I'm a fast runner when Peeta nudges my arm and I jump. He is still beside me, per Haymitch's instructions. His expression is sober. "Where would you like to start?"

I look around at the Career Tributes who are showing off, clearly trying to intimidate the field. Then at the others, the underfed, the incompetent, shakily having their first lessons with a knife or an ax.

"Suppose we tie some knots," I say.

"Right you are," says Peeta. We cross to an empty station where the trainer seems pleased to have students. You get the feeling that the knot-tying

class is not the Hunger Games hot spot. When he realizes I know something about snares, he shows us a simple, excellent trap that will leave a human competitor dangling by a leg from a tree. We concentrate on this one skill for an hour until both of us have mastered it. Then we move on to camouflage. Peeta genuinely seems to enjoy this station, swirling a combination of mud and clay and berry juices around on his pale skin, weaving disguises from vines and leaves. The trainer who runs the camouflage station is full of enthusiasm at his work.

“I do the cakes,” he admits to me.

“The cakes?” I ask. I’ve been preoccupied with watching the boy from District 2 send a spear through a dummy’s heart from fifteen yards. “What cakes?”

“At home. The iced ones, for the bakery,” he says.

He means the ones they display in the windows. Fancy cakes with flowers and pretty things painted in frosting. They’re for birthdays and New Year’s Day. When we’re in the square, Prim always drags me over to admire them, although we’d never be able to afford one. There’s little enough beauty in District 12, though, so I can hardly deny her this.

I look more critically at the design on Peeta’s arm. The alternating pattern of light and dark suggests sunlight falling through the leaves in the woods. I wonder how he knows this, since I doubt he’s ever been beyond the fence. Has he been able to pick this up from just that scraggly old apple tree in his backyard? Somehow the whole thing—his skill, those inaccessible cakes, the praise of the camouflage expert—annoys me.

“It’s lovely. If only you could frost someone to death,” I say.

“Don’t be so superior. You can never tell what you’ll find in the arena. Say it’s actually a gigantic cake—” begins Peeta.

“Say we move on,” I break in.

So the next three days pass with Peeta and me going quietly from station to station. We do pick up some valuable skills, from starting fires, to knife throwing, to making shelter. Despite Haymitch’s order to appear mediocre, Peeta excels in hand-to-hand combat, and I sweep the edible plants test without blinking an eye. We steer clear of archery and weightlifting though, wanting to save those for our private sessions.

The Gamemakers appeared early on the first day. Twenty or so men and women dressed in deep purple robes. They sit in the elevated stands that

surround the gymnasium, sometimes wandering about to watch us, jotting down notes, other times eating at the endless banquet that has been set for them, ignoring the lot of us. But they do seem to be keeping their eye on the District 12 tributes. Several times I've looked up to find one fixated on me. They consult with the trainers during our meals as well. We see them all gathered together when we come back.

Breakfast and dinner are served on our floor, but at lunch the twenty-four of us eat in a dining room off the gymnasium. Food is arranged on carts around the room and you serve yourself. The Career Tributes tend to gather rowdily around one table, as if to prove their superiority, that they have no fear of one another and consider the rest of us beneath notice. Most of the other tributes sit alone, like lost sheep. No one says a word to us. Peeta and I eat together, and since Haymitch keeps dogging us about it, try to keep up a friendly conversation during the meals.

It's not easy to find a topic. Talking of home is painful. Talking of the present unbearable. One day, Peeta empties our breadbasket and points out how they have been careful to include types from the districts along with the refined bread of the Capitol. The fish-shaped loaf tinted green with seaweed from District 4. The crescent moon roll dotted with seeds from District 11. Somehow, although it's made from the same stuff, it looks a lot more appetizing than the ugly drop biscuits that are the standard fare at home.

"And there you have it," says Peeta, scooping the breads back in the basket.

"You certainly know a lot," I say.

"Only about bread," he says. "Okay, now laugh as if I've said something funny."

We both give a somewhat convincing laugh and ignore the stares from around the room.

"All right, I'll keep smiling pleasantly and you talk," says Peeta. It's wearing us both out, Haymitch's direction to be friendly. Because ever since I slammed my door, there's been a chill in the air between us. But we have our orders.

"Did I ever tell you about the time I was chased by a bear?" I ask.

"No, but it sounds fascinating," says Peeta.

I try and animate my face as I recall the event, a true story, in which I'd foolishly challenged a black bear over the rights to a beehive. Peeta laughs

and asks questions right on cue. He's much better at this than I am.

On the second day, while we're taking a shot at spear throwing, he whispers to me. "I think we have a shadow."

I throw my spear, which I'm not too bad at actually, if I don't have to throw too far, and see the little girl from District 11 standing back a bit, watching us. She's the twelve-year-old, the one who reminded me so of Prim in stature. Up close she looks about ten. She has bright, dark eyes and satiny brown skin and stands tilted up on her toes with her arms slightly extended to her sides, as if ready to take wing at the slightest sound. It's impossible not to think of a bird.

I pick up another spear while Peeta throws. "I think her name's Rue," he says softly.

I bite my lip. Rue is a small yellow flower that grows in the Meadow. Rue. Primrose. Neither of them could tip the scale at seventy pounds soaking wet.

"What can we do about it?" I ask him, more harshly than I intended.

"Nothing to do," he says back. "Just making conversation."

Now that I know she's there, it's hard to ignore the child. She slips up and joins us at different stations. Like me, she's clever with plants, climbs swiftly, and has good aim. She can hit the target every time with a slingshot. But what is a slingshot against a 220-pound male with a sword?

Back on the District 12 floor, Haymitch and Effie grill us throughout breakfast and dinner about every moment of the day. What we did, who watched us, how the other tributes size up. Cinna and Portia aren't around, so there's no one to add any sanity to the meals. Not that Haymitch and Effie are fighting anymore. Instead they seem to be of one mind, determined to whip us into shape. Full of endless directions about what we should do and not do in training. Peeta is more patient, but I become fed up and surly.

When we finally escape to bed on the second night, Peeta mumbles, "Someone ought to get Haymitch a drink."

I make a sound that is somewhere between a snort and a laugh. Then catch myself. It's messing with my mind too much, trying to keep straight when we're supposedly friends and when we're not. At least when we get into the arena, I'll know where we stand. "Don't. Don't let's pretend when there's no one around."

“All right, Katniss,” he says tiredly. After that, we only talk in front of people.

On the third day of training, they start to call us out of lunch for our private sessions with the Gamemakers. District by district, first the boy, then the girl tribute. As usual, District 12 is slated to go last. We linger in the dining room, unsure where else to go. No one comes back once they have left. As the room empties, the pressure to appear friendly lightens. By the time they call Rue, we are left alone. We sit in silence until they summon Peeta. He rises.

“Remember what Haymitch said about being sure to throw the weights.” The words come out of my mouth without permission.

“Thanks. I will,” he says. “You...shoot straight.”

I nod. I don’t know why I said anything at all. Although if I’m going to lose, I’d rather Peeta win than the others. Better for our district, for my mother and Prim.

After about fifteen minutes, they call my name. I smooth my hair, set my shoulders back, and walk into the gymnasium. Instantly, I know I’m in trouble. They’ve been here too long, the Gamemakers. Sat through twenty-three other demonstrations. Had too much wine, most of them. Want more than anything to go home.

There’s nothing I can do but continue with the plan. I walk to the archery station. Oh, the weapons! I’ve been itching to get my hands on them for days! Bows made of wood and plastic and metal and materials I can’t even name. Arrows with feathers cut in flawless uniform lines. I choose a bow, string it, and sling the matching quiver of arrows over my shoulder. There’s a shooting range, but it’s much too limited. Standard bull’s-eyes and human silhouettes. I walk to the center of the gymnasium and pick my first target. The dummy used for knife practice. Even as I pull back on the bow I know something is wrong. The string’s tighter than the one I use at home. The arrow’s more rigid. I miss the dummy by a couple of inches and lose what little attention I had been commanding. For a moment, I’m humiliated, then I head back to the bull’s-eye. I shoot again and again until I get the feel of these new weapons.

Back in the center of the gymnasium, I take my initial position and skewer the dummy right through the heart. Then I sever the rope that holds the sandbag for boxing, and the bag splits open as it slams to the ground. Without pausing, I shoulder-roll forward, come up on one knee, and send an arrow

into one of the hanging lights high above the gymnasium floor. A shower of sparks bursts from the fixture.

It's excellent shooting. I turn to the Gamemakers. A few are nodding approval, but the majority of them are fixated on a roast pig that has just arrived at their banquet table.

Suddenly I am furious, that with my life on the line, they don't even have the decency to pay attention to me. That I'm being upstaged by a dead pig. My heart starts to pound, I can feel my face burning. Without thinking, I pull an arrow from my quiver and send it straight at the Gamemakers' table. I hear shouts of alarm as people stumble back. The arrow skewers the apple in the pig's mouth and pins it to the wall behind it. Everyone stares at me in disbelief.

"Thank you for your consideration," I say. Then I give a slight bow and walk straight toward the exit without being dismissed.

As I stride toward the elevator, I fling my bow to one side and my quiver to the other. I brush past the gaping Avoxes who guard the elevators and hit the number twelve button with my fist. The doors slide together and I zip upward. I actually make it back to my floor before the tears start running down my cheeks. I can hear the others calling me from the sitting room, but I fly down the hall into my room, bolt the door, and fling myself onto my bed. Then I really begin to sob.

Now I've done it! Now I've ruined everything! If I'd stood even a ghost of chance, it vanished when I sent that arrow flying at the Gamemakers. What will they do to me now? Arrest me? Execute me? Cut my tongue and turn me into an Avox so I can wait on the future tributes of Panem? What was I thinking, shooting at the Gamemakers? Of course, I wasn't, I was shooting at that apple because I was so angry at being ignored. I wasn't trying to kill one of them. If I were, they'd be dead!

Oh, what does it matter? It's not like I was going to win the Games anyway. Who cares what they do to me? What really scares me is what they might do to my mother and Prim, how my family might suffer now because of my impulsiveness. Will they take their few belongings, or send my mother to prison and Prim to the community home, or kill them? They wouldn't kill them, would they? Why not? What do they care?

I should have stayed and apologized. Or laughed, like it was a big joke. Then maybe I would have found some leniency. But instead I stalked out of the place in the most disrespectful manner possible.

Haymitch and Effie are knocking on my door. I shout for them to go away and eventually they do. It takes at least an hour for me to cry myself out. Then I just lie curled up on the bed, stroking the silken sheets, watching the sun set over the artificial candy Capitol.

At first, I expect guards to come for me. But as time passes, it seems less likely. I calm down. They still need a girl tribute from District 12, don't they? If the Gamemakers want to punish me, they can do it publicly. Wait until

I'm in the arena and sic starving wild animals on me. You can bet they'll make sure I don't have a bow and arrow to defend myself.

Before that though, they'll give me a score so low, no one in their right mind would sponsor me. That's what will happen tonight. Since the training isn't open to viewers, the Gamemakers announce a score for each player. It gives the audience a starting place for the betting that will continue throughout the Games. The number, which is between one and twelve, one being irredeemably bad and twelve being unattainably high, signifies the promise of the tribute. The mark is not a guarantee of which person will win. It's only an indication of the potential a tribute showed in training. Often, because of the variables in the actual arena, high-scoring tributes go down almost immediately. And a few years ago, the boy who won the Games only received a three. Still, the scores can help or hurt an individual tribute in terms of sponsorship. I had been hoping my shooting skills might get me a six or a seven, even if I'm not particularly powerful. Now I'm sure I'll have the lowest score of the twenty-four. If no one sponsors me, my odds of staying alive decrease to almost zero.

When Effie taps on the door to call me to dinner, I decide I may as well go. The scores will be televised tonight. It's not like I can hide what happened forever. I go to the bathroom and wash my face, but it's still red and splotchy.

Everyone's waiting at the table, even Cinna and Portia. I wish the stylists hadn't shown up because for some reason, I don't like the idea of disappointing them. It's as if I've thrown away all the good work they did on the opening ceremonies without a thought. I avoid looking at anyone as I take tiny spoonfuls of fish soup. The saltiness reminds me of my tears.

The adults begin some chitchat about the weather forecast, and I let my eyes meet Peeta's. He raises his eyebrows. A question. *What happened?* I just give my head a small shake. Then, as they're serving the main course, I hear Haymitch say, "Okay, enough small talk, just how bad were you today?"

Peeta jumps in. "I don't know that it mattered. By the time I showed up, no one even bothered to look at me. They were singing some kind of drinking song, I think. So, I threw around some heavy objects until they told me I could go."

That makes me feel a bit better. It's not like Peeta attacked the Gamemakers, but at least he was provoked, too.

“And you, sweetheart?” says Haymitch.

Somehow Haymitch calling me sweetheart ticks me off enough that I’m at least able to speak. “I shot an arrow at the Gamemakers.”

Everyone stops eating. “You what?” The horror in Effie’s voice confirms my worse suspicions.

“I shot an arrow at them. Not exactly at them. In their direction. It’s like Peeta said, I was shooting and they were ignoring me and I just...I just lost my head, so I shot an apple out of their stupid roast pig’s mouth!” I say defiantly.

“And what did they say?” says Cinna carefully.

“Nothing. Or I don’t know. I walked out after that,” I say.

“Without being dismissed?” gasps Effie.

“I dismissed myself,” I said. I remember how I promised Prim that I really would try to win and I feel like a ton of coal has dropped on me.

“Well, that’s that,” says Haymitch. Then he butters a roll.

“Do you think they’ll arrest me?” I ask.

“Doubt it. Be a pain to replace you at this stage,” says Haymitch.

“What about my family?” I say. “Will they punish them?”

“Don’t think so. Wouldn’t make much sense. See, they’d have to reveal what happened in the Training Center for it to have any worthwhile effect on the population. People would need to know what you did. But they can’t since it’s secret, so it’d be a waste of effort,” says Haymitch. “More likely they’ll make your life hell in the arena.”

“Well, they’ve already promised to do that to us anyway,” says Peeta.

“Very true,” says Haymitch. And I realize the impossible has happened. They have actually cheered me up. Haymitch picks up a pork chop with his fingers, which makes Effie frown, and dunks it in his wine. He rips off a hunk of meat and starts to chuckle. “What were their faces like?”

I can feel the edges of my mouth tilting up. “Shocked. Terrified. Uh, ridiculous, some of them.” An image pops into my mind. “One man tripped backward into a bowl of punch.”

Haymitch guffaws and we all start laughing except Effie, although even she is suppressing a smile. “Well, it serves them right. It’s their job to pay attention to you. And just because you come from District Twelve is no excuse to ignore you.” Then her eyes dart around as if she’s said something

totally outrageous. "I'm sorry, but that's what I think," she says to no one in particular.

"I'll get a very bad score," I say.

"Scores only matter if they're very good, no one pays much attention to the bad or mediocre ones. For all they know, you could be hiding your talents to get a low score on purpose. People use that strategy," said Portia.

"I hope that's how people interpret the four I'll probably get," says Peeta. "If that. Really, is anything less impressive than watching a person pick up a heavy ball and throw it a couple of yards. One almost landed on my foot."

I grin at him and realize that I'm starving. I cut off a piece of pork, dunk it in mashed potatoes, and start eating. It's okay. My family is safe. And if they are safe, no real harm has been done.

After dinner, we go to the sitting room to watch the scores announced on television. First they show a photo of the tribute, then flash their score below it. The Career Tributes naturally get in the eight-to-ten range. Most of the other players average a five. Surprisingly, little Rue comes up with a seven. I don't know what she showed the judges, but she's so tiny it must have been impressive.

District 12 comes up last, as usual. Peeta pulls an eight so at least a couple of the Gamemakers must have been watching him. I dig my fingernails into my palms as my face comes up, expecting the worst. Then they're flashing the number eleven on the screen.

Eleven!

Effie Trinket lets out a squeal, and everybody is slapping me on the back and cheering and congratulating me. But it doesn't seem real.

"There must be a mistake. How...how could that happen?" I ask Haymitch.

"Guess they liked your temper," he says. "They've got a show to put on. They need some players with some heat."

"Katniss, the girl who was on fire," says Cinna and gives me a hug. "Oh, wait until you see your interview dress."

"More flames?" I ask.

"Of a sort," he says mischievously.

Peeta and I congratulate each other, another awkward moment. We've both done well, but what does that mean for the other? I escape to my room as quickly as possible and burrow down under the covers. The stress of the

day, particularly the crying, has worn me out. I drift off, reprieved, relieved, and with the number eleven still flashing behind my eyelids.

At dawn, I lie in bed for a while, watching the sun come up on a beautiful morning. It's Sunday. A day off at home. I wonder if Gale is in the woods yet. Usually we devote all of Sunday to stocking up for the week. Rising early, hunting and gathering, then trading at the Hob. I think of Gale without me. Both of us can hunt alone, but we're better as a pair. Particularly if we're trying for bigger game. But also in the littler things, having a partner lightened the load, could even make the arduous task of filling my family's table enjoyable.

I had been struggling along on my own for about six months when I first ran into Gale in the woods. It was a Sunday in October, the air cool and pungent with dying things. I'd spent the morning competing with the squirrels for nuts and the slightly warmer afternoon wading in shallow ponds harvesting katniss. The only meat I'd shot was a squirrel that had practically run over my toes in its quest for acorns, but the animals would still be afoot when the snow buried my other food sources. Having strayed farther afield than usual, I was hurrying back home, lugging my burlap sacks, when I came across a dead rabbit. It was hanging by its neck in a thin wire a foot above my head. About fifteen yards away was another. I recognized the twitch-up snares because my father had used them. When the prey is caught, it's yanked into the air out of the reach of other hungry animals. I'd been trying to use snares all summer with no success, so I couldn't help dropping my sacks to examine this one. My fingers were just on the wire above one of the rabbits when a voice rang out. "That's dangerous."

I jumped back several feet as Gale materialized from behind a tree. He must have been watching me the whole time. He was only fourteen, but he cleared six feet and was as good as an adult to me. I'd seen him around the Seam and at school. And one other time. He'd lost his father in the same blast that killed mine. In January, I'd stood by while he received his medal of valor in the Justice Building, another oldest child with no father. I remembered his two little brothers clutching his mother, a woman whose swollen belly announced she was just days away from giving birth.

"What's your name?" he said, coming over and disengaging the rabbit from the snare. He had another three hanging from his belt.

"Katniss," I said, barely audible.

“Well, Catnip, stealing’s punishable by death, or hadn’t you heard?” he said.

“Katniss,” I said louder. “And I wasn’t stealing it. I just wanted to look at your snare. Mine never catch anything.”

He scowled at me, not convinced. “So where’d you get the squirrel?”

“I shot it.” I pulled my bow off my shoulder. I was still using the small version my father had made me, but I’d been practicing with the full-size one when I could. I was hoping that by spring I might be able to bring down some bigger game.

Gale’s eyes fastened on the bow. “Can I see that?”

I handed it over. “Just remember, stealing’s punishable by death.”

That was the first time I ever saw him smile. It transformed him from someone menacing to someone you wished you knew. But it took several months before I returned that smile.

We talked hunting then. I told him I might be able to get him a bow if he had something to trade. Not food. I wanted knowledge. I wanted to set my own snares that caught a belt of fat rabbits in one day. He agreed something might be worked out. As the seasons went by, we grudgingly began to share our knowledge, our weapons, our secret places that were thick with wild plums or turkeys. He taught me snares and fishing. I showed him what plants to eat and eventually gave him one of our precious bows. And then one day, without either of us saying it, we became a team. Dividing the work and the spoils. Making sure that both our families had food.

Gale gave me a sense of security I’d lacked since my father’s death. His companionship replaced the long solitary hours in the woods. I became a much better hunter when I didn’t have to look over my shoulder constantly, when someone was watching my back. But he turned into so much more than a hunting partner. He became my confidant, someone with whom I could share thoughts I could never voice inside the fence. In exchange, he trusted me with his. Being out in the woods with Gale...sometimes I was actually happy.

I call him my friend, but in the last year it’s seemed too casual a word for what Gale is to me. A pang of longing shoots through my chest. If only he was with me now! But, of course, I don’t want that. I don’t want him in the arena where he’d be dead in a few days. I just...I just miss him. And I hate being so alone. Does he miss me? He must.

I think of the eleven flashing under my name last night. I know exactly what he'd say to me. "Well, there's some room for improvement there." And then he'd give me a smile and I'd return it without hesitating now.

I can't help comparing what I have with Gale to what I'm pretending to have with Peeta. How I never question Gale's motives while I do nothing but doubt the latter's. It's not a fair comparison really. Gale and I were thrown together by a mutual need to survive. Peeta and I know the other's survival means our own death. How do you sidestep that?

Effie's knocking at the door, reminding me there's another "big, big, big day!" ahead. Tomorrow night will be our televised interviews. I guess the whole team will have their hands full readying us for that.

I get up and take a quick shower, being a bit more careful about the buttons I hit, and head down to the dining room. Peeta, Effie, and Haymitch are huddled around the table talking in hushed voices. That seems odd, but hunger wins out over curiosity and I load up my plate with breakfast before I join them.

The stew's made with tender chunks of lamb and dried plums today. Perfect on the bed of wild rice. I've shoveled about halfway through the mound when I realize no one's talking. I take a big gulp of orange juice and wipe my mouth. "So, what's going on? You're coaching us on interviews today, right?"

"That's right," says Haymitch.

"You don't have to wait until I'm done. I can listen and eat at the same time," I say.

"Well, there's been a change of plans. About our current approach," says Haymitch.

"What's that?" I ask. I'm not sure what our current approach is. Trying to appear mediocre in front of the other tributes is the last bit of strategy I remember.

Haymitch shrugs. "Peeta has asked to be coached separately."

Betrayal. That's the first thing I feel, which is ludicrous. For there to be betrayal, there would have to have been trust first. Between Peeta and me. And trust has not been part of the agreement. We're tributes. But the boy who risked a beating to give me bread, the one who steadied me in the chariot, who covered for me with the redheaded Avox girl, who insisted Haymitch know my hunting skills...was there some part of me that couldn't help trusting him?

On the other hand, I'm relieved that we can stop the pretense of being friends. Obviously, whatever thin connection we'd foolishly formed has been severed. And high time, too. The Games begin in two days, and trust will only be a weakness. Whatever triggered Peeta's decision—and I suspect it had to do with my outperforming him in training—I should be nothing but grateful for it. Maybe he's finally accepted the fact that the sooner we openly acknowledge that we are enemies, the better.

"Good," I say. "So what's the schedule?"

"You'll each have four hours with Effie for presentation and four with me for content," says Haymitch. "You start with Effie, Katniss."

I can't imagine what Effie will have to teach me that could take four hours, but she's got me working down to the last minute. We go to my room and she puts me in a full-length gown and high-heeled shoes, not the ones I'll be wearing for the actual interview, and instructs me on walking. The shoes are the worst part. I've never worn high heels and can't get used to essentially wobbling around on the balls of my feet. But Effie runs around in them full-time, and I'm determined that if she can do it, so can I. The dress poses another problem. It keeps tangling around my shoes so, of course, I hitch it up, and then Effie swoops down on me like a hawk, smacking my hands and yelling, "Not above the ankle!" When I finally conquer walking, there's still sitting, posture—apparently I have a tendency to duck my head—eye contact, hand gestures, and smiling. Smiling is mostly about smiling more. Effie makes me say a hundred banal phrases starting with a smile,

while smiling, or ending with a smile. By lunch, the muscles in my cheeks are twitching from overuse.

“Well, that’s the best I can do,” Effie says with a sigh. “Just remember, Katniss, you want the audience to like you.”

“And you don’t think they will?” I ask.

“Not if you glare at them the entire time. Why don’t you save that for the arena? Instead, think of yourself among friends,” says Effie.

“They’re betting on how long I’ll live!” I burst out. “They’re not my friends!”

“Well, try and pretend!” snaps Effie. Then she composes herself and beams at me. “See, like this. I’m smiling at you even though you’re aggravating me.”

“Yes, it feels very convincing,” I say. “I’m going to eat.” I kick off my heels and stomp down to the dining room, hiking my skirt up to my thighs.

Peeta and Haymitch seem in pretty good moods, so I’m thinking the content session should be an improvement over the morning. I couldn’t be more wrong. After lunch, Haymitch takes me into the sitting room, directs me to the couch, and then just frowns at me for a while.

“What?” I finally ask.

“I’m trying to figure out what to do with you,” he says. “How we’re going to present you. Are you going to be charming? Aloof? Fierce? So far, you’re shining like a star. You volunteered to save your sister. Cinna made you look unforgettable. You’ve got the top training score. People are intrigued, but no one knows who you are. The impression you make tomorrow will decide exactly what I can get you in terms of sponsors,” says Haymitch.

Having watched the tribute interviews all my life, I know there’s truth to what he’s saying. If you appeal to the crowd, either by being humorous or brutal or eccentric, you gain favor.

“What’s Peeta’s approach? Or am I not allowed to ask?” I say.

“Likable. He has a sort of self-deprecating humor naturally,” says Haymitch. “Whereas when you open your mouth, you come across more as sullen and hostile.”

“I do not!” I say.

“Please. I don’t know where you pulled that cheery, wavy girl on the chariot from, but I haven’t seen her before or since,” says Haymitch.

“And you’ve given me so many reasons to be cheery,” I counter.

“But you don’t have to please me. I’m not going to sponsor you. So pretend I’m the audience,” says Haymitch. “Delight me.”

“Fine!” I snarl. Haymitch takes the role of the interviewer and I try to answer his questions in a winning fashion. But I can’t. I’m too angry with Haymitch for what he said and that I even have to answer the questions. All I can think is how unjust the whole thing is, the Hunger Games. Why am I hopping around like some trained dog trying to please people I hate? The longer the interview goes on, the more my fury seems to rise to the surface, until I’m literally spitting out answers at him.

“All right, enough,” he says. “We’ve got to find another angle. Not only are you hostile, I don’t know anything about you. I’ve asked you fifty questions and still have no sense of your life, your family, what you care about. They want to know about you, Katniss.”

“But I don’t want them to! They’re already taking my future! They can’t have the things that mattered to me in the past!” I say.

“Then lie! Make something up!” says Haymitch.

“I’m not good at lying,” I say.

“Well, you better learn fast. You’ve got about as much charm as a dead slug,” says Haymitch.

Ouch. That hurts. Even Haymitch must know he’s been too harsh because his voice softens. “Here’s an idea. Try acting humble.”

“Humble,” I echo.

“That you can’t believe a little girl from District Twelve has done this well. The whole thing’s been more than you ever could have dreamed of. Talk about Cinna’s clothes. How nice the people are. How the city amazes you. If you won’t talk about yourself, at least compliment the audience. Just keep turning it back around, all right. Gush.”

The next hours are agonizing. At once, it’s clear I cannot gush. We try me playing cocky, but I just don’t have the arrogance. Apparently, I’m too “vulnerable” for ferocity. I’m not witty. Funny. Sexy. Or mysterious.

By the end of the session, I am no one at all. Haymitch started drinking somewhere around witty, and a nasty edge has crept into his voice. “I give up, sweetheart. Just answer the questions and try not to let the audience see how openly you despise them.”

I have dinner that night in my room, ordering an outrageous number of delicacies, eating myself sick, and then taking out my anger at Haymitch, at the Hunger Games, at every living being in the Capitol by smashing dishes around my room. When the girl with the red hair comes in to turn down my bed, her eyes widen at the mess. “Just leave it!” I yell at her. “Just leave it alone!”

I hate her, too, with her knowing reproachful eyes that call me a coward, a monster, a puppet of the Capitol, both now and then. For her, justice must finally be happening. At least my death will help pay for the life of the boy in the woods.

But instead of fleeing the room, the girl closes the door behind her and goes to the bathroom. She comes back with a damp cloth and wipes my face gently then cleans the blood from a broken plate off my hands. Why is she doing this? Why am I letting her?

“I should have tried to save you,” I whisper.

She shakes her head. Does this mean we were right to stand by? That she has forgiven me?

“No, it was wrong,” I say.

She taps her lips with her fingers then points to my chest. I think she means that I would just have ended up an Avox, too. Probably would have. An Avox or dead.

I spend the next hour helping the redheaded girl clean the room. When all the garbage has been dropped down a disposal and the food cleaned away, she turns down my bed. I crawl in between the sheets like a five-year-old and let her tuck me in. Then she goes. I want her to stay until I fall asleep. To be there when I wake up. I want the protection of this girl, even though she never had mine.

In the morning, it’s not the girl but my prep team who are hanging over me. My lessons with Effie and Haymitch are over. This day belongs to Cinna. He’s my last hope. Maybe he can make me look so wonderful, no one will care what comes out of my mouth.

The team works on me until late afternoon, turning my skin to glowing satin, stenciling patterns on my arms, painting flame designs on my twenty perfect nails. Then Venia goes to work on my hair, weaving strands of red into a pattern that begins at my left ear, wraps around my head, and then falls in one braid down my right shoulder. They erase my face with a layer of pale

makeup and draw my features back out. Huge dark eyes, full red lips, lashes that throw off bits of light when I blink. Finally, they cover my entire body in a powder that makes me shimmer in gold dust.

Then Cinna enters with what I assume is my dress, but I can't really see it because it's covered. "Close your eyes," he orders.

I can feel the silken inside as they slip it down over my naked body, then the weight. It must be forty pounds. I clutch Octavia's hand as I blindly step into my shoes, glad to find they are at least two inches lower than the pair Effie had me practice in. There's some adjusting and fidgeting. Then silence.

"Can I open my eyes?" I ask.

"Yes," says Cinna. "Open them."

The creature standing before me in the full-length mirror has come from another world. Where skin shimmers and eyes flash and apparently they make their clothes from jewels. Because my dress, oh, my dress is entirely covered in reflective precious gems, red and yellow and white with bits of blue that accent the tips of the flame design. The slightest movement gives the impression I am engulfed in tongues of fire.

I am not pretty. I am not beautiful. I am as radiant as the sun.

For a while, we all just stare at me. "Oh, Cinna," I finally whisper. "Thank you."

"Twirl for me," he says. I hold out my arms and spin in a circle. The prep team screams in admiration.

Cinna dismisses the team and has me move around in the dress and shoes, which are infinitely more manageable than Effie's. The dress hangs in such a way that I don't have to lift the skirt when I walk, leaving me with one less thing to worry about.

"So, all ready for the interview then?" asks Cinna. I can see by his expression that he's been talking to Haymitch. That he knows how dreadful I am.

"I'm awful. Haymitch called me a dead slug. No matter what we tried, I couldn't do it. I just can't be one of those people he wants me to be," I say.

Cinna thinks about this a moment. "Why don't you just be yourself?"

"Myself? That's no good, either. Haymitch says I'm sullen and hostile," I say.

"Well, you are...around Haymitch," says Cinna with a grin. "I don't find you so. The prep team adores you. You even won over the Gamemakers. And

as for the citizens of the Capitol, well, they can't stop talking about you. No one can help but admire your spirit."

My spirit. This is a new thought. I'm not sure exactly what it means, but it suggests I'm a fighter. In a sort of brave way. It's not as if I'm never friendly. Okay, maybe I don't go around loving everybody I meet, maybe my smiles are hard to come by, but I do care for some people.

Cinna takes my icy hands in his warm ones. "Suppose, when you answer the questions, you think you're addressing a friend back home. Who would your best friend be?" asks Cinna.

"Gale," I say instantly. "Only it doesn't make sense, Cinna. I would never be telling Gale those things about me. He already knows them."

"What about me? Could you think of me as a friend?" asks Cinna.

Of all the people I've met since I left home, Cinna is by far my favorite. I liked him right off and he hasn't disappointed me yet. "I think so, but—"

"I'll be sitting on the main platform with the other stylists. You'll be able to look right at me. When you're asked a question, find me, and answer it as honestly as possible," says Cinna.

"Even if what I think is horrible?" I ask. Because it might be, really.

"Especially if what you think is horrible," says Cinna. "You'll try it?"

I nod. It's a plan. Or at least a straw to grasp at.

Too soon it's time to go. The interviews take place on a stage constructed in front of the Training Center. Once I leave my room, it will be only minutes until I'm in front of the crowd, the cameras, all of Panem.

As Cinna turns the doorknob, I stop his hand. "Cinna..." I'm completely overcome with stage fright.

"Remember, they already love you," he says gently. "Just be yourself."

We meet up with the rest of the District 12 crowd at the elevator. Portia and her gang have been hard at work. Peeta looks striking in a black suit with flame accents. While we look well together, it's a relief not to be dressed identically. Haymitch and Effie are all fancied up for the occasion. I avoid Haymitch, but accept Effie's compliments. Effie can be tiresome and clueless, but she's not destructive like Haymitch.

When the elevator opens, the other tributes are being lined up to take the stage. All twenty-four of us sit in a big arc throughout the interviews. I'll be last, or second to last since the girl tribute precedes the boy from each district. How I wish I could be first and get the whole thing out of the way!

Now I'll have to listen to how witty, funny, humble, fierce, and charming everybody else is before I go up. Plus, the audience will start to get bored, just as the Gamemakers did. And I can't exactly shoot an arrow into the crowd to get their attention.

Right before we parade onto the stage, Haymitch comes up behind Peeta and me and growls, "Remember, you're still a happy pair. So act like it."

What? I thought we abandoned that when Peeta asked for separate coaching. But I guess that was a private, not a public thing. Anyway, there's not much chance for interaction now, as we walk single-file to our seats and take our places.

Just stepping on the stage makes my breathing rapid and shallow. I can feel my pulse pounding in my temples. It's a relief to get to my chair, because between the heels and my legs shaking, I'm afraid I'll trip. Although evening is falling, the City Circle is brighter than a summer's day. An elevated seating unit has been set up for prestigious guests, with the stylists commanding the front row. The cameras will turn to them when the crowd is reacting to their handiwork. A large balcony off a building to the right has been reserved for the Gamemakers. Television crews have claimed most of the other balconies. But the City Circle and the avenues that feed into it are completely packed with people. Standing room only. At homes and community halls around the country, every television set is turned on. Every citizen of Panem is tuned in. There will be no blackouts tonight.

Caesar Flickerman, the man who has hosted the interviews for more than forty years, bounces onto the stage. It's a little scary because his appearance has been virtually unchanged during all that time. Same face under a coating of pure white makeup. Same hairstyle that he dyes a different color for each Hunger Games. Same ceremonial suit, midnight blue dotted with a thousand tiny electric bulbs that twinkle like stars. They do surgery in the Capitol, to make people appear younger and thinner. In District 12, looking old is something of an achievement since so many people die early. You see an elderly person, you want to congratulate them on their longevity, ask the secret of survival. A plump person is envied because they aren't scraping by like the majority of us. But here it is different. Wrinkles aren't desirable. A round belly isn't a sign of success.

This year, Caesar's hair is powder blue and his eyelids and lips are coated in the same hue. He looks freakish but less frightening than he did last

year when his color was crimson and he seemed to be bleeding. Caesar tells a few jokes to warm up the audience but then gets down to business.

The girl tribute from District 1, looking provocative in a see-through gold gown, steps up the center of the stage to join Caesar for her interview. You can tell her mentor didn't have any trouble coming up with an angle for her. With that flowing blonde hair, emerald green eyes, her body tall and lush... she's sexy all the way.

Each interview only lasts three minutes. Then a buzzer goes off and the next tribute is up. I'll say this for Caesar, he really does his best to make the tributes shine. He's friendly, tries to set the nervous ones at ease, laughs at lame jokes, and can turn a weak response into a memorable one by the way he reacts.

I sit like a lady, the way Effie showed me, as the districts slip by. 2, 3, 4. Everyone seems to be playing up some angle. The monstrous boy from District 2 is a ruthless killing machine. The fox-faced girl from District 5 sly and elusive. I spotted Cinna as soon as he took his place, but even his presence cannot relax me. 8, 9, 10. The crippled boy from 10 is very quiet. My palms are sweating like crazy, but the jeweled dress isn't absorbent and they skid right off if I try to dry them. 11.

Rue, who is dressed in a gossamer gown complete with wings, flutters her way to Caesar. A hush falls over the crowd at the sight of this magical wisp of a tribute. Caesar's very sweet with her, complimenting her seven in training, an excellent score for one so small. When he asks her what her greatest strength in the arena will be, she doesn't hesitate. "I'm very hard to catch," she says in a tremulous voice. "And if they can't catch me, they can't kill me. So don't count me out."

"I wouldn't in a million years," says Caesar encouragingly.

The boy tribute from District 11, Thresh, has the same dark skin as Rue, but the resemblance stops there. He's one of the giants, probably six and a half feet tall and built like an ox, but I noticed he rejected the invitations from the Career Tributes to join their crowd. Instead he's been very solitary, speaking to no one, showing little interest in training. Even so, he scored a ten and it's not hard to imagine he impressed the Gamemakers. He ignores Caesar's attempts at banter and answers with a yes or no or just remains silent.

If only I was his size, I could get away with sullen and hostile and it would be just fine! I bet half the sponsors are at least considering him. If I had any money, I'd bet on him myself.

And then they're calling Katniss Everdeen, and I feel myself, as if in a dream, standing and making my way center stage. I shake Caesar's outstretched hand, and he has the good grace not to immediately wipe his off on his suit.

"So, Katniss, the Capitol must be quite a change from District Twelve. What's impressed you most since you arrived here?" asks Caesar.

What? What did he say? It's as if the words make no sense.

My mouth has gone as dry as sawdust. I desperately find Cinna in the crowd and lock eyes with him. I imagine the words coming from his lips. "What's impressed you most since you arrived here?" I rack my brain for something that made me happy here. *Be honest*, I think. *Be honest*.

"The lamb stew," I get out.

Caesar laughs, and vaguely I realize some of the audience has joined in.

"The one with the dried plums?" asks Caesar. I nod. "Oh, I eat it by the bucketful." He turns sideways to the audience in horror, hand on his stomach. "It doesn't show, does it?" They shout reassurances to him and applaud. This is what I mean about Caesar. He tries to help you out.

"Now, Katniss," he says confidentially, "When you came out in the opening ceremonies, my heart actually stopped. What did you think of that costume?"

Cinna raises one eyebrow at me. *Be honest*. "You mean after I got over my fear of being burned alive?" I ask.

Big laugh. A real one from the audience.

"Yes. Start then," says Caesar.

Cinna, my friend, I should tell him anyway. "I thought Cinna was brilliant and it was the most gorgeous costume I'd ever seen and I couldn't believe I was wearing it. I can't believe I'm wearing this, either." I lift up my skirt to spread it out. "I mean, look at it!"

As the audience *oohs* and *ahs*, I see Cinna make the tiniest circular motion with his finger. But I know what he's saying. *Twirl for me*.

I spin in a circle once and the reaction is immediate.

"Oh, do that again!" says Caesar, and so I lift up my arms and spin around and around letting the skirt fly out, letting the dress engulf me in flames. The

audience breaks into cheers. When I stop, I clutch Caesar's arm.

"Don't stop!" he says.

"I have to, I'm dizzy!" I'm also giggling, which I think I've done maybe never in my lifetime. But the nerves and the spinning have gotten to me.

Caesar wraps a protective arm around me. "Don't worry, I've got you. Can't have you following in your mentor's footsteps."

Everyone's hooting as the cameras find Haymitch, who is by now famous for his head dive at the reaping, and he waves them away good-naturedly and points back to me.

"It's all right," Caesar reassures the crowd. "She's safe with me. So, how about that training score. Eleven. Give us a hint what happened in there."

I glance at the Gamemakers on the balcony and bite my lip. "Um...all I can say, is I think it was a first."

The cameras are right on the Gamemakers, who are chuckling and nodding.

"You're killing us," says Caesar as if in actual pain. "Details. Details."

I address the balcony. "I'm not supposed to talk about it, right?"

The Gamemaker who fell in the punch bowl shouts out, "She's not!"

"Thank you," I say. "Sorry. My lips are sealed."

"Let's go back then, to the moment they called your sister's name at the reaping," says Caesar. His mood is quieter now. "And you volunteered. Can you tell us about her?"

No. No, not all of you. But maybe Cinna. I don't think I'm imagining the sadness on his face. "Her name's Prim. She's just twelve. And I love her more than anything."

You could hear a pin drop in the City Circle now.

"What did she say to you? After the reaping?" Caesar asks.

Be honest. Be honest. I swallow hard. "She asked me to try really hard to win." The audience is frozen, hanging on my every word.

"And what did you say?" prompts Caesar gently.

But instead of warmth, I feel an icy rigidity take over my body. My muscles tense as they do before a kill. When I speak, my voice seems to have dropped an octave. "I swore I would."

"I bet you did," says Caesar, giving me a squeeze. The buzzer goes off. "Sorry we're out of time. Best of luck, Katniss Everdeen, tribute from District Twelve."

The applause continues long after I'm seated. I look to Cinna for reassurance. He gives me a subtle thumbs-up.

I'm still in a daze for the first part of Peeta's interview. He has the audience from the get-go, though; I can hear them laughing, shouting out. He plays up the baker's son thing, comparing the tributes to the breads from their districts. Then has a funny anecdote about the perils of the Capitol showers. "Tell me, do I still smell like roses?" he asks Caesar, and then there's a whole run where they take turns sniffing each other that brings down the house. I'm coming back into focus when Caesar asks him if he has a girlfriend back home.

Peeta hesitates, then gives an unconvincing shake of his head.

"Handsome lad like you. There must be some special girl. Come on, what's her name?" says Caesar.

Peeta sighs. "Well, there is this one girl. I've had a crush on her ever since I can remember. But I'm pretty sure she didn't know I was alive until the reaping."

Sounds of sympathy from the crowd. Unrequited love they can relate to.

"She have another fellow?" asks Caesar.

"I don't know, but a lot of boys like her," says Peeta.

"So, here's what you do. You win, you go home. She can't turn you down then, eh?" says Caesar encouragingly.

"I don't think it's going to work out. Winning...won't help in my case," says Peeta.

"Why ever not?" says Caesar, mystified.

Peeta blushes beet red and stammers out. "Because...because...she came here with me."

PART II

“THE GAMES”

For a moment, the cameras hold on Peeta's downcast eyes as what he says sinks in. Then I can see my face, mouth half open in a mix of surprise and protest, magnified on every screen as I realize, *Me! He means me!* I press my lips together and stare at the floor, hoping this will conceal the emotions starting to boil up inside of me.

"Oh, that is a piece of bad luck," says Caesar, and there's a real edge of pain in his voice. The crowd is murmuring in agreement, a few have even given agonized cries.

"It's not good," agrees Peeta.

"Well, I don't think any of us can blame you. It'd be hard not to fall for that young lady," says Caesar. "She didn't know?"

Peeta shakes his head. "Not until now."

I allow my eyes to flicker up to the screen long enough to see that the blush on my cheeks is unmistakable.

"Wouldn't you love to pull her back out here and get a response?" Caesar asks the audience. The crowd screams assent. "Sadly, rules are rules, and Katniss Everdeen's time has been spent. Well, best of luck to you, Peeta Mellark, and I think I speak for all of Panem when I say our hearts go with yours."

The roar of the crowd is deafening. Peeta has absolutely wiped the rest of us off the map with his declaration of love for me. When the audience finally settles down, he chokes out a quiet "Thank you" and returns to his seat. We stand for the anthem. I have to raise my head out of the required respect and cannot avoid seeing that every screen is now dominated by a shot of Peeta and me, separated by a few feet that in the viewers' heads can never be breached. Poor tragic us.

But I know better.

After the anthem, the tributes file back into the Training Center lobby and onto the elevators. I make sure to veer into a car that does not contain Peeta. The crowd slows our entourages of stylists and mentors and chaperones, so we have only each other for company. No one speaks. My elevator stops to

deposit four tributes before I am alone and then find the doors opening on the twelfth floor. Peeta has only just stepped from his car when I slam my palms into his chest. He loses his balance and crashes into an ugly urn filled with fake flowers. The urn tips and shatters into hundreds of tiny pieces. Peeta lands in the shards, and blood immediately flows from his hands.

“What was that for?” he says, aghast.

“You had no right! No right to go saying those things about me!” I shout at him.

Now the elevators open and the whole crew is there, Effie, Haymitch, Cinna, and Portia.

“What’s going on?” says Effie, a note of hysteria in her voice. “Did you fall?”

“After she shoved me,” says Peeta as Effie and Cinna help him up.

Haymitch turns on me. “Shoved him?”

“This was your idea, wasn’t it? Turning me into some kind of fool in front of the entire country?” I answer.

“It was my idea,” says Peeta, wincing as he pulls spikes of pottery from his palms. “Haymitch just helped me with it.”

“Yes, Haymitch is very helpful. To you!” I say.

“You *are* a fool,” Haymitch says in disgust. “Do you think he hurt you? That boy just gave you something you could never achieve on your own.”

“He made me look weak!” I say.

“He made you look desirable! And let’s face it, you can use all the help you can get in that department. You were about as romantic as dirt until he said he wanted you. Now they all do. You’re all they’re talking about. The star-crossed lovers from District Twelve!” says Haymitch.

“But we’re not star-crossed lovers!” I say.

Haymitch grabs my shoulders and pins me against the wall. “Who cares? It’s all a big show. It’s all how you’re perceived. The most I could say about you after your interview was that you were nice enough, although that in itself was a small miracle. Now I can say you’re a heartbreaker. Oh, oh, oh, how the boys back home fall longingly at your feet. Which do you think will get you more sponsors?”

The smell of wine on his breath makes me sick. I shove his hands off my shoulders and step away, trying to clear my head.

Cinna comes over and puts his arm around me. “He’s right, Katniss.”

I don't know what to think. "I should have been told, so I didn't look so stupid."

"No, your reaction was perfect. If you'd known, it wouldn't have read as real," says Portia.

"She's just worried about her boyfriend," says Peeta gruffly, tossing away a bloody piece of the urn.

My cheeks burn again at the thought of Gale. "I don't have a boyfriend."

"Whatever," says Peeta. "But I bet he's smart enough to know a bluff when he sees it. Besides *you* didn't say you loved *me*. So what does it matter?"

The words are sinking in. My anger fading. I'm torn now between thinking I've been used and thinking I've been given an edge. Haymitch is right. I survived my interview, but what was I really? A silly girl spinning in a sparkling dress. Giggling. The only moment of any substance I had was when I talked about Prim. Compare that with Thresh, his silent, deadly power, and I'm forgettable. Silly and sparkly and forgettable. No, not entirely forgettable, I have my eleven in training.

But now Peeta has made me an object of love. Not just his. To hear him tell it I have many admirers. And if the audience really thinks we're in love...I remember how strongly they responded to his confession. Star-crossed lovers. Haymitch is right, they eat that stuff up in the Capitol. Suddenly I'm worried that I didn't react properly.

"After he said he loved me, did you think I could be in love with him, too?" I ask.

"I did," says Portia. "The way you avoided looking at the cameras, the blush."

The others chime in, agreeing.

"You're golden, sweetheart. You're going to have sponsors lined up around the block," says Haymitch.

I'm embarrassed about my reaction. I force myself to acknowledge Peeta. "I'm sorry I shoved you."

"Doesn't matter," he shrugs. "Although it's technically illegal."

"Are your hands okay?" I ask.

"They'll be all right," he says.

In the silence that follows, delicious smells of our dinner waft in from the dining room. "Come on, let's eat," says Haymitch. We all follow him to the

table and take our places. But then Peeta is bleeding too heavily, and Portia leads him off for medical treatment. We start the cream and rose-petal soup without them. By the time we've finished, they're back. Peeta's hands are wrapped in bandages. I can't help feeling guilty. Tomorrow we will be in the arena. He has done me a favor and I have answered with an injury. Will I never stop owing him?

After dinner, we watch the replay in the sitting room. I seem frilly and shallow, twirling and giggling in my dress, although the others assure me I am charming. Peeta actually is charming and then utterly winning as the boy in love. And there I am, blushing and confused, made beautiful by Cinna's hands, desirable by Peeta's confession, tragic by circumstance, and by all accounts, unforgettable.

When the anthem finishes and the screen goes dark, a hush falls on the room. Tomorrow at dawn, we will be roused and prepared for the arena. The actual Games don't start until ten because so many of the Capitol residents rise late. But Peeta and I must make an early start. There is no telling how far we will travel to the arena that has been prepared for this year's Games.

I know Haymitch and Effie will not be going with us. As soon as they leave here, they'll be at the Games Headquarters, hopefully madly signing up our sponsors, working out a strategy on how and when to deliver the gifts to us. Cinna and Portia will travel with us to the very spot from which we will be launched into the arena. Still final good-byes must be said here.

Effie takes both of us by the hand and, with actual tears in her eyes, wishes us well. Thanks us for being the best tributes it has ever been her privilege to sponsor. And then, because it's Effie and she's apparently required by law to say something awful, she adds "I wouldn't be at all surprised if I finally get promoted to a decent district next year!"

Then she kisses us each on the cheek and hurries out, overcome with either the emotional parting or the possible improvement of her fortunes.

Haymitch crosses his arms and looks us both over.

"Any final words of advice?" asks Peeta.

"When the gong sounds, get the hell out of there. You're neither of you up to the blood bath at the Cornucopia. Just clear out, put as much distance as you can between yourselves and the others, and find a source of water," he says. "Got it?"

"And after that?" I ask.

“Stay alive,” says Haymitch. It’s the same advice he gave us on the train, but he’s not drunk and laughing this time. And we only nod. What else is there to say?

When I head to my room, Peeta lingers to talk to Portia. I’m glad. Whatever strange words of parting we exchange can wait until tomorrow. My covers are drawn back, but there is no sign of the redheaded Avox girl. I wish I knew her name. I should have asked it. She could write it down maybe. Or act it out. But perhaps that would only result in punishment for her.

I take a shower and scrub the gold paint, the makeup, the scent of beauty from my body. All that remains of the design-team’s efforts are the flames on my nails. I decide to keep them as reminder of who I am to the audience. Katniss, the girl who was on fire. Perhaps it will give me something to hold on to in the days to come.

I pull on a thick, fleecy nightgown and climb into bed. It takes me about five seconds to realize I’ll never fall asleep. And I need sleep desperately because in the arena every moment I give in to fatigue will be an invitation to death.

It’s no good. One hour, two, three pass, and my eyelids refuse to get heavy. I can’t stop trying to imagine exactly what terrain I’ll be thrown into. Desert? Swamp? A frigid wasteland? Above all I am hoping for trees, which may afford me some means of concealment and food and shelter. Often there are trees because barren landscapes are dull and the Games resolve too quickly without them. But what will the climate be like? What traps have the Gamemakers hidden to liven up the slower moments? And then there are my fellow tributes...

The more anxious I am to find sleep, the more it eludes me. Finally, I am too restless to even stay in bed. I pace the floor, heart beating too fast, breathing too short. My room feels like a prison cell. If I don’t get air soon, I’m going to start to throw things again. I run down the hall to the door to the roof. It’s not only unlocked but ajar. Perhaps someone forgot to close it, but it doesn’t matter. The energy field enclosing the roof prevents any desperate form of escape. And I’m not looking to escape, only to fill my lungs with air. I want to see the sky and the moon on the last night that no one will be hunting me.

The roof is not lit at night, but as soon as my bare feet reach its tiled surface I see his silhouette, black against the lights that shine endlessly in the

Capitol. There's quite a commotion going on down in the streets, music and singing and car horns, none of which I could hear through the thick glass window panels in my room. I could slip away now, without him noticing me; he wouldn't hear me over the din. But the night air's so sweet, I can't bear returning to that stuffy cage of a room. And what difference does it make? Whether we speak or not?

My feet move soundlessly across the tiles. I'm only a yard behind him when I say, "You should be getting some sleep."

He starts but doesn't turn. I can see him give his head a slight shake. "I didn't want to miss the party. It's for us, after all."

I come up beside him and lean over the edge of the rail. The wide streets are full of dancing people. I squint to make out their tiny figures in more detail. "Are they in costumes?"

"Who could tell?" Peeta answers. "With all the crazy clothes they wear here. Couldn't sleep, either?"

"Couldn't turn my mind off," I say.

"Thinking about your family?" he asks.

"No," I admit a bit guiltily. "All I can do is wonder about tomorrow. Which is pointless, of course." In the light from below, I can see his face now, the awkward way he holds his bandaged hands. "I really am sorry about your hands."

"It doesn't matter, Katniss," he says. "I've never been a contender in these Games anyway."

"That's no way to be thinking," I say.

"Why not? It's true. My best hope is to not disgrace myself and..." He hesitates.

"And what?" I say.

"I don't know how to say it exactly. Only...I want to die as myself. Does that make any sense?" he asks. I shake my head. How could he die as anyone but himself? "I don't want them to change me in there. Turn me into some kind of monster that I'm not."

I bite my lip, feeling inferior. While I've been ruminating on the availability of trees, Peeta has been struggling with how to maintain his identity. His purity of self. "Do you mean you won't kill anyone?" I ask.

"No, when the time comes, I'm sure I'll kill just like everybody else. I can't go down without a fight. Only I keep wishing I could think of a way

to...to show the Capitol they don't own me. That I'm more than just a piece in their Games," says Peeta.

"But you're not," I say. "None of us are. That's how the Games work."

"Okay, but within that framework, there's still you, there's still me," he insists. "Don't you see?"

"A little. Only...no offense, but who cares, Peeta?" I say.

"I do. I mean, what else am I allowed to care about at this point?" he asks angrily. He's locked those blue eyes on mine now, demanding an answer.

I take a step back. "Care about what Haymitch said. About staying alive."

Peeta smiles at me, sad and mocking. "Okay. Thanks for the tip, sweetheart."

It's like a slap in the face. His use of Haymitch's patronizing endearment. "Look, if you want to spend the last hours of your life planning some noble death in the arena, that's your choice. I want to spend mine in District Twelve."

"Wouldn't surprise me if you do," says Peeta. "Give my mother my best when you make it back, will you?"

"Count on it," I say. Then I turn and leave the roof.

I spend the rest of the night slipping in and out of a doze, imagining the cutting remarks I will make to Peeta Mellark in the morning. Peeta Mellark. We will see how high and mighty he is when he's faced with life and death. He'll probably turn into one of those raging beast tributes, the kind who tries to eat someone's heart after they've killed them. There was a guy like that a few years ago from District 6 called Titus. He went completely savage and the Gamemakers had to have him stunned with electric guns to collect the bodies of the players he'd killed before he ate them. There are no rules in the arena, but cannibalism doesn't play well with the Capitol audience, so they tried to head it off. There was some speculation that the avalanche that finally took Titus out was specifically engineered to ensure the victor was not a lunatic.

I don't see Peeta in the morning. Cinna comes to me before dawn, gives me a simple shift to wear, and guides me to the roof. My final dressing and preparations will be done in the catacombs under the arena itself. A hovercraft appears out of thin air, just like the one did in the woods the day I saw the redheaded Avox girl captured, and a ladder drops down. I place my

hands and feet on the lower rungs and instantly it's as if I'm frozen. Some sort of current glues me to the ladder while I'm lifted safely inside.

I expect the ladder to release me then, but I'm still stuck when a woman in a white coat approaches me carrying a syringe. "This is just your tracker, Katniss. The stiller you are, the more efficiently I can place it," she says.

Still? I'm a statue. But that doesn't prevent me from feeling the sharp stab of pain as the needle inserts the metal tracking device deep under the skin on the inside of my forearm. Now the Gamemakers will always be able to trace my whereabouts in the arena. Wouldn't want to lose a tribute.

As soon as the tracker's in place, the ladder releases me. The woman disappears and Cinna is retrieved from the roof. An Avox boy comes in and directs us to a room where breakfast has been laid out. Despite the tension in my stomach, I eat as much as I can, although none of the delectable food makes any impression on me. I'm so nervous, I could be eating coal dust. The one thing that distracts me at all is the view from the windows as we sail over the city and then to the wilderness beyond. This is what birds see. Only they're free and safe. The very opposite of me.

The ride lasts about half an hour before the windows black out, suggesting that we're nearing the arena. The hovercraft lands and Cinna and I go back to the ladder, only this time it leads down into a tube underground, into the catacombs that lie beneath the arena. We follow instructions to my destination, a chamber for my preparation. In the Capitol, they call it the Launch Room. In the districts, it's referred to as the Stockyard. The place animals go before slaughter.

Everything is brand-new, I will be the first and only tribute to use this Launch Room. The arenas are historic sites, preserved after the Games. Popular destinations for Capitol residents to visit, to vacation. Go for a month, rewatch the Games, tour the catacombs, visit the sites where the deaths took place. You can even take part in reenactments.

They say the food is excellent.

I struggle to keep my breakfast down as I shower and clean my teeth. Cinna does my hair in my simple trademark braid down my back. Then the clothes arrive, the same for every tribute. Cinna has had no say in my outfit, does not even know what will be in the package, but he helps me dress in the undergarments, simple tawny pants, light green blouse, sturdy brown belt,

and thin, hooded black jacket that falls to my thighs. “The material in the jacket’s designed to reflect body heat. Expect some cool nights,” he says.

The boots, worn over skintight socks, are better than I could have hoped for. Soft leather not unlike my ones at home. These have a narrow flexible rubber sole with treads, though. Good for running.

I think I’m finished when Cinna pulls the gold mockingjay pin from his pocket. I had completely forgotten about it.

“Where did you get that?” I ask.

“Off the green outfit you wore on the train,” he says. I remember now taking it off my mother’s dress, pinning it to the shirt. “It’s your district token, right?” I nod and he fastens it on my shirt. “It barely cleared the review board. Some thought the pin could be used as a weapon, giving you an unfair advantage. But eventually, they let it through,” says Cinna. “They eliminated a ring from that District One girl, though. If you twisted the gemstone, a spike popped out. Poisoned one. She claimed she had no knowledge the ring transformed and there was no way to prove she did. But she lost her token. There, you’re all set. Move around. Make sure everything feels comfortable.”

I walk, run in a circle, swing my arms about. “Yes, it’s fine. Fits perfectly.”

“Then there’s nothing to do but wait for the call,” says Cinna. “Unless you think you could eat any more?”

I turn down food but accept a glass of water that I take tiny sips of as we wait on a couch. I don’t want to chew on my nails or lips, so I find myself gnawing on the inside of my cheek. It still hasn’t fully healed from a few days ago. Soon the taste of blood fills my mouth.

Nervousness seeps into terror as I anticipate what is to come. I could be dead, flat-out dead, in an hour. Not even. My fingers obsessively trace the hard little lump on my forearm where the woman injected the tracking device. I press on it, even though it hurts, I press on it so hard a small bruise begins to form.

“Do you want to talk, Katniss?” Cinna asks.

I shake my head but after a moment hold out my hand to him. Cinna encloses it in both of his. And this is how we sit until a pleasant female voice announces it’s time to prepare for launch.

Still clenching one of Cinna's hands, I walk over and stand on the circular metal plate. "Remember what Haymitch said. Run, find water. The rest will follow," he says. I nod. "And remember this. I'm not allowed to bet, but if I could, my money would be on you."

"Truly?" I whisper.

"Truly," says Cinna. He leans down and kisses me on the forehead. "Good luck, girl on fire." And then a glass cylinder is lowering around me, breaking our handhold, cutting him off from me. He taps his fingers under his chin. Head high.

I lift my chin and stand as straight as I can. The cylinder begins to rise. For maybe fifteen seconds, I'm in darkness and then I can feel the metal plate pushing me out of the cylinder, into the open air. For a moment, my eyes are dazzled by the bright sunlight and I'm conscious only of a strong wind with the hopeful smell of pine trees.

Then I hear the legendary announcer, Claudius Templesmith, as his voice booms all around me.

"Ladies and gentlemen, let the Seventy-fourth Hunger Games begin!"

Sixty seconds. That's how long we're required to stand on our metal circles before the sound of a gong releases us. Step off before the minute is up, and land mines blow your legs off. Sixty seconds to take in the ring of tributes all equidistant from the Cornucopia, a giant golden horn shaped like a cone with a curved tail, the mouth of which is at least twenty feet high, spilling over with the things that will give us life here in the arena. Food, containers of water, weapons, medicine, garments, fire starters. Strewn around the Cornucopia are other supplies, their value decreasing the farther they are from the horn. For instance, only a few steps from my feet lies a three-foot square of plastic. Certainly it could be of some use in a downpour. But there in the mouth, I can see a tent pack that would protect from almost any sort of weather. If I had the guts to go in and fight for it against the other twenty-three tributes. Which I have been instructed not to do.

We're on a flat, open stretch of ground. A plain of hard-packed dirt. Behind the tributes across from me, I can see nothing, indicating either a steep downward slope or even a cliff. To my right lies a lake. To my left and back, sparse piney woods. This is where Haymitch would want me to go. Immediately.

I hear his instructions in my head. "Just clear out, put as much distance as you can between yourselves and the others, and find a source of water."

But it's tempting, so tempting, when I see the bounty waiting there before me. And I know that if I don't get it, someone else will. That the Career Tributes who survive the bloodbath will divide up most of these life-sustaining spoils. Something catches my eye. There, resting on a mound of blanket rolls, is a silver sheath of arrows and a bow, already strung, just waiting to be engaged. *That's mine*, I think. *It's meant for me*.

I'm fast. I can sprint faster than any of the girls in our school although a couple can beat me in distance races. But this forty-yard length, this is what I am built for. I know I can get it, I know I can reach it first, but then the question is how quickly can I get out of there? By the time I've scrambled up the packs and grabbed the weapons, others will have reached the horn, and

one or two I might be able to pick off, but say there's a dozen, at that close range, they could take me down with the spears and the clubs. Or their own powerful fists.

Still, I won't be the only target. I'm betting many of the other tributes would pass up a smaller girl, even one who scored an eleven in training, to take out their more fierce adversaries.

Haymitch has never seen me run. Maybe if he had he'd tell me to go for it. Get the weapon. Since that's the very weapon that might be my salvation. And I only see one bow in that whole pile. I know the minute must be almost up and will have to decide what my strategy will be and I find myself positioning my feet to run, not away into the surrounding forests but toward the pile, toward the bow. When suddenly I notice Peeta, he's about five tributes to my right, quite a fair distance, still I can tell he's looking at me and I think he might be shaking his head. But the sun's in my eyes, and while I'm puzzling over it the gong rings out.

And I've missed it! I've missed my chance! Because those extra couple of seconds I've lost by not being ready are enough to change my mind about going in. My feet shuffle for a moment, confused at the direction my brain wants to take and then I lunge forward, scoop up the sheet of plastic and a loaf of bread. The pickings are so small and I'm so angry with Peeta for distracting me that I sprint in twenty yards to retrieve a bright orange backpack that could hold anything because I can't stand leaving with virtually nothing.

A boy, I think from District 9, reaches the pack at the same time I do and for a brief time we grapple for it and then he coughs, splattering my face with blood. I stagger back, repulsed by the warm, sticky spray. Then the boy slips to the ground. That's when I see the knife in his back. Already other tributes have reached the Cornucopia and are spreading out to attack. Yes, the girl from District 2, ten yards away, running toward me, one hand clutching a half-dozen knives. I've seen her throw in training. She never misses. And I'm her next target.

All the general fear I've been feeling condenses into an immediate fear of this girl, this predator who might kill me in seconds. Adrenaline shoots through me and I sling the pack over one shoulder and run full-speed for the woods. I can hear the blade whistling toward me and reflexively hike the pack up to protect my head. The blade lodges in the pack. Both straps on my

shoulders now, I make for the trees. Somehow I know the girl will not pursue me. That she'll be drawn back into the Cornucopia before all the good stuff is gone. A grin crosses my face. *Thanks for the knife*, I think.

At the edge of the woods I turn for one instant to survey the field. About a dozen or so tributes are hacking away at one another at the horn. Several lie dead already on the ground. Those who have taken flight are disappearing into the trees or into the void opposite me. I continue running until the woods have hidden me from the other tributes then slow into a steady jog that I think I can maintain for a while. For the next few hours, I alternate between jogging and walking, putting as much distance as I can between myself and my competitors. I lost my bread during the struggle with the boy from District 9 but managed to stuff my plastic in my sleeve so as I walk I fold it neatly and tuck it into a pocket. I also free the knife—it's a fine one with a long sharp blade, serrated near the handle, which will make it handy for sawing through things—and slide it into my belt. I don't dare stop to examine the contents of the pack yet. I just keep moving, pausing only to check for pursuers.

I can go a long time. I know that from my days in the woods. But I will need water. That was Haymitch's second instruction, and since I sort of botched the first, I keep a sharp eye out for any sign of it. No luck.

The woods begin to evolve, and the pines are intermixed with a variety of trees, some I recognize, some completely foreign to me. At one point, I hear a noise and pull my knife, thinking I may have to defend myself, but I've only startled a rabbit. "Good to see you," I whisper. If there's one rabbit, there could be hundreds just waiting to be snared.

The ground slopes down. I don't particularly like this. Valleys make me feel trapped. I want to be high, like in the hills around District 12, where I can see my enemies approaching. But I have no choice but to keep going.

Funny though, I don't feel too bad. The days of gorging myself have paid off. I've got staying power even though I'm short on sleep. Being in the woods is rejuvenating. I'm glad for the solitude, even though it's an illusion, because I'm probably on-screen right now. Not consistently but off and on. There are so many deaths to show the first day that a tribute trekking through the woods isn't much to look at. But they'll show me enough to let people know I'm alive, uninjured and on the move. One of the heaviest days of

betting is the opening, when the initial casualties come in. But that can't compare to what happens as the field shrinks to a handful of players.

It's late afternoon when I begin to hear the cannons. Each shot represents a dead tribute. The fighting must have finally stopped at the Cornucopia. They never collect the bloodbath bodies until the killers have dispersed. On the opening day, they don't even fire the cannons until the initial fighting's over because it's too hard to keep track of the fatalities. I allow myself to pause, panting, as I count the shots. One...two...three...on and on until they reach eleven. Eleven dead in all. Thirteen left to play. My fingernails scrape at the dried blood the boy from District 9 coughed into my face. He's gone, certainly. I wonder about Peeta. Has he lasted through the day? I'll know in a few hours. When they project the dead's images into the sky for the rest of us to see.

All of a sudden, I'm overwhelmed by the thought that Peeta may be already lost, bled white, collected, and in the process of being transported back to the Capitol to be cleaned up, redressed, and shipped in a simple wooden box back to District 12. No longer here. Heading home. I try hard to remember if I saw him once the action started. But the last image I can conjure up is Peeta shaking his head as the gong rang out.

Maybe it's better, if he's gone already. He had no confidence he could win. And I will not end up with the unpleasant task of killing him. Maybe it's better if he's out of this for good.

I slump down next to my pack, exhausted. I need to go through it anyway before night falls. See what I have to work with. As I unhook the straps, I can feel it's sturdily made although a rather unfortunate color. This orange will practically glow in the dark. I make a mental note to camouflage it first thing tomorrow.

I flip open the flap. What I want most, right at this moment, is water. Haymitch's directive to immediately find water was not arbitrary. I won't last long without it. For a few days, I'll be able to function with unpleasant symptoms of dehydration, but after that I'll deteriorate into helplessness and be dead in a week, tops. I carefully lay out the provisions. One thin black sleeping bag that reflects body heat. A pack of crackers. A pack of dried beef strips. A bottle of iodine. A box of wooden matches. A small coil of wire. A pair of sunglasses. And a half-gallon plastic bottle with a cap for carrying water that's bone dry.

No water. How hard would it have been for them to fill up the bottle? I become aware of the dryness in my throat and mouth, the cracks in my lips. I've been moving all day long. It's been hot and I've sweat a lot. I do this at home, but there are always streams to drink from, or snow to melt if it should come to it.

As I refill my pack I have an awful thought. The lake. The one I saw while I was waiting for the gong to sound. What if that's the only water source in the arena? That way they'll guarantee drawing us in to fight. The lake is a full day's journey from where I sit now, a much harder journey with nothing to drink. And then, even if I reach it, it's sure to be heavily guarded by some of the Career Tributes. I'm about to panic when I remember the rabbit I startled earlier today. It has to drink, too. I just have to find out where.

Twilight is closing in and I am ill at ease. The trees are too thin to offer much concealment. The layer of pine needles that muffles my footsteps also makes tracking animals harder when I need their trails to find water. And I'm still heading downhill, deeper and deeper into a valley that seems endless.

I'm hungry, too, but I don't dare break into my precious store of crackers and beef yet. Instead, I take my knife and go to work on a pine tree, cutting away the outer bark and scraping off a large handful of the softer inner bark. I slowly chew the stuff as I walk along. After a week of the finest food in the world, it's a little hard to choke down. But I've eaten plenty of pine in my life. I'll adjust quickly.

In another hour, it's clear I've got to find a place to camp. Night creatures are coming out. I can hear the occasional hoot or howl, my first clue that I'll be competing with natural predators for the rabbits. As to whether I'll be viewed as a source of food, it's too soon to tell. There could be any number of animals stalking me at this moment.

But right now, I decide to make my fellow tributes a priority. I'm sure many will continue hunting through the night. Those who fought it out at the Cornucopia will have food, an abundance of water from the lake, torches or flashlights, and weapons they're itching to use. I can only hope I've traveled far and fast enough to be out of range.

Before settling down, I take my wire and set two twitch-up snares in the brush. I know it's risky to be setting traps, but food will go so fast out here.

And I can't set snares on the run. Still, I walk another five minutes before making camp.

I pick my tree carefully. A willow, not terribly tall but set in a clump of other willows, offering concealment in those long, flowing tresses. I climb up, sticking to the stronger branches close to the trunk, and find a sturdy fork for my bed. It takes some doing, but I arrange the sleeping bag in a relatively comfortable manner. I place my backpack in the foot of the bag, then slide in after it. As a precaution, I remove my belt, loop it all the way around the branch and my sleeping bag, and refasten it at my waist. Now if I roll over in my sleep, I won't go crashing to the ground. I'm small enough to tuck the top of the bag over my head, but I put on my hood as well. As night falls, the air is cooling quickly. Despite the risk I took in getting the backpack, I know now it was the right choice. This sleeping bag, radiating back and preserving my body heat, will be invaluable. I'm sure there are several other tributes whose biggest concern right now is how to stay warm whereas I may actually be able to get a few hours of sleep. If only I wasn't so thirsty...

Night has just come when I hear the anthem that proceeds the death recap. Through the branches I can see the seal of the Capitol, which appears to be floating in the sky. I'm actually viewing another screen, an enormous one that's transported by one of their disappearing hovercraft. The anthem fades out and the sky goes dark for a moment. At home, we would be watching full coverage of each and every killing, but that's thought to give an unfair advantage to the living tributes. For instance, if I got my hands on the bow and shot someone, my secret would be revealed to all. No, here in the arena, all we see are the same photographs they showed when they televised our training scores. Simple head shots. But now instead of scores they post only district numbers. I take a deep breath as the faces of the eleven dead tributes begin and tick them off one by one on my fingers.

The first to appear is the girl from District 3. That means that the Career Tributes from 1 and 2 have all survived. No surprise there. Then the boy from 4. I didn't expect that one, usually all the Careers make it through the first day. The boy from District 5...I guess the fox-faced girl made it. Both tributes from 6 and 7. The boy from 8. Both from 9. Yes, there's the boy who I fought for the backpack. I've run through my fingers, only one more dead tribute to go. Is it Peeta? No, there's the girl from District 10. That's it. The

Capitol seal is back with a final musical flourish. Then darkness and the sounds of the forest resume.

I'm relieved Peeta's alive. I tell myself again that if I get killed, his winning will benefit my mother and Prim the most. This is what I tell myself to explain the conflicting emotions that arise when I think of Peeta. The gratitude that he gave me an edge by professing his love for me in the interview. The anger at his superiority on the roof. The dread that we may come face-to-face at any moment in this arena.

Eleven dead, but none from District 12. I try to work out who is left. Five Career Tributes. Foxface. Thresh and Rue. Rue...so she made it through the first day after all. I can't help feeling glad. That makes ten of us. The other three I'll figure out tomorrow. Now when it is dark, and I have traveled far, and I am nestled high in this tree, now I must try and rest.

I haven't really slept in two days, and then there's been the long day's journey into the arena. Slowly, I allow my muscles to relax. My eyes to close. The last thing I think is it's lucky I don't snore....

Snap! The sound of a breaking branch wakes me. How long have I been asleep? Four hours? Five? The tip of my nose is icy cold. *Snap! Snap!* What's going on? This is not the sound of a branch under someone's foot, but the sharp crack of one coming from a tree. *Snap! Snap!* I judge it to be several hundred yards to my right. Slowly, noiselessly, I turn myself in that direction. For a few minutes, there's nothing but blackness and some scuffling. Then I see a spark and a small fire begins to bloom. A pair of hands warms over flames, but I can't make out more than that.

I have to bite my lip not to scream every foul name I know at the fire starter. What are they thinking? A fire lit just at nightfall would have been one thing. Those who battled at the Cornucopia, with their superior strength and surplus of supplies, they couldn't possibly have been near enough to spot the flames then. But now, when they've probably been combing the woods for hours looking for victims. You might as well be waving a flag and shouting, "Come and get me!"

And here I am a stone's throw from the biggest idiot in the Games. Strapped in a tree. Not daring to flee since my general location has just been broadcast to any killer who cares. I mean, I know it's cold out here and not everybody has a sleeping bag. But then you grit your teeth and stick it out until dawn!

I lie smoldering in my bag for the next couple of hours, really thinking that if I can get out of this tree, I won't have the least problem taking out my new neighbor. My instinct has been to flee, not fight. But obviously this person's a hazard. Stupid people are dangerous. And this one probably doesn't have much in the way of weapons while I've got this excellent knife.

The sky is still dark, but I can feel the first signs of dawn approaching. I'm beginning to think we—meaning the person whose death I'm now devising and I—we might actually have gone unnoticed. Then I hear it. Several pairs of feet breaking into a run. The fire starter must have dozed off. They're on her before she can escape. I know it's a girl now, I can tell by the pleading, the agonized scream that follows. Then there's laughter and congratulations from several voices. Someone cries out, "Twelve down and eleven to go!" which gets a round of appreciative hoots.

So they're fighting in a pack. I'm not really surprised. Often alliances are formed in the early stages of the Games. The strong band together to hunt down the weak then, when the tension becomes too great, begin to turn on one another. I don't have to wonder too hard who has made this alliance. It'll be the remaining Career Tributes from Districts 1, 2, and 4. Two boys and three girls. The ones who lunched together.

For a moment, I hear them checking the girl for supplies. I can tell by their comments they've found nothing good. I wonder if the victim is Rue but quickly dismiss the thought. She's much too bright to be building a fire like that.

"Better clear out so they can get the body before it starts stinking." I'm almost certain that's the brutish boy from District 2. There are murmurs of assent and then, to my horror, I hear the pack heading toward me. They do not know I'm here. How could they? And I'm well concealed in the clump of trees. At least while the sun stays down. Then my black sleeping bag will turn from camouflage to trouble. If they just keep moving, they will pass me and be gone in a minute.

But the Careers stop in the clearing about ten yards from my tree. They have flashlights, torches. I can see an arm here, a boot there, through the breaks in the branches. I turn to stone, not even daring to breathe. Have they spotted me? No, not yet. I can tell from their words their minds are elsewhere.

"Shouldn't we have heard a cannon by now?"

“I’d say yes. Nothing to prevent them from going in immediately.”

“Unless she isn’t dead.”

“She’s dead. I stuck her myself.”

“Then where’s the cannon?”

“Someone should go back. Make sure the job’s done.”

“Yeah, we don’t want to have to track her down twice.”

“I said she’s dead!”

An argument breaks out until one tribute silences the others. “We’re wasting time! I’ll go finish her and let’s move on!”

I almost fall out of the tree. The voice belongs to Peeta.

Thank goodness, I had the foresight to belt myself in. I've rolled sideways off the fork and I'm facing the ground, held in place by the belt, one hand, and my feet straddling the pack inside my sleeping bag, braced against the trunk. There must have been some rustling when I tipped sideways, but the Careers have been too caught up in their own argument to catch it.

"Go on, then, Lover Boy," says the boy from District 2. "See for yourself."

I just get a glimpse of Peeta, lit by a torch, heading back to the girl by the fire. His face is swollen with bruises, there's a bloody bandage on one arm, and from the sound of his gait he's limping somewhat. I remember him shaking his head, telling me not to go into the fight for the supplies, when all along, all along he'd planned to throw himself into the thick of things. Just the opposite of what Haymitch had told him to do.

Okay, I can stomach that. Seeing all those supplies was tempting. But this...this other thing. This teaming up with the Career wolf pack to hunt down the rest of us. No one from District 12 would think of doing such a thing! Career tributes are overly vicious, arrogant, better fed, but only because they're the Capitol's lapdogs. Universally, solidly hated by all but those from their own districts. I can imagine the things they're saying about him back home now. And Peeta had the gall to talk to me about disgrace?

Obviously, the noble boy on the rooftop was playing just one more game with me. But this will be his last. I will eagerly watch the night skies for signs of his death, if I don't kill him first myself.

The Career tributes are silent until he gets out of earshot, then use hushed voices.

"Why don't we just kill him now and get it over with?"

"Let him tag along. What's the harm? And he's handy with that knife."

Is he? That's news. What a lot of interesting things I'm learning about my friend Peeta today.

"Besides, he's our best chance of finding her."

It takes me a moment to register that the "her" they're referring to is me.

“Why? You think she bought into that sappy romance stuff?”

“She might have. Seemed pretty simpleminded to me. Every time I think about her spinning around in that dress, I want to puke.”

“Wish we knew how she got that eleven.”

“Bet you Lover Boy knows.”

The sound of Peeta returning silences them.

“Was she dead?” asks the boy from District 2.

“No. But she is now,” says Peeta. Just then, the cannon fires. “Ready to move on?”

The Career pack sets off at a run just as dawn begins to break, and birdsong fills the air. I remain in my awkward position, muscles trembling with exertion for a while longer, then hoist myself back onto my branch. I need to get down, to get going, but for a moment I lie there, digesting what I’ve heard. Not only is Peeta with the Careers, he’s helping them find me. The simpleminded girl who has to be taken seriously because of her eleven. Because she can use a bow and arrow. Which Peeta knows better than anyone.

But he hasn’t told them yet. Is he saving that information because he knows it’s all that keeps him alive? Is he still pretending to love me for the audience? What is going on in his head?

Suddenly, the birds fall silent. Then one gives a high-pitched warning call. A single note. Just like the one Gale and I heard when the redheaded Avox girl was caught. High above the dying campfire a hovercraft materializes. A set of large metal teeth drops down. Slowly, gently, the dead tribute girl is lifted into the hovercraft. Then it vanishes. The birds resume their song.

“Move,” I whisper to myself. I wriggle out of my sleeping bag, roll it up, and place it in the pack. I take a deep breath. While I’ve been concealed by darkness and the sleeping bag and the willow branches, it has probably been difficult for the cameras to get a good shot of me. I know they must be tracking me now though. The minute I hit the ground, I’m guaranteed a close-up.

The audience will have been beside themselves, knowing I was in the tree, that I overheard the Careers talking, that I discovered Peeta was with them. Until I work out exactly how I want to play that, I’d better at least act on top of things. Not perplexed. Certainly not confused or frightened.

No, I need to look one step ahead of the game.

So as I slide out of the foliage and into the dawn light, I pause a second, giving the cameras time to lock on me. Then I cock my head slightly to the side and give a knowing smile. There! Let them figure out what that means!

I'm about to take off when I think of my snares. Maybe it's imprudent to check them with the others so close. But I have to. Too many years of hunting, I guess. And the lure of possible meat. I'm rewarded with one fine rabbit. In no time, I've cleaned and gutted the animal, leaving the head, feet, tail, skin, and innards, under a pile of leaves. I'm wishing for a fire—eating raw rabbit can give you rabbit fever, a lesson I learned the hard way—when I think of the dead tribute. I hurry back to her camp. Sure enough, the coals of her dying fire are still hot. I cut up the rabbit, fashion a spit out of branches, and set it over the coals.

I'm glad for the cameras now. I want sponsors to see I can hunt, that I'm a good bet because I won't be lured into traps as easily as the others will by hunger. While the rabbit cooks, I grind up part of a charred branch and set about camouflaging my orange pack. The black tones it down, but I feel a layer of mud would definitely help. Of course, to have mud, I'd need water....

I pull on my gear, grab my spit, kick some dirt over the coals, and take off in the opposite direction the Careers went. I eat half the rabbit as I go, then wrap up the leftovers in my plastic for later. The meat stops the grumbling in my stomach but does little to quench my thirst. Water is my top priority now.

As I hike along, I feel certain I'm still holding the screen in the Capitol, so I'm careful to continue to hide my emotions. But what a good time Claudius Templesmith must be having with his guest commentators, dissecting Peeta's behavior, my reaction. What to make of it all? Has Peeta revealed his true colors? How does this affect the betting odds? Will we lose sponsors? Do we even *have* sponsors? Yes, I feel certain we do, or at least did.

Certainly Peeta has thrown a wrench into our star-crossed lover dynamic. Or has he? Maybe, since he hasn't spoken much about me, we can still get some mileage out of it. Maybe people will think it's something we plotted together if I seem like it amuses me now.

The sun rises in the sky and even through the canopy it seems overly bright. I coat my lips in some grease from the rabbit and try to keep from

panting, but it's no use. It's only been a day and I'm dehydrating fast. I try and think of everything I know about finding water. It runs downhill, so, in fact, continuing down into this valley isn't a bad thing. If I could just locate a game trail or spot a particularly green patch of vegetation, these might help me along. But nothing seems to change. There's just the slight gradual slope, the birds, the sameness to the trees.

As the day wears on, I know I'm headed for trouble. What little urine I've been able to pass is a dark brown, my head is aching, and there's a dry patch on my tongue that refuses to moisten. The sun hurts my eyes so I dig out my sunglasses, but when I put them on they do something funny to my vision, so I just stuff them back in my pack.

It's late afternoon when I think I've found help. I spot a cluster of berry bushes and hurry to strip the fruit, to suck the sweet juices from the skins. But just as I'm holding them to my lips, I get a hard look at them. What I thought were blueberries have a slightly different shape, and when I break one open the insides are bloodred. I don't recognize these berries, perhaps they are edible, but I'm guessing this is some evil trick on the part of the Gamemakers. Even the plant instructor in the Training Center made a point of telling us to avoid berries unless you were 100 percent sure they weren't toxic. Something I already knew, but I'm so thirsty it takes her reminder to give me the strength to fling them away.

Fatigue is beginning to settle on me, but it's not the usual tiredness that follows a long hike. I have to stop and rest frequently, although I know the only cure for what ails me requires continued searching. I try a new tactic—climbing a tree as high as I dare in my shaky state—to look for any signs of water. But as far as I can see in any direction, there's the same unrelenting stretch of forest.

Determined to go on until nightfall, I walk until I'm stumbling over my own feet.

Exhausted, I haul myself up into a tree and belt myself in. I've no appetite, but I suck on a rabbit bone just to give my mouth something to do. Night falls, the anthem plays, and high in the sky I see the picture of the girl, who was apparently from District 8. The one Peeta went back to finish off.

My fear of the Career pack is minor compared to my burning thirst. Besides, they were heading away from me and by now they, too, will have to

rest. With the scarcity of water, they may even have had to return to the lake for refills.

Maybe, that is the only course for me as well.

Morning brings distress. My heads throbs with every beat of my heart. Simple movements send stabs of pain through my joints. I fall, rather than jump from the tree. It takes several minutes for me to assemble my gear. Somewhere inside me, I know this is wrong. I should be acting with more caution, moving with more urgency. But my mind seems foggy and forming a plan is hard. I lean back against the trunk of my tree, one finger gingerly stroking the sandpaper surface of my tongue, as I assess my options. How can I get water?

Return to the lake. No good. I'd never make it.

Hope for rain. There's not a cloud in the sky.

Keep looking. Yes, this is my only chance. But then, another thought hits me, and the surge of anger that follows brings me to my senses.

Haymitch! He could send me water! Press a button and have it delivered to me in a silver parachute in minutes. I know I must have sponsors, at least one or two who could afford a pint of liquid for me. Yes, it's pricey, but these people, they're made of money. And they'll be betting on me as well. Perhaps Haymitch doesn't realize how deep my need is.

I say in a voice as loud as I dare. "Water." I wait, hopefully, for a parachute to descend from the sky. But nothing is forthcoming.

Something is wrong. Am I deluded about having sponsors? Or has Peeta's behavior made them all hang back? No, I don't believe it. There's someone out there who wants to buy me water only Haymitch is refusing to let it go through. As my mentor, he gets to control the flow of gifts from the sponsors. I know he hates me. He's made that clear enough. But enough to let me die? From this? He can't do that, can he? If a mentor mistreats his tributes, he'll be held accountable by the viewers, by the people back in District 12. Even Haymitch wouldn't risk that, would he? Say what you will about my fellow traders in the Hob, but I don't think they'd welcome him back there if he let me die this way. And then where would he get his liquor? So...what? Is he trying to make me suffer for defying him? Is he directing all the sponsors toward Peeta? Is he just too drunk to even notice what's going on at the moment? Somehow I don't believe that and I don't believe he's

trying to kill me off by neglect, either. He has, in fact, in his own unpleasant way, genuinely been trying to prepare me for this. Then what is going on?

I bury my face in my hands. There's no danger of tears now, I couldn't produce one to save my life. What is Haymitch doing? Despite my anger, hatred, and suspicions, a small voice in the back of my head whispers an answer.

Maybe he's sending you a message, it says. A message. Saying what? Then I know. There's only one good reason Haymitch could be withholding water from me. Because he knows I've almost found it.

I grit my teeth and pull myself to my feet. My backpack seems to have tripled in weight. I find a broken branch that will do for a walking stick and I start off. The sun's beating down, even more searing than the first two days. I feel like an old piece of leather, drying and cracking in the heat. Every step is an effort, but I refuse to stop. I refuse to sit down. If I sit, there's a good chance I won't be able to get up again, that I won't even remember my task.

What easy prey I am! Any tribute, even tiny Rue, could take me right now, merely shove me over and kill me with my own knife, and I'd have little strength to resist. But if anyone is in my part of the woods, they ignore me. The truth is, I feel a million miles from another living soul.

Not alone though. No, they've surely got a camera tracking me now. I think back to the years of watching tributes starve, freeze, bleed, and dehydrate to death. Unless there's a really good fight going on somewhere, I'm being featured.

My thoughts turn to Prim. It's likely she won't be watching me live, but they'll show updates at the school during lunch. For her sake, I try to look as least desperate as I can.

But by afternoon, I know the end is coming. My legs are shaking and my heart is too quick. I keep forgetting exactly what I'm doing. I've stumbled repeatedly and managed to regain my feet, but when the stick slides out from under me, I finally tumble to the ground unable to get up. I let my eyes close.

I have misjudged Haymitch. He has no intention of helping me at all.

This is all right, I think. *This is not so bad here*. The air is less hot, signifying evening's approach. There's a slight, sweet scent that reminds me of lilies. My fingers stroke the smooth ground, sliding easily across the top. *This is an okay place to die*, I think.

My fingertips make small swirling patterns in the cool, slippery earth. *I love mud*, I think. How many times I've tracked game with the help of its soft, readable surface. Good for bee stings, too. Mud. Mud. Mud! My eyes fly open and I dig my fingers into the earth. It is mud! My nose lifts in the air. And those are lilies! Pond lilies!

I crawl now, through the mud, dragging myself toward the scent. Five yards from where I fell, I crawl through a tangle of plants into a pond. Floating on the top, yellow flowers in bloom, are my beautiful lilies.

It's all I can do not to plunge my face into the water and gulp down as much as I can hold. But I have just enough sense left to abstain. With trembling hands, I get out my flask and fill it with water. I add what I remember to be the right number of drops of iodine for purifying it. The half an hour of waiting is agony, but I do it. At least, I think it's a half an hour, but it's certainly as long as I can stand.

Slowly, easy now, I tell myself. I take one swallow and make myself wait. Then another. Over the next couple of hours, I drink the entire half gallon. Then a second. I prepare another before I retire to a tree where I continue sipping, eating rabbit, and even indulge in one of my precious crackers. By the time the anthem plays, I feel remarkably better. There are no faces tonight, no tributes died today. Tomorrow I'll stay here, resting, camouflaging my backpack with mud, catching some of those little fish I saw as I sipped, digging up the roots of the pond lilies to make a nice meal. I snuggle down in my sleeping bag, hanging on to my water bottle for dear life, which, of course, it is.

A few hours later, the stampede of feet shakes me from slumber. I look around in bewilderment. It's not yet dawn, but my stinging eyes can see it.

It would be hard to miss the wall of fire descending on me.

My first impulse is to scramble from the tree, but I'm belted in. Somehow my fumbling fingers release the buckle and I fall to the ground in a heap, still snarled in my sleeping bag. There's no time for any kind of packing. Fortunately, my backpack and water bottle are already in the bag. I shove in the belt, hoist the bag over my shoulder, and flee.

The world has transformed to flame and smoke. Burning branches crack from trees and fall in showers of sparks at my feet. All I can do is follow the others, the rabbits and deer, and I even spot a wild dog pack shooting through the woods. I trust their sense of direction because their instincts are sharper than mine. But they are much faster, flying through the underbrush so gracefully as my boots catch on roots and fallen tree limbs, that there's no way I can keep apace with them.

The heat is horrible, but worse than the heat is the smoke, which threatens to suffocate me at any moment. I pull the top of my shirt up over my nose, grateful to find it soaked in sweat, and it offers a thin veil of protection. And I run, choking, my bag banging against my back, my face cut with branches that materialize from the gray haze without warning, because I know I am supposed to run.

This was no tribute's campfire gone out of control, no accidental occurrence. The flames that bear down on me have an unnatural height, a uniformity that marks them as human-made, machine-made, Gamemaker-made. Things have been too quiet today. No deaths, perhaps no fights at all. The audience in the Capitol will be getting bored, claiming that these Games are verging on dullness. This is the one thing the Games must not do.

It's not hard to follow the Gamemakers' motivation. There is the Career pack and then there are the rest of us, probably spread far and thin across the arena. This fire is designed to flush us out, to drive us together. It may not be the most original device I've seen, but it's very, very effective.

I hurdle over a burning log. Not high enough. The tail end of my jacket catches on fire and I have to stop to rip it from my body and stamp out the flames. But I don't dare leave the jacket, scorched and smoldering as it is, I

take the risk of shoving it in my sleeping bag, hoping the lack of air will quell what I haven't extinguished. This is all I have, what I carry on my back, and it's little enough to survive with.

In a matter of minutes, my throat and nose are burning. The coughing begins soon after and my lungs begin to feel as if they are actually being cooked. Discomfort turns to distress until each breath sends a searing pain through my chest. I manage to take cover under a stone outcropping just as the vomiting begins, and I lose my meager supper and whatever water has remained in my stomach. Crouching on my hands and knees, I retch until there's nothing left to come up.

I know I need to keep moving, but I'm trembling and light-headed now, gasping for air. I allow myself about a spoonful of water to rinse my mouth and spit then take a few swallows from my bottle. *You get one minute*, I tell myself. *One minute to rest*. I take the time to reorder my supplies, wad up the sleeping bag, and messily stuff everything into the backpack. My minute's up. I know it's time to move on, but the smoke has clouded my thoughts. The swift-footed animals that were my compass have left me behind. I know I haven't been in this part of the woods before, there were no sizable rocks like the one I'm sheltering against on my earlier travels. Where are the Gamemakers driving me? Back to the lake? To a whole new terrain filled with new dangers? I had just found a few hours of peace at the pond when this attack began. Would there be any way I could travel parallel to the fire and work my way back there, to a source of water at least? The wall of fire must have an end and it won't burn indefinitely. Not because the Gamemakers couldn't keep it fueled but because, again, that would invite accusations of boredom from the audience. If I could get back behind the fire line, I could avoid meeting up with the Careers. I've just decided to try and loop back around, although it will require miles of travel away from the inferno and then a very circuitous route back, when the first fireball blasts into the rock about two feet from my head. I spring out from under my ledge, energized by renewed fear.

The game has taken a twist. The fire was just to get us moving, now the audience will get to see some real fun. When I hear the next hiss, I flatten on the ground, not taking time to look. The fireball hits a tree off to my left, engulfing it in flames. To remain still is death. I'm barely on my feet before the third ball hits the ground where I was lying, sending a pillar of fire up

behind me. Time loses meaning now as I frantically try to dodge the attacks. I can't see where they're being launched from, but it's not a hovercraft. The angles are not extreme enough. Probably this whole segment of the woods has been armed with precision launchers that are concealed in trees or rocks. Somewhere, in a cool and spotless room, a Gamemaker sits at a set of controls, fingers on the triggers that could end my life in a second. All that is needed is a direct hit.

Whatever vague plan I had conceived regarding returning to my pond is wiped from my mind as I zigzag and dive and leap to avoid the fireballs. Each one is only the size of an apple, but packs tremendous power on contact. Every sense I have goes into overdrive as the need to survive takes over. There's no time to judge if a move is the correct one. When there's a hiss, I act or die.

Something keeps me moving forward, though. A lifetime of watching the Hunger Games lets me know that certain areas of the arena are rigged for certain attacks. And that if I can just get away from this section, I might be able to move out of reach of the launchers. I might also then fall straight into a pit of vipers, but I can't worry about that now.

How long I scramble along dodging the fireballs I can't say, but the attacks finally begin to abate. Which is good, because I'm retching again. This time it's an acidic substance that scalds my throat and makes its way into my nose as well. I'm forced to stop as my body convulses, trying desperately to rid itself of the poisons I've been sucking in during the attack. I wait for the next hiss, the next signal to bolt. It doesn't come. The force of the retching has squeezed tears out of my stinging eyes. My clothes are drenched in sweat. Somehow, through the smoke and vomit, I pick up the scent of singed hair. My hand fumbles to my braid and finds a fireball has seared off at least six inches of it. Strands of blackened hair crumble in my fingers. I stare at them, fascinated by the transformation, when the hissing registers.

My muscles react, only not fast enough this time. The fireball crashes into the ground at my side, but not before it skids across my right calf. Seeing my pants leg on fire sends me over the edge. I twist and scuttle backward on my hands and feet, shrieking, trying to remove myself from the horror. When I finally regain enough sense, I roll the leg back and forth on the ground, which

stifles the worst of it. But then, without thinking, I rip away the remaining fabric with my bare hands.

I sit on the ground, a few yards from the blaze set off by the fireball. My calf is screaming, my hands covered in red welts. I'm shaking too hard to move. If the Gamemakers want to finish me off, now is the time.

I hear Cinna's voice, carrying images of rich fabric and sparkling gems. "Katniss, the girl who was on fire." What a good laugh the Gamemakers must be having over that one. Perhaps, Cinna's beautiful costumes have even brought on this particular torture for me. I know he couldn't have foreseen this, must be hurting for me because, in fact, I believe he cares about me. But all in all, maybe showing up stark naked in that chariot would have been safer for me.

The attack is now over. The Gamemakers don't want me dead. Not yet anyway. Everyone knows they could destroy us all within seconds of the opening gong. The real sport of the Hunger Games is watching the tributes kill one another. Every so often, they do kill a tribute just to remind the players they can. But mostly, they manipulate us into confronting one another face-to-face. Which means, if I am no longer being fired at, there is at least one other tribute close at hand.

I would drag myself into a tree and take cover now if I could, but the smoke is still thick enough to kill me. I make myself stand and begin to limp away from the wall of flames that lights up the sky. It does not seem to be pursuing me any longer, except with its stinking black clouds.

Another light, daylight, begins to softly emerge. Swirls of smoke catch the sunbeams. My visibility is poor. I can see maybe fifteen yards in any direction. A tribute could easily be concealed from me here. I should draw my knife as a precaution, but I doubt my ability to hold it for long. The pain in my hands can in no way compete with that in my calf. I hate burns, have always hated them, even a small one gotten from pulling a pan of bread from the oven. It is the worst kind of pain to me, but I have never experienced anything like this.

I'm so weary I don't even notice I'm in the pool until I'm ankle-deep. It's spring-fed, bubbling up out of a crevice in some rocks, and blissfully cool. I plunge my hands into the shallow water and feel instant relief. Isn't that what my mother always says? The first treatment for a burn is cold water? That it draws out the heat? But she means minor burns. Probably she'd recommend it

for my hands. But what of my calf? Although I have not yet had the courage to examine it, I'm guessing that it's an injury in a whole different class.

I lie on my stomach at the edge of the pool for a while, dangling my hands in the water, examining the little flames on my fingernails that are beginning to chip off. Good. I've had enough fire for a lifetime.

I bathe the blood and ash from my face. I try to recall all I know about burns. They are common injuries in the Seam where we cook and heat our homes with coal. Then there are the mine accidents....A family once brought in an unconscious young man pleading with my mother to help him. The district doctor who's responsible for treating the miners had written him off, told the family to take him home to die. But they wouldn't accept this. He lay on our kitchen table, senseless to the world. I got a glimpse of the wound on his thigh, gaping, charred flesh, burned clear down to the bone, before I ran from the house. I went to the woods and hunted the entire day, haunted by the gruesome leg, memories of my father's death. What's funny was, Prim, who's scared of her own shadow, stayed and helped. My mother says healers are born, not made. They did their best, but the man died, just like the doctor said he would.

My leg is in need of attention, but I still can't look at it. What if it's as bad as the man's and I can see my bone? Then I remember my mother saying that if a burn's severe, the victim might not even feel pain because the nerves would be destroyed. Encouraged by this, I sit up and swing my leg in front of me.

I almost faint at the sight of my calf. The flesh is a brilliant red covered with blisters. I force myself to take deep, slow breaths, feeling quite certain the cameras are on my face. I can't show weakness at this injury. Not if I want help. Pity does not get you aid. Admiration at your refusal to give in does. I cut the remains of the pant leg off at the knee and examine the injury more closely. The burned area is about the size of my hand. None of the skin is blackened. I think it's not too bad to soak. Gingerly I stretch out my leg into the pool, propping the heel of my boot on a rock so the leather doesn't get too sodden, and sigh, because this does offer some relief. I know there are herbs, if I could find them, that would speed the healing, but I can't quite call them to mind. Water and time will probably be all I have to work with.

Should I be moving on? The smoke is slowly clearing but still too heavy to be healthy. If I do continue away from the fire, won't I be walking straight

into the weapons of the Careers? Besides, every time I lift my leg from the water, the pain rebounds so intensely I have to slide it back in. My hands are slightly less demanding. They can handle small breaks from the pool. So I slowly put my gear back in order. First I fill my bottle with the pool water, treat it, and when enough time has passed, begin to rehydrate my body. After a time, I force myself to nibble on a cracker, which helps settle my stomach. I roll up my sleeping bag. Except for a few black marks, it's relatively unscathed. My jacket's another matter. Stinking and scorched, at least a foot of the back beyond repair. I cut off the damaged area leaving me with a garment that comes just to the bottom of my ribs. But the hood's intact and it's far better than nothing.

Despite the pain, drowsiness begins to take over. I'd take to a tree and try to rest, except I'd be too easy to spot. Besides, abandoning my pool seems impossible. I neatly arrange my supplies, even settle my pack on my shoulders, but I can't seem to leave. I spot some water plants with edible roots and make a small meal with my last piece of rabbit. Sip water. Watch the sun make its slow arc across the sky. Where would I go anyway that is any safer than here? I lean back on my pack, overcome by drowsiness. *If the Careers want me, let them find me*, I think before drifting into a stupor. *Let them find me*.

And find me, they do. It's lucky I'm ready to move on because when I hear the feet, I have less than a minute head start. Evening has begun to fall. The moment I awake, I'm up and running, splashing across the pool, flying into the underbrush. My leg slows me down, but I sense my pursuers are not as speedy as they were before the fire, either. I hear their coughs, their raspy voices calling to one another.

Still, they are closing in, just like a pack of wild dogs, and so I do what I have done my whole life in such circumstances. I pick a high tree and begin to climb. If running hurt, climbing is agonizing because it requires not only exertion but direct contact of my hands on the tree bark. I'm fast, though, and by the time they've reached the base of my trunk, I'm twenty feet up. For a moment, we stop and survey one another. I hope they can't hear the pounding of my heart.

This could be it, I think. What chance do I have against them? All six are there, the five Careers and Peeta, and my only consolation is they're pretty beat-up, too. Even so, look at their weapons. Look at their faces, grinning and

snarling at me, a sure kill above them. It seems pretty hopeless. But then something else registers. They're bigger and stronger than I am, no doubt, but they're also heavier. There's a reason it's me and not Gale who ventures up to pluck the highest fruit, or rob the most remote bird nests. I must weigh at least fifty or sixty pounds less than the smallest Career.

Now I smile. "How's everything with you?" I call down cheerfully.

This takes them aback, but I know the crowd will love it.

"Well enough," says the boy from District 2. "Yourself?"

"It's been a bit warm for my taste," I say. I can almost hear the laughter from the Capitol. "The air's better up here. Why don't you come on up?"

"Think I will," says the same boy.

"Here, take this, Cato," says the girl from District 1, and she offers him the silver bow and sheath of arrows. My bow! My arrows! Just the sight of them makes me so angry I want to scream, at myself, at that traitor Peeta for distracting me from having them. I try to make eye contact with him now, but he seems to be intentionally avoiding my gaze as he polishes his knife with the edge of his shirt.

"No," says Cato, pushing away the bow. "I'll do better with my sword." I can see the weapon, a short, heavy blade at his belt.

I give Cato time to hoist himself into the tree before I begin to climb again. Gale always says I remind him of a squirrel the way I can scurry up even the slenderest limbs. Part of it's my weight, but part of it's practice. You have to know where to place your hands and feet. I'm another thirty feet in the air when I hear the crack and look down to see Cato flailing as he and a branch go down. He hits the ground hard and I'm hoping he possibly broke his neck when he gets back to his feet, swearing like a fiend.

The girl with the arrows, Glimmer I hear someone call her—ugh, the names the people in District 1 give their children are so ridiculous—anyway Glimmer scales the tree until the branches begin to crack under her feet and then has the good sense to stop. I'm at least eighty feet high now. She tries to shoot me and it's immediately evident that she's incompetent with a bow. One of the arrows gets lodged in the tree near me though and I'm able to seize it. I wave it teasingly above her head, as if this was the sole purpose of retrieving it, when actually I mean to use it if I ever get the chance. I could kill them, everyone of them, if those silver weapons were in my hands.

The Careers regroup on the ground and I can hear them growling conspiratorially among themselves, furious I have made them look foolish. But twilight has arrived and their window of attack on me is closing. Finally, I hear Peeta say harshly, “Oh, let her stay up there. It’s not like she’s going anywhere. We’ll deal with her in the morning.”

Well, he’s right about one thing. I’m going nowhere. All the relief from the pool water has gone, leaving me to feel the full potency of my burns. I scoot down to a fork in the tree and clumsily prepare for bed. Put on my jacket. Lay out my sleeping bag. Belt myself in and try to keep from moaning. The heat of the bag’s too much for my leg. I cut a slash in the fabric and hang my calf out in the open air. I drizzle water on the wound, my hands.

All my bravado is gone. I’m weak from pain and hunger but can’t bring myself to eat. Even if I can last the night, what will the morning bring? I stare into the foliage trying to will myself to rest, but the burns forbid it. Birds are settling down for the night, singing lullabies to their young. Night creatures emerge. An owl hoots. The faint scent of a skunk cuts through the smoke. The eyes of some animal peer at me from the neighboring tree—a possum maybe—catching the firelight from the Careers’ torches. Suddenly, I’m up on one elbow. Those are no possum’s eyes, I know their glassy reflection too well. In fact, those are not animal eyes at all. In the last dim rays of light, I make her out, watching me silently from between the branches.

Rue.

How long has she been here? The whole time probably. Still and unobserved as the action unfolded beneath her. Perhaps she headed up her tree shortly before I did, hearing the pack was so close.

For a while we hold each other’s gaze. Then, without even rustling a leaf, her little hand slides into the open and points to something above my head.

My eyes follow the line of her finger up into the foliage above me. At first, I have no idea what she's pointing to, but then, about fifteen feet up, I make out the vague shape in the dimming light. But of...of what? Some sort of animal? It looks about the size of a raccoon, but it hangs from the bottom of a branch, swaying ever so slightly. There's something else. Among the familiar evening sounds of the woods, my ears register a low hum. Then I know. It's a wasp nest.

Fear shoots through me, but I have enough sense to keep still. After all, I don't know what kind of wasp lives there. It could be the ordinary leave-us-alone-and-we'll-leave-you-alone type. But these are the Hunger Games, and ordinary isn't the norm. More likely they will be one of the Capitol's mutations, tracker jackers. Like the jabberjays, these killer wasps were spawned in a lab and strategically placed, like land mines, around the districts during the war. Larger than regular wasps, they have a distinctive solid gold body and a sting that raises a lump the size of a plum on contact. Most people can't tolerate more than a few stings. Some die at once. If you live, the hallucinations brought on by the venom have actually driven people to madness. And there's another thing, these wasps will hunt down anyone who disturbs their nest and attempt to kill them. That's where the tracker part of the name comes from.

After the war, the Capitol destroyed all the nests surrounding their city, but the ones near the districts were left untouched. Another reminder of our weakness, I suppose, just like the Hunger Games. Another reason to keep inside the fence of District 12. When Gale and I come across a tracker jacker nest, we immediately head in the opposite direction.

So is that what hangs above me? I look back to Rue for help, but she's melted into her tree.

Given my circumstances, I guess it doesn't matter what type of wasp nest it is. I'm wounded and trapped. Darkness has given me a brief reprieve, but by the time the sun rises, the Careers will have formulated a plan to kill me. There's no way they could do otherwise after I've made them look so stupid.

That nest may be the sole option I have left. If I can drop it down on them, I may be able to escape. But I'll risk my life in the process.

Of course, I'll never be able to get in close enough to the actual nest to cut it free. I'll have to saw off the branch at the trunk and send the whole thing down. The serrated portion of my knife should be able to manage that. But can my hands? And will the vibration from the sawing raise the swarm? And what if the Careers figure out what I'm doing and move their camp? That would defeat the whole purpose.

I realize that the best chance I'll have to do the sawing without drawing notice will be during the anthem. That could begin any time. I drag myself out of my bag, make sure my knife is secured in my belt, and begin to make my way up the tree. This in itself is dangerous since the branches are becoming precariously thin even for me, but I persevere. When I reach the limb that supports the nest, the humming becomes more distinctive. But it's still oddly subdued if these are tracker jackers. *It's the smoke*, I think. *It's sedated them*. This was the one defense the rebels found to battle the wasps.

The seal of the Capitol shines above me and the anthem blares out. *It's now or never*, I think, and begin to saw. Blisters burst on my right hand as I awkwardly drag the knife back and forth. Once I've got a groove, the work requires less effort but is almost more than I can handle. I grit my teeth and saw away, occasionally glancing at the sky to register that there were no deaths today. That's all right. The audience will be sated seeing me injured and treed and the pack below me. But the anthem's running out and I'm only three quarters of the way through the wood when the music ends, the sky goes dark, and I'm forced to stop.

Now what? I could probably finish off the job by sense of feel but that may not be the smartest plan. If the wasps are too groggy, if the nest catches on its way down, if I try to escape, this could all be a deadly waste of time. Better, I think, to sneak up here at dawn and send the nest into my enemies.

In the faint light of the Careers' torches, I inch back down to my fork to find the best surprise I've ever had. Sitting on my sleeping bag is a small plastic pot attached to a silver parachute. My first gift from a sponsor! Haymitch must have had it sent in during the anthem. The pot easily fits in the palm of my hand. What can it be? Not food surely. I unscrew the lid and I know by the scent that it's medicine. Cautiously, I probe the surface of the ointment. The throbbing in my fingertip vanishes.

“Oh, Haymitch,” I whisper. “Thank you.” He has not abandoned me. Not left me to fend entirely for myself. The cost of this medicine must be astronomical. Probably not one but many sponsors have contributed to buy this one tiny pot. To me, it is priceless.

I dip two fingers in the jar and gently spread the balm over my calf. The effect is almost magical, erasing the pain on contact, leaving a pleasant cooling sensation behind. This is no herbal concoction that my mother grinds up out of woodland plants, it’s high-tech medicine brewed up in the Capitol’s labs. When my calf is treated, I rub a thin layer into my hands. After wrapping the pot in the parachute, I nestle it safely away in my pack. Now that the pain has eased, it’s all I can do to reposition myself in my bag before I plunge into sleep.

A bird perched just a few feet from me alerts me that a new day is dawning. In the gray morning light, I examine my hands. The medicine has transformed all the angry red patches to a soft baby-skin pink. My leg still feels inflamed, but that burn was far deeper. I apply another coat of medicine and quietly pack up my gear. Whatever happens, I’m going to have to move and move fast. I also make myself eat a cracker and a strip of beef and drink a few cups of water. Almost nothing stayed in my stomach yesterday, and I’m already starting to feel the effects of hunger.

Below me, I can see the Career pack and Peeta asleep on the ground. By her position, leaning up against the trunk of the tree, I’d guess Glimmer was supposed to be on guard, but fatigue overcame her.

My eyes squint as they try to penetrate the tree next to me, but I can’t make out Rue. Since she tipped me off, it only seems fair to warn her. Besides, if I’m going to die today, it’s Rue I want to win. Even if it means a little extra food for my family, the idea of Peeta being crowned victor is unbearable.

I call Rue’s name in a hushed whisper and the eyes appear, wide and alert, at once. She points up to the nest again. I hold up my knife and make a sawing motion. She nods and disappears. There’s a rustling in a nearby tree. Then the same noise again a bit farther off. I realize she’s leaping from tree to tree. It’s all I can do not to laugh out loud. Is this what she showed the Gamemakers? I imagine her flying around the training equipment never touching the floor. She should have gotten at least a ten.

Rosy streaks are breaking through in the east. I can't afford to wait any longer. Compared to the agony of last night's climb, this one is a cinch. At the tree limb that holds the nest, I position the knife in the groove and I'm about to draw the teeth across the wood when I see something moving. There, on the nest. The bright gold gleam of a tracker jacker lazily making its way across the papery gray surface. No question, it's acting a little subdued, but the wasp is up and moving and that means the others will be out soon as well. Sweat breaks out on the palms of my hands, beading up through the ointment, and I do my best to pat them dry on my shirt. If I don't get through this branch in a matter of seconds, the entire swarm could emerge and attack me.

There's no sense in putting it off. I take a deep breath, grip the knife handle and bear down as hard as I can. *Back, forth, back, forth!* The tracker jackers begin to buzz and I hear them coming out. *Back, forth, back, forth!* A stabbing pain shoots through my knee and I know one has found me and the others will be honing in. *Back, forth, back, forth.* And just as the knife cuts through, I shove the end of the branch as far away from me as I can. It crashes down through the lower branches, snagging temporarily on a few but then twisting free until it smashes with a thud on the ground. The nest bursts open like an egg, and a furious swarm of tracker jackers takes to the air.

I feel a second sting on the cheek, a third on my neck, and their venom almost immediately makes me woozy. I cling to the tree with one arm while I rip the barbed stingers out of my flesh. Fortunately, only these three tracker jackers had identified me before the nest went down. The rest of the insects have targeted their enemies on the ground.

It's mayhem. The Careers have woken to a full-scale tracker jacker attack. Peeta and a few others have the sense to drop everything and bolt. I can hear cries of "To the lake! To the lake!" and know they hope to evade the wasps by taking to the water. It must be close if they think they can outdistance the furious insects. Glimmer and another girl, the one from District 4, are not so lucky. They receive multiple stings before they're even out of my view. Glimmer appears to go completely mad, shrieking and trying to bat the wasps off with her bow, which is pointless. She calls to the others for help but, of course, no one returns. The girl from District 4 staggers out of sight, although I wouldn't bet on her making it to the lake. I watch Glimmer

fall, twitch hysterically around on the ground for a few minutes, and then go still.

The nest is nothing but an empty shell. The wasps have vanished in pursuit of the others. I don't think they'll return, but I don't want to risk it. I scamper down the tree and hit the ground running in the opposite direction of the lake. The poison from the stingers makes me wobbly, but I find my way back to my own little pool and submerge myself in the water, just in case any wasps are still on my trail. After about five minutes, I drag myself onto the rocks. People have not exaggerated the effects of the tracker jacker stings. Actually, the one on my knee is closer to an orange than a plum in size. A foul-smelling green liquid oozes from the places where I pulled out the stingers.

The swelling. The pain. The ooze. Watching Glimmer twitching to death on the ground. It's a lot to handle before the sun has even cleared the horizon. I don't want to think about what Glimmer must look like now. Her body disfigured. Her swollen fingers stiffening around the bow...

The bow! Somewhere in my befuddled mind one thought connects to another and I'm on my feet, teetering through the trees back to Glimmer. The bow. The arrows. I must get them. I haven't heard the cannons fire yet, so perhaps Glimmer is in some sort of coma, her heart still struggling against the wasp venom. But once it stops and the cannon signals her death, a hovercraft will move in and retrieve her body, taking the only bow and sheath of arrows I've seen out of the Games for good. And I refuse to let them slip through my fingers again!

I reach Glimmer just as the cannon fires. The tracker jackers have vanished. This girl, so breathtakingly beautiful in her golden dress the night of the interviews, is unrecognizable. Her features eradicated, her limbs three times their normal size. The stinger lumps have begun to explode, spewing putrid green liquid around her. I have to break several of what used to be her fingers with a stone to free the bow. The sheath of arrows is pinned under her back. I try to roll over her body by pulling on one arm, but the flesh disintegrates in my hands and I fall back on the ground.

Is this real? Or have the hallucinations begun? I squeeze my eyes tight and try to breathe through my mouth, ordering myself not to become sick. Breakfast must stay down, it might be days before I can hunt again. A second cannon fires and I'm guessing the girl from District 4 has just died. I hear the

birds fall silent and then one give the warning call, which means a hovercraft is about to appear. Confused, I think it's for Glimmer, although this doesn't quite make sense because I'm still in the picture, still fighting for the arrows. I lurch back onto my knees and the trees around me begin to spin in circles. In the middle of the sky, I spot the hovercraft. I throw myself over Glimmer's body as if to protect it but then I see the girl from District 4 being lifted into the air and vanishing.

"Do this!" I command myself. Clenching my jaw, I dig my hands under Glimmer's body, get a hold on what must be her rib cage, and force her onto her stomach. I can't help it, I'm hyperventilating now, the whole thing is so nightmarish and I'm losing my grasp on what's real. I tug on the silver sheath of arrows, but it's caught on something, her shoulder blade, something, and finally yank it free. I've just encircled the sheath with my arms when I hear the footsteps, several pairs, coming through the underbrush, and I realize the Careers have come back. They've come back to kill me or get their weapons or both.

But it's too late to run. I pull a slimy arrow from the sheath and try to position it on the bowstring but instead of one string I see three and the stench from the stings is so repulsive I can't do it. I can't do it. I can't do it.

I'm helpless as the first hunter crashes through the trees, spear lifted, poised to throw. The shock on Peeta's face makes no sense to me. I wait for the blow. Instead his arm drops to his side.

"What are you still doing here?" he hisses at me. I stare uncomprehendingly as a trickle of water drips off a sting under his ear. His whole body starts sparkling as if he's been dipped in dew. "Are you mad?" He's prodding me with the shaft of the spear now. "Get up! Get up!" I rise, but he's still pushing at me. What? What is going on? He shoves me away from him hard. "Run!" he screams. "Run!"

Behind him, Cato slashes his way through the brush. He's sparkling wet, too, and badly stung under one eye. I catch the gleam of sunlight on his sword and do as Peeta says. Holding tightly to my bow and arrows, banging into trees that appear out of nowhere, tripping and falling as I try to keep my balance. Back past my pool and into unfamiliar woods. The world begins to bend in alarming ways. A butterfly balloons to the size of a house then shatters into a million stars. Trees transform to blood and splash down over my boots. Ants begin to crawl out of the blisters on my hands and I can't

shake them free. They're climbing up my arms, my neck. Someone's screaming, a long high-pitched scream that never breaks for breath. I have a vague idea it might be me. I trip and fall into a small pit lined with tiny orange bubbles that hum like the tracker jacker nest. Tucking my knees up to my chin, I wait for death.

Sick and disoriented, I'm able to form only one thought: *Peeta Mellark just saved my life.*

Then the ants bore into my eyes and I black out.

I enter a nightmare from which I wake repeatedly only to find a greater terror awaiting me. All the things I dread most, all the things I dread for others manifest in such vivid detail I can't help but believe they're real. Each time I wake, I think, *At last, this is over*, but it isn't. It's only the beginning of a new chapter of torture. How many ways do I watch Prim die? Relive my father's last moments? Feel my own body ripped apart? This is the nature of the tracker jacker venom, so carefully created to target the place where fear lives in your brain.

When I finally do come to my senses, I lie still, waiting for the next onslaught of imagery. But eventually I accept that the poison must have finally worked its way out of my system, leaving my body wracked and feeble. I'm still lying on my side, locked in the fetal position. I lift a hand to my eyes to find them sound, untouched by ants that never existed. Simply stretching out my limbs requires an enormous effort. So many parts of me hurt, it doesn't seem worthwhile taking inventory of them. Very, very slowly I manage to sit up. I'm in a shallow hole, not filled with the humming orange bubbles of my hallucination but with old, dead leaves. My clothing's damp, but I don't know whether pond water, dew, rain, or sweat is the cause. For a long time, all I can do is take tiny sips from my bottle and watch a beetle crawl up the side of a honeysuckle bush.

How long have I been out? It was morning when I lost reason. Now it's afternoon. But the stiffness in my joints suggests more than a day has passed, even two possibly. If so, I'll have no way of knowing which tributes survived that tracker jacker attack. Not Glimmer or the girl from District 4. But there was the boy from District 1, both tributes from District 2, and Peeta. Did they die from the stings? Certainly if they lived, their last days must have been as horrid as my own. And what about Rue? She's so small, it wouldn't take much venom to do her in. But then again...the tracker jackers would've had to catch her, and she had a good head start.

A foul, rotten taste pervades my mouth, and the water has little effect on it. I drag myself over to the honeysuckle bush and pluck a flower. I gently

pull the stamen through the blossom and set the drop of nectar on my tongue. The sweetness spreads through my mouth, down my throat, warming my veins with memories of summer, and my home woods and Gale's presence beside me. For some reason, our discussion from that last morning comes back to me.

"We could do it, you know."

"What?"

"Leave the district. Run off. Live in the woods. You and I, we could make it."

And suddenly, I'm not thinking of Gale but of Peeta and...Peeta! *He saved my life!* I think. Because by the time we met up, I couldn't tell what was real and what the tracker jacker venom had caused me to imagine. But if he did, and my instincts tell me he did, what for? Is he simply working the Lover Boy angle he initiated at the interview? Or was he actually trying to protect me? And if he was, what was he doing with those Careers in the first place? None of it makes sense.

I wonder what Gale made of the incident for a moment and then I push the whole thing out of my mind because for some reason Gale and Peeta do not coexist well together in my thoughts.

So I focus on the one really good thing that's happened since I landed in the arena. I have a bow and arrows! A full dozen arrows if you count the one I retrieved in the tree. They bear no trace of the noxious green slime that came from Glimmer's body—which leads me to believe that might not have been wholly real—but they have a fair amount of dried blood on them. I can clean them later, but I do take a minute to shoot a few into a nearby tree. They are more like the weapons in the Training Center than my ones at home, but who cares? That I can work with.

The weapons give me an entirely new perspective on the Games. I know I have tough opponents left to face. But I am no longer merely prey that runs and hides or takes desperate measures. If Cato broke through the trees right now, I wouldn't flee, I'd shoot. I find I'm actually anticipating the moment with pleasure.

But first, I have to get some strength back in my body. I'm very dehydrated again and my water supply is dangerously low. The little padding I was able to put on by gorging myself during prep time in the Capitol is gone, plus several more pounds as well. My hip bones and ribs are more

prominent than I remember them being since those awful months after my father's death. And then there are my wounds to contend with—burns, cuts, and bruises from smashing into the trees, and three tracker jacker stings, which are as sore and swollen as ever. I treat my burns with the ointment and try dabbing a bit on my stings as well, but it has no effect on them. My mother knew a treatment for them, some type of leaf that could draw out the poison, but she seldom had cause to use it, and I don't even remember its name let alone its appearance.

Water first, I think. You can hunt along the way now. It's easy to see the direction I came from by the path of destruction my crazed body made through the foliage. So I walk off in the other direction, hoping my enemies still lie locked in the surreal world of tracker jacker venom.

I can't move too quickly, my joints reject any abrupt motions. But I establish the slow hunter's tread I use when tracking game. Within a few minutes, I spot a rabbit and make my first kill with the bow and arrow. It's not my usual clean shot through the eye, but I'll take it. After about an hour, I find a stream, shallow but wide, and more than sufficient for my needs. The sun's hot and severe, so while I wait for my water to purify I strip down to my underclothes and wade into the mild current. I'm filthy from head to toe. I try splashing myself but eventually just lie down in the water for a few minutes, letting it wash off the soot and blood and skin that has started to peel off my burns. After rinsing out my clothes and hanging them on bushes to dry, I sit on the bank in the sun for a bit, untangling my hair with my fingers. My appetite returns and I eat a cracker and a strip of beef. With a handful of moss, I polish the blood from my silver weapons.

Refreshed, I treat my burns again, braid back my hair, and dress in the damp clothes, knowing the sun will dry them soon enough. Following the stream against its current seems the smartest course of action. I'm traveling uphill now, which I prefer, with a source of fresh water not only for myself but possible game. I easily take out a strange bird that must be some form of wild turkey. Anyway, it looks plenty edible to me. By late afternoon, I decide to build a small fire to cook the meat, betting that dusk will help conceal the smoke and I can quench the fire by nightfall. I clean the game, taking extra care with the bird, but there's nothing alarming about it. Once the feathers are plucked, it's no bigger than a chicken, but it's plump and firm. I've just placed the first lot over the coals when I hear the twig snap.

In one motion, I turn to the sound, bringing the bow and arrow to my shoulder. There's no one there. No one I can see anyway. Then I spot the tip of a child's boot just peeking out from behind the trunk of a tree. My shoulders relax and I grin. She can move through the woods like a shadow, you have to give her that. How else could she have followed me? The words come out of my mouth before I can stop them.

"You know, they're not the only ones who can form alliances," I say.

For a moment, no response. Then one of Rue's eyes edges around the trunk. "You want me for an ally?"

"Why not? You saved me with those tracker jackers. You're smart enough to still be alive. And I can't seem to shake you anyway," I say. She blinks at me, trying to decide. "You hungry?" I can see her swallow hard, her eye flickering to the meat. "Come on then, I've had two kills today."

Rue tentatively steps out into the open. "I can fix your stings."

"Can you?" I ask. "How?"

She digs in the pack she carries and pulls out a handful of leaves. I'm almost certain they're the ones my mother uses. "Where'd you find those?"

"Just around. We all carry them when we work in the orchards. They left a lot of nests there," says Rue. "There are a lot here, too."

"That's right. You're District Eleven. Agriculture," I say. "Orchards, huh? That must be how you can fly around the trees like you've got wings." Rue smiles. I've landed on one of the few things she'll admit pride in. "Well, come on, then. Fix me up."

I plunk down by the fire and roll up my pant leg to reveal the sting on my knee. To my surprise, Rue places the handful of leaves into her mouth and begins to chew them. My mother would use other methods, but it's not like we have a lot of options. After a minute or so, Rue presses a gloppy green wad of chewed leaves and spit on my knee.

"Ohhh." The sound comes out of my mouth before I can stop it. It's as if the leaves are actually leaching the pain right out of the sting.

Rue gives a giggle. "Lucky you had the sense to pull the stingers out or you'd be a lot worse."

"Do my neck! Do my cheek!" I almost beg.

Rue stuffs another handful of leaves in her mouth, and soon I'm laughing because the relief is so sweet. I notice a long burn on Rue's forearm. "I've

got something for that.” I set aside my weapons and anoint her arm with the burn medicine.

“You have good sponsors,” she says longingly.

“Have you gotten anything yet?” I ask. She shakes her head. “You will, though. Watch. The closer we get to the end, the more people will realize how clever you are.” I turn the meat over.

“You weren’t joking, about wanting me for an ally?” she asks.

“No, I meant it,” I say. I can almost hear Haymitch groaning as I team up with this wispy child. But I want her. Because she’s a survivor, and I trust her, and why not admit it? She reminds me of Prim.

“Okay,” she says, and holds out her hand. We shake. “It’s a deal.”

Of course, this kind of deal can only be temporary, but neither of us mentions that.

Rue contributes a big handful of some sort of starchy root to the meal. Roasted over the fire, they have the sharp sweet taste of a parsnip. She recognizes the bird, too, some wild thing they call a groosling in her district. She says sometimes a flock will wander into the orchard and they get a decent lunch that day. For a while, all conversation stops as we fill our stomachs. The groosling has delicious meat that’s so fatty, the grease drips down your face when you bite into it.

“Oh,” says Rue with a sigh. “I’ve never had a whole leg to myself before.”

I’ll bet she hasn’t. I’ll bet meat hardly ever comes her way. “Take the other,” I say.

“Really?” she asks.

“Take whatever you want. Now that I’ve got a bow and arrows, I can get more. Plus I’ve got snares. I can show you how to set them,” I say. Rue still looks uncertainly at the leg. “Oh, take it,” I say, putting the drumstick in her hands. “It will only keep a few days anyway, and we’ve got the whole bird plus the rabbit.” Once she’s got hold of it, her appetite wins out and she takes a huge mouthful.

“I’d have thought, in District Eleven, you’d have a bit more to eat than us. You know, since you grow the food,” I say.

Rue’s eyes widen. “Oh, no, we’re not allowed to eat the crops.”

“They arrest you or something?” I ask.

“They whip you and make everyone else watch,” says Rue. “The mayor’s very strict about it.”

I can tell by her expression that it’s not that uncommon an occurrence. A public whipping’s a rare thing in District 12, although occasionally one occurs. Technically, Gale and I could be whipped on a daily basis for poaching in the woods—well, technically, we could get a whole lot worse—except all the officials buy our meat. Besides, our mayor, Madge’s father, doesn’t seem to have much taste for such events. Maybe being the least prestigious, poorest, most ridiculed district in the country has its advantages. Such as, being largely ignored by the Capitol as long as we produce our coal quotas.

“Do you get all the coal you want?” Rue asks.

“No,” I answer. “Just what we buy and whatever we track in on our boots.”

“They feed us a bit extra during harvest, so that people can keep going longer,” says Rue.

“Don’t you have to be in school?” I ask.

“Not during harvest. Everyone works then,” says Rue.

It’s interesting, hearing about her life. We have so little communication with anyone outside our district. In fact, I wonder if the Gamemakers are blocking out our conversation, because even though the information seems harmless, they don’t want people in different districts to know about one another.

At Rue’s suggestion, we lay out all our food to plan ahead. She’s seen most of mine, but I add the last couple of crackers and beef strips to the pile. She’s gathered quite a collection of roots, nuts, greens, and even some berries.

I roll an unfamiliar berry in my fingers. “You sure this is safe?”

“Oh, yes, we have them back home. I’ve been eating them for days,” she says, popping a handful in her mouth. I tentatively bite into one, and it’s as good as our blackberries. Taking Rue on as an ally seems a better choice all the time. We divide up our food supplies, so in case we’re separated, we’ll both be set for a few days. Apart from the food, Rue has a small water skin, a homemade slingshot, and an extra pair of socks. She also has a sharp shard of rock she uses as a knife. “I know it’s not much,” she says as if embarrassed, “but I had to get away from the Cornucopia fast.”

“You did just right,” I say. When I spread out my gear, she gasps a little when she sees the sunglasses.

“How did you get those?” she asks.

“In my pack. They’ve been useless so far. They don’t block the sun and they make it harder to see,” I say with a shrug.

“These aren’t for sun, they’re for darkness,” exclaims Rue. “Sometimes, when we harvest through the night, they’ll pass out a few pairs to those of us highest in the trees. Where the torchlight doesn’t reach. One time, this boy Martin, he tried to keep his pair. Hid it in his pants. They killed him on the spot.”

“They killed a boy for taking these?” I say.

“Yes, and everyone knew he was no danger. Martin wasn’t right in the head. I mean, he still acted like a three-year-old. He just wanted the glasses to play with,” says Rue.

Hearing this makes me feel like District 12 is some sort of safe haven. Of course, people keel over from starvation all the time, but I can’t imagine the Peacekeepers murdering a simpleminded child. There’s a little girl, one of Greasy Sae’s grandkids, who wanders around the Hob. She’s not quite right, but she’s treated as a sort of pet. People toss her scraps and things.

“So what do these do?” I ask Rue, taking the glasses.

“They let you see in complete darkness,” says Rue. “Try them tonight when the sun goes down.”

I give Rue some matches and she makes sure I have plenty of leaves in case my stings flare up again. We extinguish our fire and head upstream until it’s almost nightfall.

“Where do you sleep?” I ask her. “In the trees?” She nods. “In just your jacket?”

Rue holds up her extra pair of socks. “I have these for my hands.”

I think of how cold the nights have been. “You can share my sleeping bag if you want. We’ll both easily fit.” Her face lights up. I can tell this is more than she dared hope for.

We pick a fork high in a tree and settle in for the night just as the anthem begins to play. There were no deaths today.

“Rue, I only woke up today. How many nights did I miss?” The anthem should block out our words, but still I whisper. I even take the precaution of

covering my lips with my hand. I don't want the audience to know what I'm planning to tell her about Peeta. Taking a cue from me, she does the same.

"Two," she says. "The girls from Districts One and Four are dead. There's ten of us left."

"Something strange happened. At least, I think it did. It might have been the tracker jacker venom making me imagine things," I say. "You know the boy from my district? Peeta? I think he saved my life. But he was with the Careers."

"He's not with them now," she says. "I've spied on their base camp by the lake. They made it back before they collapsed from the stingers. But he's not there. Maybe he did save you and had to run."

I don't answer. If, in fact, Peeta did save me, I'm in his debt again. And this can't be paid back. "If he did, it was all probably just part of his act. You know, to make people think he's in love with me."

"Oh," says Rue thoughtfully. "I didn't think that was an act."

"Course it is," I say. "He worked it out with our mentor." The anthem ends and the sky goes dark. "Let's try out these glasses." I pull out the glasses and slip them on. Rue wasn't kidding. I can see everything from the leaves on the trees to a skunk strolling through the bushes a good fifty feet away. I could kill it from here if I had a mind to. I could kill anyone.

"I wonder who else got a pair of these," I say.

"The Careers have two pairs. But they've got everything down by the lake," Rue says. "And they're so strong."

"We're strong, too," I say. "Just in a different way."

"You are. You can shoot," she says. "What can I do?"

"You can feed yourself. Can they?" I ask.

"They don't need to. They have all those supplies," Rue says.

"Say they didn't. Say the supplies were gone. How long would they last?" I say. "I mean, it's the Hunger Games, right?"

"But, Katniss, they're not hungry," says Rue.

"No, they're not. That's the problem," I agree. And for the first time, I have a plan. A plan that isn't motivated by the need for flight and evasion. An offensive plan. "I think we're going to have to fix that, Rue."

Rue has decided to trust me wholeheartedly. I know this because as soon as the anthem finishes she snuggles up against me and falls asleep. Nor do I have any misgivings about her, as I take no particular precautions. If she'd wanted me dead, all she would have had to do was disappear from that tree without pointing out the tracker jacker nest. Needling me, at the very back of my mind, is the obvious. Both of us can't win these Games. But since the odds are still against either of us surviving, I manage to ignore the thought.

Besides, I'm distracted by my latest idea about the Careers and their supplies. Somehow Rue and I must find a way to destroy their food. I'm pretty sure feeding themselves will be a tremendous struggle. Traditionally, the Career tributes' strategy is to get hold of all the food early on and work from there. The years when they have not protected it well—one year a pack of hideous reptiles destroyed it, another a Gamemakers' flood washed it away—those are usually the years that tributes from other districts have won. That the Careers have been better fed growing up is actually to their disadvantage, because they don't know how to be hungry. Not the way Rue and I do.

But I'm too exhausted to begin any detailed plan tonight. My wounds recovering, my mind still a bit foggy from the venom, and the warmth of Rue at my side, her head cradled on my shoulder, have given me a sense of security. I realize, for the first time, how very lonely I've been in the arena. How comforting the presence of another human being can be. I give in to my drowsiness, resolving that tomorrow the tables will turn. Tomorrow, it's the Careers who will have to watch their backs.

The boom of the cannon jolts me awake. The sky's streaked with light, the birds already chattering. Rue perches in a branch across from me, her hands cupping something. We wait, listening for more shots, but there aren't any.

"Who do you think that was?" I can't help thinking of Peeta.

"I don't know. It could have been any of the others," says Rue. "I guess we'll know tonight."

“Who’s left again?” I ask.

“The boy from District One. Both tributes from Two. The boy from Three. Thresh and me. And you and Peeta,” says Rue. “That’s eight. Wait, and the boy from Ten, the one with the bad leg. He makes nine.”

There’s someone else, but neither of us can remember who it is.

“I wonder how that last one died,” says Rue.

“No telling. But it’s good for us. A death should hold the crowd for a bit. Maybe we’ll have time to do something before the Gamemakers decide things have been moving too slowly,” I say. “What’s in your hands?”

“Breakfast,” says Rue. She holds them out revealing two big eggs.

“What kind are those?” I ask.

“Not sure. There’s a marshy area over that way. Some kind of waterbird,” she says.

It’d be nice to cook them, but neither of us wants to risk a fire. My guess is the tribute who died today was a victim of the Careers, which means they’ve recovered enough to be back in the Games. We each suck out the insides of an egg, eat a rabbit leg and some berries. It’s a good breakfast anywhere.

“Ready to do it?” I say, pulling on my pack.

“Do what?” says Rue, but by the way she bounces up, you can tell she’s up for whatever I propose.

“Today we take out the Careers’ food,” I say.

“Really? How?” You can see the glint of excitement in her eyes. In this way, she’s exactly the opposite of Prim, for whom adventures are an ordeal.

“No idea. Come on, we’ll figure out a plan while we hunt,” I say.

We don’t get much hunting done though because I’m too busy getting every scrap of information I can out of Rue about the Careers’ base. She’s only been in to spy on them briefly, but she’s observant. They have set up their camp beside the lake. Their supply stash is about thirty yards away. During the day, they’ve been leaving another tribute, the boy from District 3, to watch over the supplies.

“The boy from District Three?” I ask. “He’s working with them?”

“Yes, he stays at the camp full-time. He got stung, too, when they drew the tracker jackers in by the lake,” says Rue. “I guess they agreed to let him live if he acted as their guard. But he’s not very big.”

“What weapons does he have?” I ask.

“Not much that I could see. A spear. He might be able to hold a few of us off with that, but Thresh could kill him easily,” says Rue.

“And the food’s just out in the open?” I say. She nods. “Something’s not quite right about that whole setup.”

“I know. But I couldn’t tell what exactly,” says Rue. “Katniss, even if you could get to the food, how would you get rid of it?”

“Burn it. Dump it in the lake. Soak it in fuel.” I poke Rue in the belly, just like I would Prim. “Eat it!” She giggles. “Don’t worry, I’ll think of something. Destroying things is much easier than making them.”

For a while, we dig roots, we gather berries and greens, we devise a strategy in hushed voices. And I come to know Rue, the oldest of six kids, fiercely protective of her siblings, who gives her rations to the younger ones, who forages in the meadows in a district where the Peacekeepers are far less obliging than ours. Rue, who when you ask her what she loves most in the world, replies, of all things, “Music.”

“Music?” I say. In our world, I rank music somewhere between hair ribbons and rainbows in terms of usefulness. At least a rainbow gives you a tip about the weather. “You have a lot of time for that?”

“We sing at home. At work, too. That’s why I love your pin,” she says, pointing to the mockingjay that I’ve again forgotten about.

“You have mockingjays?” I ask.

“Oh, yes. I have a few that are my special friends. We can sing back and forth for hours. They carry messages for me,” she says.

“What do you mean?” I say.

“I’m usually up highest, so I’m the first to see the flag that signals quitting time. There’s a special little song I do,” says Rue. She opens her mouth and sings a little four-note run in a sweet, clear voice. “And the mockingjays spread it around the orchard. That’s how everyone knows to knock off,” she continues. “They can be dangerous though, if you get too near their nests. But you can’t blame them for that.”

I unclasp the pin and hold it out to her. “Here, you take it. It has more meaning for you than me.”

“Oh, no,” says Rue, closing my fingers back over the pin. “I like to see it on you. That’s how I decided I could trust you. Besides, I have this.” She pulls a necklace woven out of some kind of grass from her shirt. On it, hangs

a roughly carved wooden star. Or maybe it's a flower. "It's a good luck charm."

"Well, it's worked so far," I say, pinning the mockingjay back on my shirt. "Maybe you should just stick with that."

By lunch, we have a plan. By early afternoon, we are poised to carry it out. I help Rue collect and place the wood for the first two campfires, the third she'll have time for on her own. We decide to meet afterward at the site where we ate our first meal together. The stream should help guide me back to it. Before I leave, I make sure Rue's well stocked with food and matches. I even insist she take my sleeping bag, in case it's not possible to rendezvous by nightfall.

"What about you? Won't you be cold?" she asks.

"Not if I pick up another bag down by the lake," I say. "You know, stealing isn't illegal here," I say with a grin.

At the last minute, Rue decides to teach me her mockingjay signal, the one she gives to indicate the day's work is done. "It might not work. But if you hear the mockingjays singing it, you'll know I'm okay, only I can't get back right away."

"Are there many mockingjays here?" I ask.

"Haven't you seen them? They've got nests everywhere," she says. I have to admit I haven't noticed.

"Okay, then. If all goes according to plan, I'll see you for dinner," I say.

Unexpectedly, Rue throws her arms around me. I only hesitate a moment before I hug her back.

"You be careful," she says to me.

"You, too," I say. I turn and head back to the stream, feeling somehow worried. About Rue being killed, about Rue not being killed and the two of us being left for last, about leaving Rue alone, about leaving Prim alone back home. No, Prim has my mother and Gale and a baker who has promised she won't go hungry. Rue has only me.

Once I reach the stream, I have only to follow it downhill to the place I initially picked it up after the tracker jacker attack. I have to be cautious as I move along the water though, because I find my thoughts preoccupied with unanswered questions, most of which concern Peeta. The cannon that fired early this morning, did that signify his death? If so, how did he die? At the hand of a Career? And was that in revenge for letting me live? I struggle

again to remember that moment over Glimmer's body, when he burst through the trees. But just the fact that he was sparkling leads me to doubt everything that happened.

I must have been moving very slowly yesterday because I reach the shallow stretch where I took my bath in just a few hours. I stop to replenish my water and add a layer of mud to my backpack. It seems bent on reverting to orange no matter how many times I cover it.

My proximity to the Careers' camp sharpens my senses, and the closer I get to them, the more guarded I am, pausing frequently to listen for unnatural sounds, an arrow already fitted into the string of my bow. I don't see any other tributes, but I do notice some of the things Rue has mentioned. Patches of the sweet berries. A bush with the leaves that healed my stings. Clusters of tracker jacker nests in the vicinity of the tree I was trapped in. And here and there, the black-and-white flash of a mockingjay wing in the branches high over my head.

When I reach the tree with the abandoned nest at the foot, I pause a moment, to gather my courage. Rue has given specific instructions on how to reach the best spying place near the lake from this point. *Remember*, I tell myself. *You're the hunter now, not them*. I get a firmer grasp on my bow and go on. I make it to the copse Rue has told me about and again have to admire her cleverness. It's right at the edge of the wood, but the bushy foliage is so thick down low I can easily observe the Career camp without being spotted. Between us lies the flat expanse where the Games began.

There are four tributes. The boy from District 1, Cato and the girl from District 2, and a scrawny, ashen-skinned boy who must be from District 3. He made almost no impression on me at all during our time in the Capitol. I can remember almost nothing about him, not his costume, not his training score, not his interview. Even now, as he sits there fiddling with some kind of plastic box, he's easily ignored in the presence of his large and domineering companions. But he must be of some value or they wouldn't have bothered to let him live. Still, seeing him only adds to my sense of unease over why the Careers would possibly leave him as a guard, why they have allowed him to live at all.

All four tributes seem to still be recovering from the tracker jacker attack. Even from here, I can see the large swollen lumps on their bodies. They must not have had the sense to remove the stingers, or if they did, not

known about the leaves that healed them. Apparently, whatever medicines they found in the Cornucopia have been ineffective.

The Cornucopia sits in its original position, but its insides have been picked clean. Most of the supplies, held in crates, burlap sacks, and plastic bins, are piled neatly in a pyramid in what seems a questionable distance from the camp. Others are sprinkled around the perimeter of the pyramid, almost mimicking the layout of supplies around the Cornucopia at the onset of the Games. A canopy of netting that, aside from discouraging birds, seems to be useless shelters the pyramid itself.

The whole setup is completely perplexing. The distance, the netting, and the presence of the boy from District 3. One thing's for sure, destroying those supplies is not going to be as simple as it looks. Some other factor is at play here, and I'd better stay put until I figure out what it is. My guess is the pyramid is booby-trapped in some manner. I think of concealed pits, descending nets, a thread that when broken sends a poisonous dart into your heart. Really, the possibilities are endless.

While I am mulling over my options, I hear Cato shout out. He's pointing up to the woods, far beyond me, and without turning I know that Rue must have set the first campfire. We'd made sure to gather enough green wood to make the smoke noticeable. The Careers begin to arm themselves at once.

An argument breaks out. It's loud enough for me to hear that it concerns whether or not the boy from District 3 should stay or accompany them.

"He's coming. We need him in the woods, and his job's done here anyway. No one can touch those supplies," says Cato.

"What about Lover Boy?" says the boy from District 1.

"I keep telling you, forget about him. I know where I cut him. It's a miracle he hasn't bled to death yet. At any rate, he's in no shape to raid us," says Cato.

So Peeta is out there in the woods, wounded badly. But I am still in the dark on what motivated him to betray the Careers.

"Come on," says Cato. He thrusts a spear into the hands of the boy from District 3, and they head off in the direction of the fire. The last thing I hear as they enter the woods is Cato saying, "When we find her, I kill her in my own way, and no one interferes."

Somehow I don't think he's talking about Rue. She didn't drop a nest of tracker jackers on him.

I stay put for a half an hour or so, trying to figure out what to do about the supplies. The one advantage I have with the bow and arrow is distance. I could send a flaming arrow into the pyramid easily enough—I'm a good enough shot to get it through those openings in the net—but there's no guarantee it would catch. More likely it'd just burn itself out and then what? I'd have achieved nothing and given them far too much information about myself. That I was here, that I have an accomplice, that I can use the bow and arrow with accuracy.

There's no alternative. I'm going to have to get in closer and see if I can't discover what exactly protects the supplies. In fact, I'm just about to reveal myself when a movement catches my eye. Several hundred yards to my right, I see someone emerge from the woods. For a second, I think it's Rue, but then I recognize Foxface—she's the one we couldn't remember this morning—creeping out onto the plain. When she decides it's safe, she runs for the pyramid, with quick, small steps. Just before she reaches the circle of supplies that have been littered around the pyramid, she stops, searches the ground, and carefully places her feet on a spot. Then she begins to approach the pyramid with strange little hops, sometimes landing on one foot, teetering slightly, sometimes risking a few steps. At one point, she launches up in the air, over a small barrel and lands poised on her tiptoes. But she overshot slightly, and her momentum throws her forward. I hear her give a sharp squeal as her hands hit the ground, but nothing happens. In a moment, she's regained her feet and continues until she has reached the bulk of the supplies.

So, I'm right about the booby trap, but it's clearly more complex than I had imagined. I was right about the girl, too. How wily is she to have discovered this path into the food and to be able to replicate it so neatly? She fills her pack, taking a few items from a variety of containers, crackers from a crate, a handful of apples from a burlap sack that hangs suspended from a rope off the side of a bin. But only a handful from each, not enough to tip off that the food is missing. Not enough to cause suspicion. And then she's doing her odd little dance back out of the circle and scampering into the woods again, safe and sound.

I realize I'm grinding my teeth in frustration. Foxface has confirmed what I'd already guessed. But what sort of trap have they laid that requires such dexterity? Has so many trigger points? Why did she squeal so as her hands

made contact with the earth? You'd have thought...and slowly it begins to dawn on me...you'd have thought the very ground was going to explode.

"It's mined," I whisper. That explains everything. The Careers' willingness to leave their supplies, Foxface's reaction, the involvement of the boy from District 3, where they have the factories, where they make televisions and automobiles and explosives. But where did he get them? In the supplies? That's not the sort of weapon the Gamemakers usually provide, given that they like to see the tributes draw blood personally. I slip out of the bushes and cross to one of the round metal plates that lifted the tributes into the arena. The ground around it has been dug up and patted back down. The land mines were disabled after the sixty seconds we stood on the plates, but the boy from District 3 must have managed to reactivate them. I've never seen anyone in the Games do that. I bet it came as a shock even to the Gamemakers.

Well, hurray for the boy from District 3 for putting one over on them, but what am I supposed to do now? Obviously, I can't go strolling into that mess without blowing myself sky-high. As for sending in a burning arrow, that's more laughable than ever. The mines are set off by pressure. It doesn't have to be a lot, either. One year, a girl dropped her token, a small wooden ball, while she was at her plate, and they literally had to scrape bits of her off the ground.

My arm's pretty good, I might be able to chuck some rocks in there and set off what? Maybe one mine? That could start a chain reaction. Or could it? Would the boy from District 3 have placed the mines in such a way that a single mine would not disturb the others? Thereby protecting the supplies but ensuring the death of the invader. Even if I only blew up one mine, I'd draw the Careers back down on me for sure. And anyway, what am I thinking? There's that net, clearly strung to deflect any such attack. Besides, what I'd really need is to throw about thirty rocks in there at once, setting off a big chain reaction, demolishing the whole lot.

I glance back up at the woods. The smoke from Rue's second fire is wafting toward the sky. By now, the Careers have probably begun to suspect some sort of trick. Time is running out.

There is a solution to this, I know there is, if I can only focus hard enough. I stare at the pyramid, the bins, the crates, too heavy to topple over with an arrow. Maybe one contains cooking oil, and the burning arrow idea

is reviving when I realize I could end up losing all twelve of my arrows and not get a direct hit on an oil bin, since I'd just be guessing. I'm genuinely thinking of trying to re-create Foxface's trip up to the pyramid in hopes of finding a new means of destruction when my eyes light on the burlap bag of apples. I could sever the rope in one shot, didn't I do as much in the Training Center? It's a big bag, but it still might only be good for one explosion. If only I could free the apples themselves...

I know what to do. I move into range and give myself three arrows to get the job done. I place my feet carefully, block out the rest of the world as I take meticulous aim. The first arrow tears through the side of the bag near the top, leaving a split in the burlap. The second widens it to a gaping hole. I can see the first apple teetering when I let the third arrow go, catching the torn flap of burlap and ripping it from the bag.

For a moment, everything seems frozen in time. Then the apples spill to the ground and I'm blown backward into the air.

The impact with the hard-packed earth of the plain knocks the wind out of me. My backpack does little to soften the blow. Fortunately my quiver has caught in the crook of my elbow, sparing both itself and my shoulder, and my bow is locked in my grasp. The ground still shakes with explosions. I can't hear them. I can't hear anything at the moment. But the apples must have set off enough mines, causing debris to activate the others. I manage to shield my face with my arms as shattered bits of matter, some of it burning, rain down around me. An acrid smoke fills the air, which is not the best remedy for someone trying to regain the ability to breathe.

After about a minute, the ground stops vibrating. I roll on my side and allow myself a moment of satisfaction at the sight of the smoldering wreckage that was recently the pyramid. The Careers aren't likely to salvage anything out of that.

I'd better get out of here, I think. They' ll be making a beeline for the place. But once I'm on my feet, I realize escape may not be so simple. I'm dizzy. Not the slightly wobbly kind, but the kind that sends the trees swooping around you and causes the earth to move in waves under your feet. I take a few steps and somehow wind up on my hands and knees. I wait a few minutes to let it pass, but it doesn't.

Panic begins to set in. I can't stay here. Flight is essential. But I can neither walk nor hear. I place a hand to my left ear, the one that was turned toward the blast, and it comes away bloody. Have I gone deaf from the explosion? The idea frightens me. I rely as much on my ears as my eyes as a hunter, maybe more at times. But I can't let my fear show. Absolutely, positively, I am live on every screen in Panem.

No blood trails, I tell myself, and manage to pull my hood up over my head, tie the cord under my chin with uncooperative fingers. That should help soak up the blood. I can't walk, but can I crawl? I move forward tentatively. Yes, if I go very slowly, I can crawl. Most of the woods will offer insufficient cover. My only hope is to make it back to Rue's copse and conceal myself in greenery. I can't get caught out here on my hands and knees

in the open. Not only will I face death, it's sure to be a long and painful one at Cato's hand. The thought of Prim having to watch that keeps me doggedly inching my way toward the hideout.

Another blast knocks me flat on my face. A stray mine, set off by some collapsing crate. This happens twice more. I'm reminded of those last few kernels that burst when Prim and I pop corn over the fire at home.

To say I make it in the nick of time is an understatement. I have literally just dragged myself into the tangle of bushes at the base of the trees when there's Cato, barreling onto the plain, soon followed by his companions. His rage is so extreme it might be comical—so people really do tear out their hair and beat the ground with their fists—if I didn't know that it was aimed at me, at what I have done to him. Add to that my proximity, my inability to run or defend myself, and in fact, the whole thing has me terrified. I'm glad my hiding place makes it impossible for the cameras to get a close shot of me because I'm biting my nails like there's no tomorrow. Gnawing off the last bits of nail polish, trying to keep my teeth from chattering.

The boy from District 3 throws stones into the ruins and must have declared all the mines activated because the Careers are approaching the wreckage.

Cato has finished the first phase of his tantrum and takes out his anger on the smoking remains by kicking open various containers. The other tributes are poking around in the mess, looking for anything to salvage, but there's nothing. The boy from District 3 has done his job too well. This idea must occur to Cato, too, because he turns on the boy and appears to be shouting at him. The boy from District 3 only has time to turn and run before Cato catches him in a headlock from behind. I can see the muscles ripple in Cato's arms as he sharply jerks the boy's head to the side.

It's that quick. The death of the boy from District 3.

The other two Careers seem to be trying to calm Cato down. I can tell he wants to return to the woods, but they keep pointing at the sky, which puzzles me until I realize, *Of course. They think whoever set off the explosions is dead.* They don't know about the arrows and the apples. They assume the booby trap was faulty, but that the tribute who blew up the supplies was killed doing it. If there was a cannon shot, it could have been easily lost in the subsequent explosions. The shattered remains of the thief removed by

hovercraft. They retire to the far side of the lake to allow the Gamemakers to retrieve the body of the boy from District 3. And they wait.

I suppose a cannon goes off. A hovercraft appears and takes the dead boy. The sun dips below the horizon. Night falls. Up in the sky, I see the seal and know the anthem must have begun. A moment of darkness. They show the boy from District 3. They show the boy from District 10, who must have died this morning. Then the seal reappears. So, now they know. The bomber survived. In the seal's light, I can see Cato and the girl from District 2 put on their night-vision glasses. The boy from District 1 ignites a tree branch for a torch, illuminating the grim determination on all their faces. The Careers stride back into the woods to hunt.

The dizziness has subsided and while my left ear is still deafened, I can hear a ringing in my right, which seems a good sign. There's no point in leaving my hiding place, though. I'm about as safe as I can be, here at the crime scene. They probably think the bomber has a two- or three-hour lead on them. Still it's a long time before I risk moving.

The first thing I do is dig out my own glasses and put them on, which relaxes me a little, to have at least one of my hunter's senses working. I drink some water and wash the blood from my ear. Fearing the smell of meat will draw unwanted predators—fresh blood is bad enough—I make a good meal out of the greens and roots and berries Rue and I gathered today.

Where is my little ally? Did she make it back to the rendezvous point? Is she worried about me? At least, the sky has shown we're both alive.

I run through the surviving tributes on my fingers. The boy from 1, both from 2, Foxface, both from 11 and 12. Just eight of us. The betting must be getting really hot in the Capitol. They'll be doing special features on each of us now. Probably interviewing our friends and families. It's been a long time since a tribute from District 12 made it into the top eight. And now there are two of us. Although from what Cato said, Peeta's on his way out. Not that Cato is the final word on anything. Didn't he just lose his entire stash of supplies?

Let the Seventy-fourth Hunger Games begin, Cato, I think. Let them begin for real.

A cold breeze has sprung up. I reach for my sleeping bag before I remember I left it with Rue. I was supposed to pick up another one, but what with the mines and all, I forgot. I begin to shiver. Since roosting overnight in

a tree isn't sensible anyway, I scoop out a hollow under the bushes and cover myself with leaves and pine needles. I'm still freezing. I lay my sheet of plastic over my upper body and position my backpack to block the wind. It's a little better. I begin to have more sympathy for the girl from District 8 that lit the fire that first night. But now it's me who needs to grit my teeth and tough it out until morning. More leaves, more pine needles. I pull my arms inside my jacket and tuck my knees up to my chest. Somehow, I drift off to sleep.

When I open my eyes, the world looks slightly fractured, and it takes a minute to realize that the sun must be well up and the glasses fragmenting my vision. As I sit up and remove them, I hear a laugh somewhere near the lake and freeze. The laugh's distorted, but the fact that it registered at all means I must be regaining my hearing. Yes, my right ear can hear again, although it's still ringing. As for my left ear, well, at least the bleeding has stopped.

I peer through the bushes, afraid the Careers have returned, trapping me here for an indefinite time. No, it's Foxface, standing in the rubble of the pyramid and laughing. She's smarter than the Careers, actually finding a few useful items in the ashes. A metal pot. A knife blade. I'm perplexed by her amusement until I realize that with the Careers' stores eliminated, she might actually stand a chance. Just like the rest of us. It crosses my mind to reveal myself and enlist her as a second ally against that pack. But I rule it out. There's something about that sly grin that makes me sure that befriending Foxface would ultimately get me a knife in the back. With that in mind, this might be an excellent time to shoot her. But she's heard something, not me, because her head turns away, toward the drop-off, and she sprints for the woods. I wait. No one, nothing shows up. Still, if Foxface thought it was dangerous, maybe it's time for me to get out of here, too. Besides, I'm eager to tell Rue about the pyramid.

Since I've no idea where the Careers are, the route back by the stream seems as good as any. I hurry, loaded bow in one hand, a hunk of cold groosling in the other, because I'm famished now, and not just for leaves and berries but for the fat and protein in the meat. The trip to the stream is uneventful. Once there, I refill my water and wash, taking particular care with my injured ear. Then I travel uphill using the stream as a guide. At one point, I find boot prints in the mud along the bank. The Careers have been here, but not for a while. The prints are deep because they were made in soft

mud, but now they're nearly dry in the hot sun. I haven't been careful enough about my own tracks, counting on a light tread and the pine needles to conceal my prints. Now I strip off my boots and socks and go barefoot up the bed of the stream.

The cool water has an invigorating effect on my body, my spirits. I shoot two fish, easy pickings in this slow-moving stream, and go ahead and eat one raw even though I've just had the groosling. The second I'll save for Rue.

Gradually, subtly, the ringing in my right ear diminishes until it's gone entirely. I find myself pawing at my left ear periodically, trying to clean away whatever deadens its ability to collect sounds. If there's improvement, it's undetectable. I can't adjust to deafness in the ear. It makes me feel off-balanced and defenseless to my left. Blind even. My head keeps turning to the injured side, as my right ear tries to compensate for the wall of nothingness where yesterday there was a constant flow of information. The more time that passes, the less hopeful I am that this is an injury that will heal.

When I reach the site of our first meeting, I feel certain it's been undisturbed. There's no sign of Rue, not on the ground or in the trees. This is odd. By now she should have returned, as it's midday. Undoubtedly, she spent the night in a tree somewhere. What else could she do with no light and the Careers with their night-vision glasses tromping around the woods. And the third fire she was supposed to set—although I forgot to check for it last night—was the farthest from our site of all. She's probably just being cautious about making her way back. I wish she'd hurry, because I don't want to hang around here too long. I want to spend the afternoon traveling to higher ground, hunting as we go. But there's nothing really for me to do but wait.

I wash the blood out of my jacket and hair and clean my ever-growing list of wounds. The burns are much better but I use a bit of medicine on them anyway. The main thing to worry about now is keeping out infection. I go ahead and eat the second fish. It isn't going to last long in this hot sun, but it should be easy enough to spear a few more for Rue. If she would just show up.

Feeling too vulnerable on the ground with my lopsided hearing, I scale a tree to wait. If the Careers show up, this will be a fine place to shoot them from. The sun moves slowly. I do things to pass the time. Chew leaves and apply them to my stings that are deflated but still tender. Comb through my damp hair with my fingers and braid it. Lace my boots back up. Check over

my bow and remaining nine arrows. Test my left ear repeatedly for signs of life by rustling a leaf near it, but without good results.

Despite the groosling and the fish, my stomach's growling, and I know I'm going to have what we call a hollow day back in District 12. That's a day where no matter what you put in your belly, it's never enough. Having nothing to do but sit in a tree makes it worse, so I decide to give into it. After all, I've lost a lot of weight in the arena, I need some extra calories. And having the bow and arrows makes me far more confident about my future prospects.

I slowly peel and eat a handful of nuts. My last cracker. The groosling neck. That's good because it takes time to pick clean. Finally, a groosling wing and the bird is history. But it's a hollow day, and even with all that I start daydreaming about food. Particularly the decadent dishes served in the Capitol. The chicken in creamy orange sauce. The cakes and pudding. Bread with butter. Noodles in green sauce. The lamb and dried plum stew. I suck on a few mint leaves and tell myself to get over it. Mint is good because we drink mint tea after supper often, so it tricks my stomach into thinking eating time is over. Sort of.

Dangling up in the tree, with the sun warming me, a mouthful of mint, my bow and arrows at hand...this is the most relaxed I've been since I've entered the arena. If only Rue would show up, and we could clear out. As the shadows grow, so does my restlessness. By late afternoon, I've resolved to go looking for her. I can at least visit the spot where she set the third fire and see if there are any clues to her whereabouts.

Before I go, I scatter a few mint leaves around our old campfire. Since we gathered these some distance away, Rue will understand I've been here, while they'll mean nothing to the Careers.

In less than an hour, I'm at the place where we agreed to have the third fire and I know something has gone amiss. The wood has been neatly arranged, expertly interspersed with tinder, but it has never been lit. Rue set up the fire but never made it back here. Somewhere between the second column of smoke I spied before I blew up the supplies and this point, she ran into trouble.

I have to remind myself she's still alive. Or is she? Could the cannon shot announcing her death have come in the wee hours of the morning when even my good ear was too broken to pick it up? Will she appear in the sky tonight? No, I refuse to believe it. There could be a hundred other explanations. She

could have lost her way. Run into a pack of predators or another tribute, like Thresh, and had to hide. Whatever happened, I'm almost certain she's stuck out there, somewhere between the second fire and the unlit one at my feet. Something is keeping her up a tree.

I think I'll go hunt it down.

It's a relief to be doing something after sitting around all afternoon. I creep silently through the shadows, letting them conceal me. But nothing seems suspicious. There's no sign of any kind of struggle, no disruption of the needles on the ground. I've stopped for just a moment when I hear it. I have to cock my head around to the side to be sure, but there it is again. Rue's four-note tune coming out of a mockingjay's mouth. The one that means she's all right.

I grin and move in the direction of the bird. Another just a short distance ahead, picks up on the handful of notes. Rue has been singing to them, and recently. Otherwise they'd have taken up some other song. My eyes lift up into the trees, searching for a sign of her. I swallow and sing softly back, hoping she'll know it's safe to join me. A mockingjay repeats the melody to me. And that's when I hear the scream.

It's a child's scream, a young girl's scream, there's no one in the arena capable of making that sound except Rue. And now I'm running, knowing this may be a trap, knowing the three Careers may be poised to attack me, but I can't help myself. There's another high-pitched cry, this time my name. "Katniss! Katniss!"

"Rue!" I shout back, so she knows I'm near. So, *they* know I'm near, and hopefully the girl who has attacked them with tracker jackers and gotten an eleven they still can't explain will be enough to pull their attention away from her. "Rue! I'm coming!"

When I break into the clearing, she's on the ground, hopelessly entangled in a net. She just has time to reach her hand through the mesh and say my name before the spear enters her body.

The boy from District 1 dies before he can pull out the spear. My arrow drives deeply into the center of his neck. He falls to his knees and halves the brief remainder of his life by yanking out the arrow and drowning in his own blood. I'm reloaded, shifting my aim from side to side, while I shout at Rue, "Are there more? Are there more?"

She has to say no several times before I hear it.

Rue has rolled to her side, her body curved in and around the spear. I shove the boy away from her and pull out my knife, freeing her from the net. One look at the wound and I know it's far beyond my capacity to heal. Beyond anyone's probably. The spearhead is buried up to the shaft in her stomach. I crouch before her, staring helplessly at the embedded weapon. There's no point in comforting words, in telling her she'll be all right. She's no fool. Her hand reaches out and I clutch it like a lifeline. As if it's me who's dying instead of Rue.

"You blew up the food?" she whispers.

"Every last bit," I say.

"You have to win," she says.

"I'm going to. Going to win for both of us now," I promise. I hear a cannon and look up. It must be for the boy from District 1.

"Don't go." Rue tightens her grip on my hand.

"Course not. Staying right here," I say. I move in closer to her, pulling her head onto my lap. I gently brush the dark, thick hair back behind her ear.

"Sing," she says, but I barely catch the word.

Sing? I think. *Sing what?* I do know a few songs. Believe it or not, there was once music in my house, too. Music I helped make. My father pulled me in with that remarkable voice—but I haven't sung much since he died. Except when Prim is very sick. Then I sing her the same songs she liked as a baby.

Sing. My throat is tight with tears, hoarse from smoke and fatigue. But if this is Prim's, I mean, Rue's last request, I have to at least try. The song that comes to me is a simple lullaby, one we sing fretful, hungry babies to sleep with. It's old, very old I think. Made up long ago in our hills. What my music

teacher calls a mountain air. But the words are easy and soothing, promising tomorrow will be more hopeful than this awful piece of time we call today.

I give a small cough, swallow hard, and begin:

*Deep in the meadow, under the willow
A bed of grass, a soft green pillow
Lay down your head, and close your sleepy eyes
And when again they open, the sun will rise.*

*Here it's safe, here it's warm
Here the daisies guard you from every harm
Here your dreams are sweet and tomorrow brings them true
Here is the place where I love you.*

Rue's eyes have fluttered shut. Her chest moves but only slightly. My throat releases the tears and they slide down my cheeks. But I have to finish the song for her.

*Deep in the meadow, hidden far away
A cloak of leaves, a moonbeam ray
Forget your woes and let your troubles lay
And when again it's morning, they'll wash away.*

*Here it's safe, here it's warm
Here the daisies guard you from every harm*

The final lines are barely audible.

*Here your dreams are sweet and tomorrow brings them true
Here is the place where I love you.*

Everything's still and quiet. Then, almost eerily, the mockingjays take up my song.

For a moment, I sit there, watching my tears drip down on her face. Rue's cannon fires. I lean forward and press my lips against her temple. Slowly, as if not to wake her, I lay her head back on the ground and release her hand.

They'll want me to clear out now. So they can collect the bodies. And there's nothing to stay for. I roll the boy from District 1 onto his face and take his pack, retrieve the arrow that ended his life. I cut Rue's pack from her back as well, knowing she'd want me to have it but leave the spear in her stomach. Weapons in bodies will be transported to the hovercraft. I've no use for a spear, so the sooner it's gone from the arena the better.

I can't stop looking at Rue, smaller than ever, a baby animal curled up in a nest of netting. I can't bring myself to leave her like this. Past harm, but seeming utterly defenseless. To hate the boy from District 1, who also appears so vulnerable in death, seems inadequate. It's the Capitol I hate, for doing this to all of us.

Gale's voice is in my head. His ravings against the Capitol no longer pointless, no longer to be ignored. Rue's death has forced me to confront my own fury against the cruelty, the injustice they inflict upon us. But here, even more strongly than at home, I feel my impotence. There's no way to take revenge on the Capitol. Is there?

Then I remember Peeta's words on the roof. *"Only I keep wishing I could think of a way to...to show the Capitol they don't own me. That I'm more than just a piece in their Games."* And for the first time, I understand what he means.

I want to do something, right here, right now, to shame them, to make them accountable, to show the Capitol that whatever they do or force us to do there is a part of every tribute they can't own. That Rue was more than a piece in their Games. And so am I.

A few steps into the woods grows a bank of wildflowers. Perhaps they are really weeds of some sort, but they have blossoms in beautiful shades of violet and yellow and white. I gather up an armful and come back to Rue's side. Slowly, one stem at a time, I decorate her body in the flowers. Covering the ugly wound. Wreathing her face. Weaving her hair with bright colors.

They'll have to show it. Or, even if they choose to turn the cameras elsewhere at this moment, they'll have to bring them back when they collect the bodies and everyone will see her then and know I did it. I step back and take a last look at Rue. She could really be asleep in that meadow after all.

"Bye, Rue," I whisper. I press the three middle fingers of my left hand against my lips and hold them out in her direction. Then I walk away without looking back.

The birds fall silent. Somewhere, a mockingjay gives the warning whistle that precedes the hovercraft. I don't know how it knows. It must hear things that humans can't. I pause, my eyes focused on what's ahead, not what's happening behind me. It doesn't take long, then the general birdsong begins again and I know she's gone.

Another mockingjay, a young one by the look of it, lands on a branch before me and bursts out Rue's melody. My song, the hovercraft, were too unfamiliar for this novice to pick up, but it has mastered her handful of notes. The ones that mean she's safe.

"Good and safe," I say as I pass under its branch. "We don't have to worry about her now." Good and safe.

I've no idea where to go. The brief sense of home I had that one night with Rue has vanished. My feet wander this way and that until sunset. I'm not afraid, not even watchful. Which makes me an easy target. Except I'd kill anyone I met on sight. Without emotion or the slightest tremor in my hands. My hatred of the Capitol has not lessened my hatred of my competitors in the least. Especially the Careers. They, at least, can be made to pay for Rue's death.

No one materializes though. There aren't many of us left and it's a big arena. Soon they'll be pulling out some other device to force us together. But there's been enough gore today. Perhaps we'll even get to sleep.

I'm about to haul my packs into a tree to make camp when a silver parachute floats down and lands in front of me. A gift from a sponsor. But why now? I've been in fairly good shape with supplies. Maybe Haymitch's noticed my despondency and is trying to cheer me up a bit. Or could it be something to help my ear?

I open the parachute and find a small loaf of bread. It's not the fine white Capitol stuff. It's made of dark ration grain and shaped in a crescent. Sprinkled with seeds. I flashback to Peeta's lesson on the various district breads in the Training Center. This bread came from District 11. I cautiously lift the still warm loaf. What must it have cost the people of District 11 who can't even feed themselves? How many would've had to do without to scrape up a coin to put in the collection for this one loaf? It had been meant for Rue, surely. But instead of pulling the gift when she died, they'd authorized Haymitch to give it to me. As a thank-you? Or because, like me,

they don't like to let debts go unpaid? For whatever reason, this is a first. A district gift to a tribute who's not your own.

I lift my face and step into the last falling rays of sunlight. "My thanks to the people of District Eleven," I say. I want them to know I know where it came from. That the full value of their gift has been recognized.

I climb dangerously high into a tree, not for safety but to get as far away from today as I can. My sleeping bag is rolled neatly in Rue's pack. Tomorrow I'll sort through the supplies. Tomorrow I'll make a new plan. But tonight, all I can do is strap myself in and take tiny bites of the bread. It's good. It tastes of home.

Soon the seal's in the sky, the anthem plays in my right ear. I see the boy from District 1, Rue. That's all for tonight. *Six of us left*, I think. *Only six*. With the bread still locked in my hands, I fall asleep at once.

Sometimes when things are particularly bad, my brain will give me a happy dream. A visit with my father in the woods. An hour of sunlight and cake with Prim. Tonight it sends me Rue, still decked in her flowers, perched in a high sea of trees, trying to teach me to talk to the mockingjays. I see no sign of her wounds, no blood, just a bright, laughing girl. She sings songs I've never heard in a clear, melodic voice. On and on. Through the night. There's a drowsy in-between period when I can hear the last few strains of her music although she's lost in the leaves. When I fully awaken, I'm momentarily comforted. I try to hold on to the peaceful feeling of the dream, but it quickly slips away, leaving me sadder and lonelier than ever.

Heaviness infuses my whole body, as if there's liquid lead in my veins. I've lost the will to do the simplest tasks, to do anything but lie here, staring unblinkingly through the canopy of leaves. For several hours, I remain motionless. As usual, it's the thought of Prim's anxious face as she watches me on the screens back home that breaks me from my lethargy.

I give myself a series of simple commands to follow, like "Now you have to sit up, Katniss. Now you have to drink water, Katniss." I act on the orders with slow, robotic motions. "Now you have to sort the packs, Katniss."

Rue's pack holds my sleeping bag, her nearly empty water skin, a handful of nuts and roots, a bit of rabbit, her extra socks, and her slingshot. The boy from District 1 has several knives, two spare spearheads, a flashlight, a small leather pouch, a first-aid kit, a full bottle of water, and a pack of dried fruit. A pack of dried fruit! Out of all he might have chosen from. To me, this

is a sign of extreme arrogance. Why bother to carry food when you have such a bounty back at camp? When you will kill your enemies so quickly you'll be home before you're hungry? I can only hope the other Careers traveled so lightly when it came to food and now find themselves with nothing.

Speaking of which, my own supply is running low. I finish off the loaf from District 11 and the last of the rabbit. How quickly the food disappears. All I have left are Rue's roots and nuts, the boy's dried fruit, and one strip of beef. *Now you have to hunt, Katniss*, I tell myself.

I obediently consolidate the supplies I want into my pack. After I climb down the tree, I conceal the boy's knives and spearheads in a pile of rocks so that no one else can use them. I've lost my bearings what with all the wandering around I did yesterday evening, but I try and head back in the general direction of the stream. I know I'm on course when I come across Rue's third, unlit fire. Shortly thereafter, I discover a flock of grooslings perched in the trees and take out three before they know what hit them. I return to Rue's signal fire and start it up, not caring about the excessive smoke. *Where are you, Cato?* I think as I roast the birds and Rue's roots. *I'm waiting right here.*

Who knows where the Careers are now? Either too far to reach me or too sure this is a trick or...is it possible? Too scared of me? They know I have the bow and arrows, of course, Cato saw me take them from Glimmer's body. But have they put two and two together yet? Figured out I blew up the supplies and killed their fellow Career? Possibly they think Thresh did this. Wouldn't he be more likely to revenge Rue's death than I would? Being from the same district? Not that he ever took any interest in her.

And what about Foxface? Did she hang around to watch me blow up the supplies? No. When I caught her laughing in the ashes the next morning, it was as if someone had given her a lovely surprise.

I doubt they think Peeta has lit this signal fire. Cato's sure he's as good as dead. I find myself wishing I could tell Peeta about the flowers I put on Rue. That I now understand what he was trying to say on the roof. Perhaps if he wins the Games, he'll see me on victor's night, when they replay the highlights of the Games on a screen over the stage where we did our interviews. The winner sits in a place of honor on the platform, surrounded by their support crew.

But I told Rue I'd be there. For both of us. And somehow that seems even more important than the vow I gave Prim.

I really think I stand a chance of doing it now. Winning. It's not just having the arrows or outsmarting the Careers a few times, although those things help. Something happened when I was holding Rue's hand, watching the life drain out of her. Now I am determined to avenge her, to make her loss unforgettable, and I can only do that by winning and thereby making myself unforgettable.

I overcook the birds hoping someone will show up to shoot, but no one does. Maybe the other tributes are out there beating one another senseless. Which would be fine. Ever since the bloodbath, I've been featured on screens more than I care.

Eventually, I wrap up my food and go back to the stream to replenish my water and gather some. But the heaviness from the morning drapes back over me and even though it's only early evening, I climb a tree and settle in for the night. My brain begins to replay the events from yesterday. I keep seeing Rue speared, my arrow piercing the boy's neck. I don't know why I should even care about the boy.

Then I realize...he was my first kill.

Along with other statistics they report to help people place their bets, every tribute has a list of kills. I guess technically I'd get credited for Glimmer and the girl from District 4, too, for dumping that nest on them. But the boy from District 1 was the first person I knew would die because of my actions. Numerous animals have lost their lives at my hands, but only one human. I hear Gale saying, "How different can it be, really?"

Amazingly similar in the execution. A bow pulled, an arrow shot. Entirely different in the aftermath. I killed a boy whose name I don't even know. Somewhere his family is weeping for him. His friends call for my blood. Maybe he had a girlfriend who really believed he would come back.

...

But then I think of Rue's still body and I'm able to banish the boy from my mind. At least, for now.

It's been an uneventful day according to the sky. No deaths. I wonder how long we'll get until the next catastrophe drives us back together. If it's going to be tonight, I want to get some sleep first. I cover my good ear to block out

the strains of the anthem, but then I hear the trumpets and sit straight up in anticipation.

For the most part, the only communication the tributes get from outside the arena is the nightly death toll. But occasionally, there will be trumpets followed by an announcement. Usually, this will be a call to a feast. When food is scarce, the Gamemakers will invite the players to a banquet, somewhere known to all like the Cornucopia, as an inducement to gather and fight. Sometimes there is a feast and sometimes there's nothing but a loaf of stale bread for the tributes to compete for. I wouldn't go in for the food, but this could be an ideal time to take out a few competitors.

Claudius Templesmith's voice booms down from overhead, congratulating the six of us who remain. But he is not inviting us to a feast. He's saying something very confusing. There's been a rule change in the Games. A rule change! That in itself is mind bending since we don't really have any rules to speak of except don't step off your circle for sixty seconds and the unspoken rule about not eating one another. Under the new rule, both tributes from the same district will be declared winners if they are the last two alive. Claudius pauses, as if he knows we're not getting it, and repeats the change again.

The news sinks in. Two tributes can win this year. If they're from the same district. Both can live. Both of us can live.

Before I can stop myself, I call out Peeta's name.

PART III
“THE VICTOR”

I clap my hands over my mouth, but the sound has already escaped. The sky goes black and I hear a chorus of frogs begin to sing. *Stupid!* I tell myself. *What a stupid thing to do!* I wait, frozen, for the woods to come alive with assailants. Then I remember there's almost no one left.

Peeta, who's been wounded, is now my ally. Whatever doubts I've had about him dissipate because if either of us took the other's life now we'd be pariahs when we returned to District 12. In fact, I know if I was watching I'd loathe any tribute who didn't immediately ally with their district partner. Besides, it just makes sense to protect each other. And in my case—being one of the star-crossed lovers from District 12—it's an absolute requirement if I want any more help from sympathetic sponsors.

The star-crossed lovers...Peeta must have been playing that angle all along. Why else would the Gamemakers have made this unprecedented change in the rules? For two tributes to have a shot at winning, our "romance" must be so popular with the audience that condemning it would jeopardize the success of the Games. No thanks to me. All I've done is managed not to kill Peeta. But whatever he's done in the arena, he must have the audience convinced it was to keep me alive. Shaking his head to keep me from running to the Cornucopia. Fighting Cato to let me escape. Even hooking up with the Careers must have been a move to protect me. Peeta, it turns out, has never been a danger to me.

The thought makes me smile. I drop my hands and hold my face up to the moonlight so the cameras can be sure to catch it.

So, who is there left to be afraid of? Foxface? The boy tribute from her district is dead. She's operating alone, at night. And her strategy has been to evade, not attack. I don't really think that, even if she heard my voice, she'd do anything but hope someone else would kill me.

Then there's Thresh. All right, he's a distinct threat. But I haven't seen him, not once, since the Games began. I think about how Foxface grew alarmed when she heard a sound at the site of the explosion. But she didn't turn to the woods, she turned to whatever lies across from it. To that area of

the arena that drops off into I don't know what. I feel almost certain that the person she ran from was Thresh and that is his domain. He'd never have heard me from there and, even if he did, I'm up too high for someone his size to reach.

So that leaves Cato and the girl from District 2, who are now surely celebrating the new rule. They're the only ones left who benefit from it besides Peeta and myself. Do I run from them now, on the chance they heard me call Peeta's name? *No*, I think. *Let them come*. Let them come with their night-vision glasses and their heavy, branch-breaking bodies. Right into the range of my arrows. But I know they won't. If they didn't come in daylight to my fire, they won't risk what could be another trap at night. When they come, it will be on their own terms, not because I've let them know my whereabouts.

Stay put and get some sleep, Katniss, I instruct myself, although I wish I could start tracking Peeta now. *Tomorrow, you'll find him*.

I do sleep, but in the morning I'm extra-cautious, thinking that while the Careers might hesitate to attack me in a tree, they're completely capable of setting an ambush for me. I make sure to fully prepare myself for the day—eating a big breakfast, securing my pack, readying my weapons—before I descend. But all seems peaceful and undisturbed on the ground.

Today I'll have to be scrupulously careful. The Careers will know I'm trying to locate Peeta. They may well want to wait until I do before they move in. If he's as badly wounded as Cato thinks, I'd be in the position of having to defend us both without any assistance. But if he's that incapacitated, how has he managed to stay alive? And how on earth will I find him?

I try to think of anything Peeta ever said that might give me an indication as to where he's hiding out, but nothing rings a bell. So I go back to the last moment I saw him sparkling in the sunlight, yelling at me to run. Then Cato appeared, his sword drawn. And after I was gone, he wounded Peeta. But how did Peeta get away? Maybe he'd held out better against the tracker jacker poison than Cato. Maybe that was the variable that allowed him to escape. But he'd been stung, too. So how far could he have gotten, stabbed and filled with venom? And how has he stayed alive all these days since? If the wound and the stingers haven't killed him, surely thirst would have taken him by now.

And that's when I get my first clue to his whereabouts. He couldn't have survived without water. I know that from my first few days here. He must be hidden somewhere near a source. There's the lake, but I find that an unlikely option since it's so close to the Careers' base camp. A few spring-fed pools. But you'd really be a sitting duck at one of those. And the stream. The one that leads from the camp Rue and I made all the way down near the lake and beyond. If he stuck to the stream, he could change his location and always be near water. He could walk in the current and erase any tracks. He might even be able to get a fish or two.

Well, it's a place to start, anyway.

To confuse my enemies' minds, I start a fire with plenty of green wood. Even if they think it's a ruse, I hope they'll decide I'm hidden somewhere near it. While in reality, I'll be tracking Peeta.

The sun burns off the morning haze almost immediately and I can tell the day will be hotter than usual. The water's cool and pleasant on my bare feet as I head downstream. I'm tempted to call out Peeta's name as I go but decide against it. I will have to find him with my eyes and one good ear or he will have to find me. But he'll know I'll be looking, right? He won't have so low of an opinion of me as to think I'd ignore the new rule and keep to myself. Would he? He's very hard to predict, which might be interesting under different circumstances, but at the moment only provides an extra obstacle.

It doesn't take long to reach the spot where I peeled off to go to the Careers' camp. There's been no sign of Peeta, but this doesn't surprise me. I've been up and down this stretch three times since the tracker jacker incident. If he were nearby, surely I'd have had some suspicion of it. The stream begins to curve to the left into a part of the woods that's new to me. Muddy banks covered in tangled water plants lead to large rocks that increase in size until I begin to feel somewhat trapped. It would be no small matter to escape the stream now. Fighting off Cato or Thresh as I climbed over this rocky terrain. In fact, I've just about decided I'm on the wrong track entirely, that a wounded boy would be unable to navigate getting to and from this water source, when I see the bloody streak going down the curve of a boulder. It's long dried now, but the smeary lines running side to side suggest someone—who perhaps was not fully in control of his mental faculties—tried to wipe it away.

Hugging the rocks, I move slowly in the direction of the blood, searching for him. I find a few more bloodstains, one with a few threads of fabric glued to it, but no sign of life. I break down and say his name in a hushed voice. "Peeta! Peeta!" Then a mockingjay lands on a scruffy tree and begins to mimic my tones so I stop. I give up and climb back down to the stream thinking, *He must have moved on. Somewhere farther down.*

My foot has just broken the surface of the water when I hear a voice.

"You here to finish me off, sweetheart?"

I whip around. It's come from the left, so I can't pick it up very well. And the voice was hoarse and weak. Still, it must have been Peeta. Who else in the arena would call me sweetheart? My eyes peruse the bank, but there's nothing. Just mud, the plants, the base of the rocks.

"Peeta?" I whisper. "Where are you?" There's no answer. Could I just have imagined it? No, I'm certain it was real and very close at hand, too. "Peeta?" I creep along the bank.

"Well, don't step on me."

I jump back. His voice was right under my feet. Still there's nothing. Then his eyes open, unmistakably blue in the brown mud and green leaves. I gasp and am rewarded with a hint of white teeth as he laughs.

It's the final word in camouflage. Forget chucking weights around. Peeta should have gone into his private session with the Gamemakers and painted himself into a tree. Or a boulder. Or a muddy bank full of weeds.

"Close your eyes again," I order. He does, and his mouth, too, and completely disappears. Most of what I judge to be his body is actually under a layer of mud and plants. His face and arms are so artfully disguised as to be invisible. I kneel beside him. "I guess all those hours decorating cakes paid off."

Peeta smiles. "Yes, frosting. The final defense of the dying."

"You're not going to die," I tell him firmly.

"Says who?" His voice is so ragged.

"Says me. We're on the same team now, you know," I tell him.

His eyes open. "So, I heard. Nice of you to find what's left of me."

I pull out my water bottle and give him a drink. "Did Cato cut you?" I ask.

"Left leg. Up high," he answers.

“Let’s get you in the stream, wash you off so I can see what kind of wounds you’ve got,” I say.

“Lean down a minute first,” he says. “Need to tell you something.” I lean over and put my good ear to his lips, which tickle as he whispers. “Remember, we’re madly in love, so it’s all right to kiss me anytime you feel like it.”

I jerk my head back but end up laughing. “Thanks, I’ll keep it in mind.” At least, he’s still able to joke around. But when I start to help him to the stream, all the levity disappears. It’s only two feet away, how hard can it be? Very hard when I realize he’s unable to move an inch on his own. He’s so weak that the best he can do is not to resist. I try to drag him, but despite the fact that I know he’s doing all he can to keep quiet, sharp cries of pain escape him. The mud and plants seem to have imprisoned him and I finally have to give a gigantic tug to break him from their clutches. He’s still two feet from the water, lying there, teeth gritted, tears cutting trails in the dirt on his face.

“Look, Peeta, I’m going to roll you into the stream. It’s very shallow here, okay?” I say.

“Excellent,” he says.

I crouch down beside him. No matter what happens, I tell myself, don’t stop until he’s in the water. “On three,” I say. “One, two, three!” I can only manage one full roll before I have to stop because of the horrible sound he’s making. Now he’s on the edge of the stream. Maybe this is better anyway.

“Okay, change of plans. I’m not going to put you all the way in,” I tell him. Besides, if I get him in, who knows if I’d ever be able to get him out?

“No more rolling?” he asks.

“That’s all done. Let’s get you cleaned up. Keep an eye on the woods for me, okay?” I say. It’s hard to know where to start. He’s so caked with mud and matted leaves, I can’t even see his clothes. If he’s wearing clothes. The thought makes me hesitate a moment, but then I plunge in. Naked bodies are no big deal in the arena, right?

I’ve got two water bottles and Rue’s water skin. I prop them against rocks in the stream so that two are always filling while I pour the third over Peeta’s body. It takes a while, but I finally get rid of enough mud to find his clothes. I gently unzip his jacket, unbutton his shirt and ease them off him. His undershirt is so plastered into his wounds I have to cut it away with my knife and drench him again to work it loose. He’s badly bruised with a long burn

across his chest and four tracker jacker stings, if you count the one under his ear. But I feel a bit better. This much I can fix. I decide to take care of his upper body first, to alleviate some pain, before I tackle whatever damage Cato did to his leg.

Since treating his wounds seems pointless when he's lying in what's become a mud puddle, I manage to prop him up against a boulder. He sits there, uncomplaining, while I wash away all the traces of dirt from his hair and skin. His flesh is very pale in the sunlight and he no longer looks strong and stocky. I have to dig the stingers out of his tracker jacker lumps, which causes him to wince, but the minute I apply the leaves he sighs in relief. While he dries in the sun, I wash his filthy shirt and jacket and spread them over boulders. Then I apply the burn cream to his chest. This is when I notice how hot his skin is becoming. The layer of mud and the bottles of water have disguised the fact that he's burning with fever. I dig through the first-aid kit I got from the boy from District 1 and find pills that reduce your temperature. My mother actually breaks down and buys these on occasion when her home remedies fail.

"Swallow these," I tell him, and he obediently takes the medicine. "You must be hungry."

"Not really. It's funny, I haven't been hungry for days," says Peeta. In fact, when I offer him groosling, he wrinkles his nose at it and turns away. That's when I know how sick he is.

"Peeta, we need to get some food in you," I insist.

"It'll just come right back up," he says. The best I can do is to get him to eat a few bits of dried apple. "Thanks. I'm much better, really. Can I sleep now, Katniss?" he asks.

"Soon," I promise. "I need to look at your leg first." Trying to be as gentle as I can, I remove his boots, his socks, and then very slowly inch his pants off of him. I can see the tear Cato's sword made in the fabric over his thigh, but it in no way prepares me for what lies underneath. The deep inflamed gash oozing both blood and pus. The swelling of the leg. And worst of all, the smell of festering flesh.

I want to run away. Disappear into the woods like I did that day they brought the burn victim to our house. Go and hunt while my mother and Prim attend to what I have neither the skill nor the courage to face. But there's no

one here but me. I try to capture the calm demeanor my mother assumes when handling particularly bad cases.

“Pretty awful, huh?” says Peeta. He’s watching me closely.

“So-so.” I shrug like it’s no big deal. “You should see some of the people they bring my mother from the mines.” I refrain from saying how I usually clear out of the house whenever she’s treating anything worse than a cold. Come to think of it, I don’t even much like to be around coughing. “First thing is to clean it well.”

I’ve left on Peeta’s undershorts because they’re not in bad shape and I don’t want to pull them over the swollen thigh and, all right, maybe the idea of him being naked makes me uncomfortable. That’s another thing about my mother and Prim. Nakedness has no effect on them, gives them no cause for embarrassment. Ironically, at this point in the Games, my little sister would be of far more use to Peeta than I am. I scoot my square of plastic under him so I can wash down the rest of him. With each bottle I pour over him, the worse the wound looks. The rest of his lower body has fared pretty well, just one tracker jacker sting and a few small burns that I treat quickly. But the gash on his leg...what on earth can I do for that?

“Why don’t we give it some air and then...” I trail off.

“And then you’ll patch it up?” says Peeta. He looks almost sorry for me, as if he knows how lost I am.

“That’s right,” I say. “In the meantime, you eat these.” I put a few dried pear halves in his hand and go back in the stream to wash the rest of his clothes. When they’re flattened out and drying, I examine the contents of the first-aid kit. It’s pretty basic stuff. Bandages, fever pills, medicine to calm stomachs. Nothing of the caliber I’ll need to treat Peeta.

“We’re going to have to experiment some,” I admit. I know the tracker jacker leaves draw out infection, so I start with those. Within minutes of pressing the handful of chewed-up green stuff into the wound, pus begins running down the side of his leg. I tell myself this is a good thing and bite the inside of my cheek hard because my breakfast is threatening to make a reappearance.

“Katniss?” Peeta says. I meet his eyes, knowing my face must be some shade of green. He mouths the words. “How about that kiss?”

I burst out laughing because the whole thing is so revolting I can’t stand it.

“Something wrong?” he asks a little too innocently.

“I...I’m no good at this. I’m not my mother. I’ve no idea what I’m doing and I hate pus,” I say. “Euh!” I allow myself to let out a groan as I rinse away the first round of leaves and apply the second. “Euuuh!”

“How do you hunt?” he asks.

“Trust me. Killing things is much easier than this,” I said. “Although for all I know, I am killing you.”

“Can you speed it up a little?” he asks.

“No. Shut up and eat your pears,” I say.

After three applications and what seems like a bucket of pus, the wound does look better. Now that the swelling has gone down, I can see how deep Cato’s sword cut. Right down to the bone.

“What next, Dr. Everdeen?” he asks.

“Maybe I’ll put some of the burn ointment on it. I think it helps with infection anyway. And wrap it up?” I say. I do and the whole thing seems a lot more manageable, covered in clean white cotton. Although, against the sterile bandage, the hem of his undershorts looks filthy and teeming with contagion. I pull out Rue’s backpack. “Here, cover yourself with this and I’ll wash your shorts.”

“Oh, I don’t care if you see me,” says Peeta.

“You’re just like the rest of my family,” I say. “I care, all right?” I turn my back and look at the stream until the undershorts splash into the current. He must be feeling a bit better if he can throw.

“You know, you’re kind of squeamish for such a lethal person,” says Peeta as I beat the shorts clean between two rocks. “I wish I’d let you give Haymitch a shower after all.”

I wrinkle my nose at the memory. “What’s he sent you so far?”

“Not a thing,” says Peeta. Then there’s a pause as it hits him. “Why, did you get something?”

“Burn medicine,” I say almost sheepishly. “Oh, and some bread.”

“I always knew you were his favorite,” says Peeta.

“Please, he can’t stand being in the same room with me,” I say.

“Because you’re just alike,” mutters Peeta. I ignore it though because this really isn’t the time for me to be insulting Haymitch, which is my first impulse.

I let Peeta doze off while his clothes dry out, but by late afternoon, I don't dare wait any longer. I gently shake his shoulder. "Peeta, we've got to go now."

"Go?" He seems confused. "Go where?"

"Away from here. Downstream maybe. Somewhere we can hide you until you're stronger," I say. I help him dress, leaving his feet bare so we can walk in the water, and pull him upright. His face drains of color the moment he puts weight on his leg. "Come on. You can do this."

But he can't. Not for long anyway. We make it about fifty yards downstream, with him propped up by my shoulder, and I can tell he's going to black out. I sit him on the bank, push his head between his knees, and pat his back awkwardly as I survey the area. Of course, I'd love to get him up in a tree, but that's not going to happen. It could be worse though. Some of the rocks form small cavelike structures. I set my sights on one about twenty yards above the stream. When Peeta's able to stand, I half-guide, half-carry him up to the cave. Really, I'd like to look around for a better place, but this one will have to do because my ally is shot. Paper white, panting, and, even though it's only just cooling off, he's shivering.

I cover the floor of the cave with a layer of pine needles, unroll my sleeping bag, and tuck him into it. I get a couple of pills and some water into him when he's not noticing, but he refuses to eat even the fruit. Then he just lies there, his eyes trained on my face as I build a sort of blind out of vines to conceal the mouth of the cave. The result is unsatisfactory. An animal might not question it, but a human would see hands had manufactured it quickly enough. I tear it down in frustration.

"Katniss," he says. I go over to him and brush the hair back from his eyes. "Thanks for finding me."

"You would have found me if you could," I say. His forehead's burning up. Like the medicine's having no effect at all. Suddenly, out of nowhere, I'm scared he's going to die.

"Yes. Look, if I don't make it back—" he begins.

"Don't talk like that. I didn't drain all that pus for nothing," I say.

"I know. But just in case I don't—" he tries to continue.

"No, Peeta, I don't even want to discuss it," I say, placing my fingers on his lips to quiet him.

"But I—" he insists.

Impulsively, I lean forward and kiss him, stopping his words. This is probably overdue anyway since he's right, we are supposed to be madly in love. It's the first time I've ever kissed a boy, which should make some sort of impression I guess, but all I can register is how unnaturally hot his lips are from the fever. I break away and pull the edge of the sleeping bag up around him. "You're not going to die. I forbid it. All right?"

"All right," he whispers.

I step out in the cool evening air just as the parachute floats down from the sky. My fingers quickly undo the tie, hoping for some real medicine to treat Peeta's leg. Instead I find a pot of hot broth.

Haymitch couldn't be sending me a clearer message. One kiss equals one pot of broth. I can almost hear his snarl. "You're supposed to be in love, sweetheart. The boy's dying. Give me something I can work with!"

And he's right. If I want to keep Peeta alive, I've got to give the audience something more to care about. Star-crossed lovers desperate to get home together. Two hearts beating as one. Romance.

Never having been in love, this is going to be a real trick. I think of my parents. The way my father never failed to bring her gifts from the woods. The way my mother's face would light up at the sound of his boots at the door. The way she almost stopped living when he died.

"Peeta!" I say, trying for the special tone that my mother used only with my father. He's dozed off again, but I kiss him awake, which seems to startle him. Then he smiles as if he'd be happy to lie there gazing at me forever. He's great at this stuff.

I hold up the pot. "Peeta, look what Haymitch has sent you."

Getting the broth into Peeta takes an hour of coaxing, begging, threatening, and yes, kissing, but finally, sip by sip, he empties the pot. I let him drift off to sleep then and attend to my own needs, wolfing down a supper of groosling and roots while I watch the daily report in the sky. No new casualties. Still, Peeta and I have given the audience a fairly interesting day. Hopefully, the Gamemakers will allow us a peaceful night.

I automatically look around for a good tree to nest in before I realize that's over. At least for a while. I can't very well leave Peeta unguarded on the ground. I left the scene of his last hiding place on the bank of the stream untouched—how could I conceal it?—and we're a scant fifty yards downstream. I put on my glasses, place my weapons in readiness, and settle down to keep watch.

The temperature drops rapidly and soon I'm chilled to the bone. Eventually, I give in and slide into the sleeping bag with Peeta. It's toasty warm and I snuggle down gratefully until I realize it's more than warm, it's overly hot because the bag is reflecting back his fever. I check his forehead and find it burning and dry. I don't know what to do. Leave him in the bag and hope the excessive heat breaks the fever? Take him out and hope the night air cools him off? I end up just dampening a strip of bandage and placing it on his forehead. It seems weak, but I'm afraid to do anything too drastic.

I spend the night half-sitting, half-lying next to Peeta, refreshing the bandage, and trying not to dwell on the fact that by teaming up with him, I've made myself far more vulnerable than when I was alone. Tethered to the ground, on guard, with a very sick person to take care of. But I knew he was injured. And still I came after him. I'm just going to have to trust that whatever instinct sent me to find him was a good one.

When the sky turns rosy, I notice the sheen of sweat on Peeta's lip and discover the fever has broken. He's not back to normal, but it's come down a few degrees. Last night, when I was gathering vines, I came upon a bush of

Rue's berries. I strip off the fruit and mash it up in the broth pot with cold water.

Peeta's struggling to get up when I reach the cave. "I woke up and you were gone," he says. "I was worried about you."

I have to laugh as I ease him back down. "You were worried about me? Have you taken a look at yourself lately?"

"I thought Cato and Clove might have found you. They like to hunt at night," he says, still serious.

"Clove? Which one is that?" I ask.

"The girl from District Two. She's still alive, right?" he says.

"Yes, there's just them and us and Thresh and Foxface," I say. "That's what I nicknamed the girl from Five. How do you feel?"

"Better than yesterday. This is an enormous improvement over the mud," he says. "Clean clothes and medicine and a sleeping bag...and you."

Oh, right, the whole romance thing. I reach out to touch his cheek and he catches my hand and presses it against his lips. I remember my father doing this very thing to my mother and I wonder where Peeta picked it up. Surely not from his father and the witch.

"No more kisses for you until you've eaten," I say.

We get him propped up against the wall and he obediently swallows the spoonfuls of the berry mush I feed him. He refuses the groosling again, though.

"You didn't sleep," Peeta says.

"I'm all right," I say. But the truth is, I'm exhausted.

"Sleep now. I'll keep watch. I'll wake you if anything happens," he says. I hesitate. "Katniss, you can't stay up forever."

He's got a point there. I'll have to sleep eventually. And probably better to do it now when he seems relatively alert and we have daylight on our side. "All right," I say. "But just for a few hours. Then you wake me."

It's too warm for the sleeping bag now. I smooth it out on the cave floor and lie down, one hand on my loaded bow in case I have to shoot at a moment's notice. Peeta sits beside me, leaning against the wall, his bad leg stretched out before him, his eyes trained on the world outside. "Go to sleep," he says softly. His hand brushes the loose strands of my hair off my forehead. Unlike the staged kisses and caresses so far, this gesture seems

natural and comforting. I don't want him to stop and he doesn't. He's still stroking my hair when I fall asleep.

Too long. I sleep too long. I know from the moment I open my eyes that we're into the afternoon. Peeta's right beside me, his position unchanged. I sit up, feeling somehow defensive but better rested than I've been in days.

"Peeta, you were supposed to wake me after a couple of hours," I say.

"For what? Nothing's going on here," he says. "Besides I like watching you sleep. You don't scowl. Improves your looks a lot."

This, of course, brings on a scowl that makes him grin. That's when I notice how dry his lips are. I test his cheek. Hot as a coal stove. He claims he's been drinking, but the containers still feel full to me. I give him more fever pills and stand over him while he drinks first one, then a second quart of water. Then I tend to his minor wounds, the burns, the stings, which are showing improvement. I steel myself and unwrap the leg.

My heart drops into my stomach. It's worse, much worse. There's no more pus in evidence, but the swelling has increased and the tight shiny skin is inflamed. Then I see the red streaks starting to crawl up his leg. Blood poisoning. Unchecked, it will kill him for sure. My chewed-up leaves and ointment won't make a dent in it. We'll need strong anti-infection drugs from the Capitol. I can't imagine the cost of such potent medicine. If Haymitch pooled every donation from every sponsor, would he have enough? I doubt it. Gifts go up in price the longer the Games continue. What buys a full meal on day one buys a cracker on day twelve. And the kind of medicine Peeta needs would have been at a premium from the beginning.

"Well, there's more swelling, but the pus is gone," I say in an unsteady voice.

"I know what blood poisoning is, Katniss," says Peeta. "Even if my mother isn't a healer."

"You're just going to have to outlast the others, Peeta. They'll cure it back at the Capitol when we win," I say.

"Yes, that's a good plan," he says. But I feel this is mostly for my benefit.

"You have to eat. Keep your strength up. I'm going to make you soup," I say.

"Don't light a fire," he says. "It's not worth it."

"We'll see," I say. As I take the pot down to the stream, I'm struck by how brutally hot it is. I swear the Gamemakers are progressively ratcheting

up the temperature in the daytime and sending it plummeting at night. The heat of the sun-baked stones by the stream gives me an idea though. Maybe I won't need to light a fire.

I settle down on a big flat rock halfway between the stream and the cave. After purifying half a pot of water, I place it in direct sunlight and add several egg-size hot stones to the water. I'm the first to admit I'm not much of a cook. But since soup mainly involves tossing everything in a pot and waiting, it's one of my better dishes. I mince groosling until it's practically mush and mash some of Rue's roots. Fortunately, they've both been roasted already so they mostly need to be heated up. Already, between the sunlight and the rocks, the water's warm. I put in the meat and roots, swap in fresh rocks, and go find something green to spice it up a little. Before long, I discover a tuft of chives growing at the base of some rocks. Perfect. I chop them very fine and add them to the pot, switch out the rocks again, put on the lid, and let the whole thing stew.

I've seen very few signs of game around, but I don't feel comfortable leaving Peeta alone while I hunt, so I rig half a dozen snares and hope I get lucky. I wonder about the other tributes, how they're managing now that their main source of food has been blown up. At least three of them, Cato, Clove, and Foxface, had been relying on it. Probably not Thresh though. I've got a feeling he must share some of Rue's knowledge on how to feed yourself from the earth. Are they fighting each other? Looking for us? Maybe one of them has located us and is just waiting for the right moment to attack. The idea sends me back to the cave.

Peeta's stretched out on top of the sleeping bag in the shade of the rocks. Although he brightens a bit when I come in, it's clear he feels miserable. I put cool cloths on his head, but they warm up almost as soon as they touch his skin.

"Do you want anything?" I ask.

"No," he says. "Thank you. Wait, yes. Tell me a story."

"A story? What about?" I say. I'm not much for storytelling. It's kind of like singing. But once in a while, Prim wheedles one out of me.

"Something happy. Tell me about the happiest day you can remember," says Peeta.

Something between a sigh and a huff of exasperation leaves my mouth. A happy story? This will require a lot more effort than the soup. I rack my

brains for good memories. Most of them involve Gale and me out hunting and somehow I don't think these will play well with either Peeta or the audience. That leaves Prim.

"Did I ever tell you about how I got Prim's goat?" I ask. Peeta shakes his head, and looks at me expectantly. So I begin. But carefully. Because my words are going out all over Panem. And while people have no doubt put two and two together that I hunt illegally, I don't want to hurt Gale or Greasy Sae or the butcher or even the Peacekeepers back home who are my customers by publicly announcing they're breaking the law, too.

Here's the real story of how I got the money for Prim's goat, Lady. It was a Friday evening, the day before Prim's tenth birthday in late May. As soon as school ended, Gale and I hit the woods, because I wanted to get enough to trade for a present for Prim. Maybe some new cloth for a dress or a hairbrush. Our snares had done well enough and the woods were flush with greens, but this was really no more than our average Friday-night haul. I was disappointed as we headed back, even though Gale said we'd be sure to do better tomorrow. We were resting a moment by a stream when we saw him. A young buck, probably a yearling by his size. His antlers were just growing in, still small and coated in velvet. Poised to run but unsure of us, unfamiliar with humans. Beautiful.

Less beautiful perhaps when the two arrows caught him, one in the neck, the other in the chest. Gale and I had shot at the same time. The buck tried to run but stumbled, and Gale's knife slit his throat before he knew what had happened. Momentarily, I'd felt a pang at killing something so fresh and innocent. And then my stomach rumbled at the thought of all that fresh and innocent meat.

A deer! Gale and I have only brought down three in all. The first one, a doe that had injured her leg somehow, almost didn't count. But we knew from that experience not to go dragging the carcass into the Hob. It had caused chaos with people bidding on parts and actually trying to hack off pieces themselves. Greasy Sae had intervened and sent us with our deer to the butcher, but not before it'd been badly damaged, hunks of meat taken, the hide riddled with holes. Although everybody paid up fairly, it had lowered the value of the kill.

This time, we waited until dark fell and slipped under a hole in the fence close to the butcher. Even though we were known hunters, it wouldn't have

been good to go carrying a 150-pound deer through the streets of District 12 in daylight like we were rubbing it in the officials' faces.

The butcher, a short, chunky woman named Rooba, came to the back door when we knocked. You don't haggle with Rooba. She gives you one price, which you can take or leave, but it's a fair price. We took her offer on the deer and she threw in a couple of venison steaks we could pick up after the butchering. Even with the money divided in two, neither Gale nor I had held so much at one time in our lives. We decided to keep it a secret and surprise our families with the meat and money at the end of the next day.

This is where I really got the money for the goat, but I tell Peeta I sold an old silver locket of my mother's. That can't hurt anyone. Then I pick up the story in the late afternoon of Prim's birthday.

Gale and I went to the market on the square so that I could buy dress materials. As I was running my fingers over a length of thick blue cotton cloth, something caught my eye. There's an old man who keeps a small herd of goats on the other side of the Seam. I don't know his real name, everyone just calls him the Goat Man. His joints are swollen and twisted in painful angles, and he's got a hacking cough that proves he spent years in the mines. But he's lucky. Somewhere along the way he saved up enough for these goats and now has something to do in his old age besides slowly starve to death. He's filthy and impatient, but the goats are clean and their milk is rich if you can afford it.

One of the goats, a white one with black patches, was lying down in a cart. It was easy to see why. Something, probably a dog, had mauled her shoulder and infection had set in. It was bad, the Goat Man had to hold her up to milk her. But I thought I knew someone who could fix it.

"Gale," I whispered. "I want that goat for Prim."

Owning a nanny goat can change your life in District 12. The animals can live off almost anything, the Meadow's a perfect feeding place, and they can give four quarts of milk a day. To drink, to make into cheese, to sell. It's not even against the law.

"She's hurt pretty bad," said Gale. "We better take a closer look."

We went over and bought a cup of milk to share, then stood over the goat as if idly curious.

"Let her be," said the man.

"Just looking," said Gale.

“Well, look fast. She goes to the butcher soon. Hardly anyone will buy her milk, and then they only pay half price,” said the man.

“What’s the butcher giving for her?” I asked.

The man shrugged. “Hang around and see.” I turned and saw Rooba coming across the square toward us. “Lucky thing you showed up,” said the Goat Man when she arrived. “Girl’s got her eye on your goat.”

“Not if she’s spoken for,” I said carelessly.

Rooba looked me up and down then frowned at the goat. “She’s not. Look at that shoulder. Bet you half the carcass will be too rotten for even sausage.”

“What?” said the Goat Man. “We had a deal.”

“We had a deal on an animal with a few teeth marks. Not that thing. Sell her to the girl if she’s stupid enough to take her,” said Rooba. As she marched off, I caught her wink.

The Goat Man was mad, but he still wanted that goat off his hands. It took us half an hour to agree on the price. Quite a crowd had gathered by then to hand out opinions. It was an excellent deal if the goat lived; I’d been robbed if she died. People took sides in the argument, but I took the goat.

Gale offered to carry her. I think he wanted to see the look on Prim’s face as much as I did. In a moment of complete giddiness, I bought a pink ribbon and tied it around her neck. Then we hurried back to my house.

You should have seen Prim’s reaction when we walked in with that goat. Remember this is a girl who wept to save that awful old cat, Buttercup. She was so excited she started crying and laughing all at once. My mother was less sure, seeing the injury, but the pair of them went to work on it, grinding up herbs and coaxing brews down the animal’s throat.

“They sound like you,” says Peeta. I had almost forgotten he was there.

“Oh, no, Peeta. They work magic. That thing couldn’t have died if it tried,” I say. But then I bite my tongue, realizing what that must sound like to Peeta, who is dying, in my incompetent hands.

“Don’t worry. I’m not trying,” he jokes. “Finish the story.”

“Well, that’s it. Only I remember that night, Prim insisted on sleeping with Lady on a blanket next to the fire. And just before they drifted off, the goat licked her cheek, like it was giving her a good night kiss or something,” I say. “It was already mad about her.”

“Was it still wearing the pink ribbon?” he asks.

“I think so,” I say. “Why?”

"I'm just trying to get a picture," he says thoughtfully. "I can see why that day made you happy."

"Well, I knew that goat would be a little gold mine," I say.

"Yes, of course I was referring to that, not the lasting joy you gave the sister you love so much you took her place in the reaping," says Peeta drily.

"The goat *has* paid for itself. Several times over," I say in a superior tone.

"Well, it wouldn't dare do anything else after you saved its life," says Peeta. "I intend to do the same thing."

"Really? What did you cost me again?" I ask.

"A lot of trouble. Don't worry. You'll get it all back," he says.

"You're not making sense," I say. I test his forehead. The fever's going nowhere but up. "You're a little cooler though."

The sound of the trumpets startles me. I'm on my feet and at the mouth of the cave in a flash, not wanting to miss a syllable. It's my new best friend, Claudius Templesmith, and as I expected, he's inviting us to a feast. Well, we're not that hungry and I actually wave his offer away in indifference when he says, "Now hold on. Some of you may already be declining my invitation. But this is no ordinary feast. Each of you needs something desperately."

I do need something desperately. Something to heal Peeta's leg.

"Each of you will find that something in a backpack, marked with your district number, at the Cornucopia at dawn. Think hard about refusing to show up. For some of you, this will be your last chance," says Claudius.

There's nothing else, just his words hanging in the air. I jump as Peeta grips my shoulder from behind. "No," he says. "You're not risking your life for me."

"Who said I was?" I say.

"So, you're not going?" he asks.

"Of course, I'm not going. Give me some credit. Do you think I'm running straight into some free-for-all against Cato and Clove and Thresh? Don't be stupid," I say, helping him back to bed. "I'll let them fight it out, we'll see who's in the sky tomorrow night and work out a plan from there."

"You're such a bad liar, Katniss. I don't know how you've survived this long." He begins to mimic me. "*I knew that goat would be a little gold mine. You're a little cooler though. Of course, I'm not going.*" He shakes his head. "Never gamble at cards. You'll lose your last coin," he says.

Anger flushes my face. "All right, I am going, and you can't stop me!"

"I can follow you. At least partway. I may not make it to the Cornucopia, but if I'm yelling your name, I bet someone can find me. And then I'll be dead for sure," he says.

"You won't get a hundred yards from here on that leg," I say.

"Then I'll drag myself," says Peeta. "You go and I'm going, too."

He's just stubborn enough and maybe just strong enough to do it. Come howling after me in the woods. Even if a tribute doesn't find him, something else might. He can't defend himself. I'd probably have to wall him up in the cave just to go myself. And who knows what the exertion will do to him?

"What am I supposed to do? Sit here and watch you die?" I say. He must know that's not an option. That the audience would hate me. And frankly, I would hate myself, too, if I didn't even try.

"I won't die. I promise. If you promise not to go," he says.

We're at something of a stalemate. I know I can't argue him out of this one, so I don't try. I pretend, reluctantly, to go along. "Then you have to do what I say. Drink your water, wake me when I tell you, and eat every bite of the soup no matter how disgusting it is!" I snap at him.

"Agreed. Is it ready?" he asks.

"Wait here," I say. The air's gone cold even though the sun's still up. I'm right about the Gamemakers messing with the temperature. I wonder if the thing someone needs desperately is a good blanket. The soup is still nice and warm in its iron pot. And actually doesn't taste too bad.

Peeta eats without complaint, even scraping out the pot to show his enthusiasm. He rambles on about how delicious it is, which should be encouraging if you don't know what fever does to people. He's like listening to Haymitch before the alcohol has soaked him into incoherence. I give him another dose of fever medicine before he goes off his head completely.

As I go down to the stream to wash up, all I can think is that he's going to die if I don't get to that feast. I'll keep him going for a day or two, and then the infection will reach his heart or his brain or his lungs and he'll be gone. And I'll be here all alone. Again. Waiting for the others.

I'm so lost in thought that I almost miss the parachute, even though it floats right by me. Then I spring after it, yanking it from the water, tearing off the silver fabric to retrieve the vial. Haymitch has done it! He's gotten the medicine—I don't know how, persuaded some gaggle of romantic fools to

sell their jewels—and I can save Peeta! It's such a tiny vial though. It must be very strong to cure someone as ill as Peeta. A ripple of doubt runs through me. I uncork the vial and take a deep sniff. My spirits fall at the sickly sweet scent. Just to be sure, I place a drop on the tip of my tongue. There's no question, it's sleep syrup. It's a common medicine in District 12. Cheap, as medicine goes, but very addictive. Almost everyone's had a dose at one time or another. We have some in a bottle at home. My mother gives it to hysterical patients to knock them out to stitch up a bad wound or quiet their minds or just to help someone in pain get through the night. It only takes a little. A vial this size could knock Peeta out for a full day, but what good is that? I'm so furious I'm about to throw Haymitch's last offering into the stream when it hits me. A full day? That's more than I need.

I mash up a handful of berries so the taste won't be as noticeable and add some mint leaves for good measure. Then I head back up to the cave. "I've brought you a treat. I found a new patch of berries a little farther downstream."

Peeta opens his mouth for the first bite without hesitation. He swallows then frowns slightly. "They're very sweet."

"Yes, they're sugar berries. My mother makes jam from them. Haven't you ever had them before?" I say, poking the next spoonful in his mouth.

"No," he says, almost puzzled. "But they taste familiar. Sugar berries?"

"Well, you can't get them in the market much, they only grow wild," I say. Another mouthful goes down. Just one more to go.

"They're sweet as syrup," he says, taking the last spoonful. "Syrup." His eyes widen as he realizes the truth. I clamp my hand over his mouth and nose hard, forcing him to swallow instead of spit. He tries to make himself vomit the stuff up, but it's too late, he's already losing consciousness. Even as he fades away, I can see in his eyes what I've done is unforgivable.

I sit back on my heels and look at him with a mixture of sadness and satisfaction. A stray berry stains his chin and I wipe it away. "Who can't lie, Peeta?" I say, even though he can't hear me.

It doesn't matter. The rest of Panem can.

In the remaining hours before nightfall, I gather rocks and do my best to camouflage the opening of the cave. It's a slow and arduous process, but after a lot of sweating and shifting things around, I'm pretty pleased with my work. The cave now appears to be part of a larger pile of rocks, like so many in the vicinity. I can still crawl in to Peeta through a small opening, but it's undetectable from the outside. That's good, because I'll need to share that sleeping bag again tonight. Also, if I don't make it back from the feast, Peeta will be hidden but not entirely imprisoned. Although I doubt he can hang on much longer without medicine. If I die at the feast, District 12 isn't likely to have a victor.

I make a meal out of the smaller, bonier fish that inhabit the stream down here, fill every water container and purify it, and clean my weapons. I've nine arrows left in all. I debate leaving the knife with Peeta so he'll have some protection while I'm gone, but there's really no point. He was right about camouflage being his final defense. But I still might have use for the knife. Who knows what I'll encounter?

Here are some things I'm fairly certain of. That at least Cato, Clove, and Thresh will be on hand when the feast starts. I'm not sure about Foxface since direct confrontation isn't her style or her forte. She's even smaller than I am and unarmed, unless she's picked up some weapons recently. She'll probably be hanging somewhere nearby, seeing what she can scavenge. But the other three...I'm going to have my hands full. My ability to kill at a distance is my greatest asset, but I know I'll have to go right into the thick of things to get that backpack, the one with the number 12 on it that Claudius Templesmith mentioned.

I watch the sky, hoping for one less opponent at dawn, but nobody appears tonight. Tomorrow there will be faces up there. Feasts always result in fatalities.

I crawl into the cave, secure my glasses, and curl up next to Peeta. Luckily I had that good long sleep today. I have to stay awake. I don't really think anyone will attack our cave tonight, but I can't risk missing the dawn.

So cold, so bitterly cold tonight. As if the Gamemakers have sent an infusion of frozen air across the arena, which may be exactly what they've done. I lie next to Peeta in the bag, trying to absorb every bit of his fever heat. It's strange to be so physically close to someone who's so distant. Peeta might as well be back in the Capitol, or in District 12, or on the moon right now, he'd be no harder to reach. I've never felt lonelier since the Games began.

Just accept it will be a bad night, I tell myself. I try not to, but I can't help thinking of my mother and Prim, wondering if they'll sleep a wink tonight. At this late stage in the Games, with an important event like the feast, school will probably be canceled. My family can either watch on that static-filled old clunker of a television at home or join the crowds in the square to watch on the big, clear screens. They'll have privacy at home but support in the square. People will give them a kind word, a bit of food if they can spare it. I wonder if the baker has sought them out, especially now that Peeta and I are a team, and made good on his promise to keep my sister's belly full.

Spirits must be running high in District 12. We so rarely have anyone to root for at this point in the Games. Surely, people are excited about Peeta and me, especially now that we're together. If I close my eyes, I can imagine their shouts at the screens, urging us on. I see their faces—Greasy Sae and Madge and even the Peacekeepers who buy my meat—cheering for us.

And Gale. I know him. He won't be shouting and cheering. But he'll be watching, every moment, every twist and turn, and willing me to come home. I wonder if he's hoping that Peeta makes it as well. Gale's not my boyfriend, but would he be, if I opened that door? He talked about us running away together. Was that just a practical calculation of our chances of survival away from the district? Or something more?

I wonder what he makes of all this kissing.

Through a crack in the rocks, I watch the moon cross the sky. At what I judge to be about three hours before dawn, I begin final preparations. I'm careful to leave Peeta with water and the medical kit right beside him. Nothing else will be of much use if I don't return, and even these would only prolong his life a short time. After some debate, I strip him of his jacket and zip it on over my own. He doesn't need it. Not now in the sleeping bag with his fever, and during the day, if I'm not there to remove it, he'll be roasting in it. My hands are already stiff from cold, so I take Rue's spare pair of socks,

cut holes for my fingers and thumbs, and pull them on. It helps anyway. I fill her small pack with some food, a water bottle, and bandages, tuck the knife in my belt, get my bow and arrows. I'm about to leave when I remember the importance of sustaining the star-crossed lover routine and I lean over and give Peeta a long, lingering kiss. I imagine the teary sighs emanating from the Capitol and pretend to brush away a tear of my own. Then I squeeze through the opening in the rocks out into the night.

My breath makes small white clouds as it hits the air. It's as cold as a November night at home. One where I've slipped into the woods, lantern in hand, to join Gale at some prearranged place where we'll sit bundled together, sipping herb tea from metal flasks wrapped in quilting, hoping game will pass our way as the morning comes on. *Oh, Gale, I think. If only you had my back now...*

I move as fast as I dare. The glasses are quite remarkable, but I still sorely miss having the use of my left ear. I don't know what the explosion did, but it damaged something deep and irreparable. Never mind. If I get home, I'll be so stinking rich, I'll be able to pay someone to do my hearing.

The woods always look different at night. Even with the glasses, everything has an unfamiliar slant to it. As if the daytime trees and flowers and stones had gone to bed and sent slightly more ominous versions of themselves to take their places. I don't try anything tricky, like taking a new route. I make my way back up the stream and follow the same path back to Rue's hiding place near the lake. Along the way, I see no sign of another tribute, not a puff of breath, not a quiver of a branch. Either I'm the first to arrive or the others positioned themselves last night. There's still more than an hour, maybe two, when I wriggle into the underbrush and wait for the blood to begin to flow.

I chew a few mint leaves, my stomach isn't up for much more. Thank goodness, I have Peeta's jacket as well as my own. If not, I'd be forced to move around to stay warm. The sky turns a misty morning gray and still there's no sign of the other tributes. It's not surprising really. Everyone has distinguished themselves either by strength or deadliness or cunning. Do they suppose, I wonder, that I have Peeta with me? I doubt Foxface and Thresh even know he was wounded. All the better if they think he's covering me when I go in for the backpack.

But where is it? The arena has lightened enough for me to remove my glasses. I can hear the morning birds singing. Isn't it time? For a second, I'm panicked that I'm at the wrong location. But no, I'm certain I remember Claudius Templesmith specifying the Cornucopia. And there it is. And here I am. So where's my feast?

Just as the first ray of sun glints off the gold Cornucopia, there's a disturbance on the plain. The ground before the mouth of the horn splits in two and a round table with a snowy white cloth rises into the arena. On the table sit four backpacks, two large black ones with the numbers 2 and 11, a medium-size green one with the number 5, and a tiny orange one—really I could carry it around my wrist—that must be marked with a 12.

The table has just clicked into place when a figure darts out of the Cornucopia, snags the green backpack, and speeds off. Foxface! Leave it to her to come up with such a clever and risky idea! The rest of us are still poised around the plain, sizing up the situation, and she's got hers. She's got us trapped, too, because no one wants to chase her down, not while their own pack sits so vulnerable on the table. Foxface must have purposefully left the other packs alone, knowing that to steal one without her number would definitely bring on a pursuer. That should have been my strategy! By the time I've worked through the emotions of surprise, admiration, anger, jealousy, and frustration, I'm watching that reddish mane of hair disappear into the trees well out of shooting range. Huh. I'm always dreading the others, but maybe Foxface is the real opponent here.

She's cost me time, too, because by now it's clear that I must get to the table next. Anyone who beats me to it will easily scoop up my pack and be gone. Without hesitation, I sprint for the table. I can sense the emergence of danger before I see it. Fortunately, the first knife comes whizzing in on my right side so I can hear it and I'm able to deflect it with my bow. I turn, drawing back the bowstring and send an arrow straight at Clove's heart. She turns just enough to avoid a fatal hit, but the point punctures her upper left arm. Unfortunately, she throws with her right, but it's enough to slow her down a few moments, having to pull the arrow from her arm, take in the severity of the wound. I keep moving, positioning the next arrow automatically, as only someone who has hunted for years can do.

I'm at the table now, my fingers closing over the tiny orange backpack. My hand slips between the straps and I yank it up on my arm, it's really too

small to fit on any other part of my anatomy, and I'm turning to fire again when the second knife catches me in the forehead. It slices above my right eyebrow, opening a gash that sends a gush running down my face, blinding my eye, filling my mouth with the sharp, metallic taste of my own blood. I stagger backward but still manage to send my readied arrow in the general direction of my assailant. I know as it leaves my hands it will miss. And then Clove slams into me, knocking me flat on my back, pinning my shoulders to the ground with her knees.

This is it, I think, and hope for Prim's sake it will be fast. But Clove means to savor the moment. Even feels she has time. No doubt Cato is somewhere nearby, guarding her, waiting for Thresh and possibly Peeta.

"Where's your boyfriend, District Twelve? Still hanging on?" she asks.

Well, as long as we're talking I'm alive. "He's out there now. Hunting Cato," I snarl at her. Then I scream at the top of my lungs. "Peeta!"

Clove jams her fist into my windpipe, very effectively cutting off my voice. But her head's whipping from side to side, and I know for a moment she's at least considering I'm telling the truth. Since no Peeta appears to save me, she turns back to me.

"Liar," she says with a grin. "He's nearly dead. Cato knows where he cut him. You've probably got him strapped up in some tree while you try to keep his heart going. What's in the pretty little backpack? That medicine for Lover Boy? Too bad he'll never get it."

Clove opens her jacket. It's lined with an impressive array of knives. She carefully selects an almost dainty-looking number with a cruel, curved blade. "I promised Cato if he let me have you, I'd give the audience a good show."

I'm struggling now in an effort to unseat her, but it's no use. She's too heavy and her lock on me too tight.

"Forget it, District Twelve. We're going to kill you. Just like we did your pathetic little ally...what was her name? The one who hopped around in the trees? Rue? Well, first Rue, then you, and then I think we'll just let nature take care of Lover Boy. How does that sound?" Clove asks. "Now, where to start?"

She carelessly wipes away the blood from my wound with her jacket sleeve. For a moment, she surveys my face, tilting it from side to side as if it's a block of wood and she's deciding exactly what pattern to carve on it. I attempt to bite her hand, but she grabs the hair on the top of my head, forcing

me back to the ground. “I think...” she almost purrs. “I think we’ll start with your mouth.” I clamp my teeth together as she teasingly traces the outline of my lips with the tip of the blade.

I won’t close my eyes. The comment about Rue has filled me with fury, enough fury I think to die with some dignity. As my last act of defiance, I will stare her down as long as I can see, which will probably not be an extended period of time, but I will stare her down, I will not cry out, I will die, in my own small way, undefeated.

“Yes, I don’t think you’ll have much use for your lips anymore. Want to blow Lover Boy one last kiss?” she asks. I work up a mouthful of blood and saliva and spit it in her face. She flushes with rage. “All right then. Let’s get started.”

I brace myself for the agony that’s sure to follow. But as I feel the tip open the first cut at my lip, some great force yanks Clove from my body and then she’s screaming. I’m too stunned at first, too unable to process what has happened. Has Peeta somehow come to my rescue? Have the Gamemakers sent in some wild animal to add to the fun? Has a hovercraft inexplicably plucked her into the air?

But when I push myself up on my numb arms, I see it’s none of the above. Clove is dangling a foot off the ground, imprisoned in Thresh’s arms. I let out a gasp, seeing him like that, towering over me, holding Clove like a rag doll. I remember him as big, but he seems more massive, more powerful than I even recall. If anything, he seems to have gained weight in the arena. He flips Clove around and flings her onto the ground.

When he shouts, I jump, never having heard him speak above a mutter. “What’d you do to that little girl? You kill her?”

Clove is scrambling backward on all fours, like a frantic insect, too shocked to even call for Cato. “No! No, it wasn’t me!”

“You said her name. I heard you. You kill her?” Another thought brings a fresh wave of rage to his features. “You cut her up like you were going to cut up this girl here?”

“No! No, I—” Clove sees the stone, about the size of a small loaf of bread in Thresh’s hand and loses it. “Cato!” she screeches. “Cato!”

“Clove!” I hear Cato’s answer, but he’s too far away, I can tell that much, to do her any good. What was he doing? Trying to get Foxface or Peeta? Or had he been lying in wait for Thresh and just badly misjudged his location?

Thresh brings the rock down hard against Clove's temple. It's not bleeding, but I can see the dent in her skull and I know that she's a goner. There's still life in her now though, in the rapid rise and fall of her chest, the low moan escaping her lips.

When Thresh whirls around on me, the rock raised, I know it's no good to run. And my bow is empty, the last loaded arrow having gone in Clove's direction. I'm trapped in the glare of his strange golden brown eyes. "What'd she mean? About Rue being your ally?"

"I—I—we teamed up. Blew up the supplies. I tried to save her, I did. But he got there first. District One," I say. Maybe if he knows I helped Rue, he won't choose some slow, sadistic end for me.

"And you killed him?" he demands.

"Yes. I killed him. And buried her in flowers," I say. "And I sang her to sleep."

Tears spring in my eyes. The tension, the fight goes out of me at the memory. And I'm overwhelmed by Rue, and the pain in my head, and my fear of Thresh, and the moaning of the dying girl a few feet away.

"To sleep?" Thresh says gruffly.

"To death. I sang until she died," I say. "Your district...they sent me bread." My hand reaches up but not for an arrow that I know I'll never reach. Just to wipe my nose. "Do it fast, okay, Thresh?"

Conflicting emotions cross Thresh's face. He lowers the rock and points at me, almost accusingly. "Just this one time, I let you go. For the little girl. You and me, we're even then. No more owed. You understand?"

I nod because I do understand. About owing. About hating it. I understand that if Thresh wins, he'll have to go back and face a district that has already broken all the rules to thank me, and he is breaking the rules to thank me, too. And I understand that, for the moment, Thresh is not going to smash in my skull.

"Clove!" Cato's voice is much nearer now. I can tell by the pain in it that he sees her on the ground.

"You better run now, Fire Girl," says Thresh.

I don't need to be told twice. I flip over and my feet dig into the hard-packed earth as I run away from Thresh and Clove and the sound of Cato's voice. Only when I reach the woods do I turn back for an instant. Thresh and both large backpacks are vanishing over the edge of the plain into the area

I've never seen. Cato kneels beside Clove, spear in hand, begging her to stay with him. In a moment, he will realize it's futile, she can't be saved. I crash into the trees, repeatedly swiping away the blood that's pouring into my eye, fleeing like the wild, wounded creature I am. After a few minutes, I hear the cannon and I know that Clove has died, that Cato will be on one of our trails. Either Thresh's or mine. I'm seized with terror, weak from my head wound, shaking. I load an arrow, but Cato can throw that spear almost as far as I can shoot.

Only one thing calms me down. Thresh has Cato's backpack containing the thing he needs desperately. If I had to bet, Cato headed out after Thresh, not me. Still I don't slow down when I reach the water. I plunge right in, boots still on, and flounder downstream. I pull off Rue's socks that I've been using for gloves and press them into my forehead, trying to staunch the flow of blood, but they're soaked in minutes.

Somehow I make it back to the cave. I squeeze through the rocks. In the dappled light, I pull the little orange backpack from my arm, cut open the clasp, and dump the contents on the ground. One slim box containing one hypodermic needle. Without hesitating, I jam the needle into Peeta's arm and slowly press down on the plunger.

My hands go to my head and then drop to my lap, slick with blood.

The last thing I remember is an exquisitely beautiful green-and-silver moth landing on the curve of my wrist.

The sound of rain drumming on the roof of our house gently pulls me toward consciousness. I fight to return to sleep though, wrapped in a warm cocoon of blankets, safe at home. I'm vaguely aware that my head aches. Possibly I have the flu and this is why I'm allowed to stay in bed, even though I can tell I've been asleep a long time. My mother's hand strokes my cheek and I don't push it away as I would in wakefulness, never wanting her to know how much I crave that gentle touch. How much I miss her even though I still don't trust her. Then there's a voice, the wrong voice, not my mother's, and I'm scared.

"Katniss," it says. "Katniss, can you hear me?"

My eyes open and the sense of security vanishes. I'm not home, not with my mother. I'm in a dim, chilly cave, my bare feet freezing despite the cover, the air tainted with the unmistakable smell of blood. The haggard, pale face of a boy slides into view, and after an initial jolt of alarm, I feel better. "Peeta."

"Hey," he says. "Good to see your eyes again."

"How long have I been out?" I ask.

"Not sure. I woke up yesterday evening and you were lying next to me in a very scary pool of blood," he says. "I think it's stopped finally, but I wouldn't sit up or anything."

I gingerly lift my hand to my head and find it bandaged. This simple gesture leaves me weak and dizzy. Peeta holds a bottle to my lips and I drink thirstily.

"You're better," I say.

"Much better. Whatever you shot into my arm did the trick," he says. "By this morning, almost all the swelling in my leg was gone."

He doesn't seem angry about my tricking him, drugging him, and running off to the feast. Maybe I'm just too beat-up and I'll hear about it later when I'm stronger. But for the moment, he's all gentleness.

"Did you eat?" I ask.

“I’m sorry to say I gobbled down three pieces of that groosling before I realized it might have to last a while. Don’t worry, I’m back on a strict diet,” he says.

“No, it’s good. You need to eat. I’ll go hunting soon,” I say.

“Not too soon, all right?” he says. “You just let me take care of you for a while.”

I don’t really seem to have much choice. Peeta feeds me bites of groosling and raisins and makes me drink plenty of water. He rubs some warmth back into my feet and wraps them in his jacket before tucking the sleeping bag back up around my chin.

“Your boots and socks are still damp and the weather’s not helping much,” he says. There’s a clap of thunder, and I see lightning electrify the sky through an opening in the rocks. Rain drips through several holes in the ceiling, but Peeta has built a sort of canopy over my head and upper body by wedging the square of plastic into the rocks above me.

“I wonder what brought on this storm? I mean, who’s the target?” says Peeta.

“Cato and Thresh,” I say without thinking. “Foxface will be in her den somewhere, and Clove...she cut me and then...” My voice trails off.

“I know Clove’s dead. I saw it in the sky last night,” he says. “Did you kill her?”

“No. Thresh broke her skull with a rock,” I say.

“Lucky he didn’t catch you, too,” says Peeta.

The memory of the feast returns full-force and I feel sick. “He did. But he let me go.” Then, of course, I have to tell him. About things I’ve kept to myself because he was too sick to ask and I wasn’t ready to relive anyway. Like the explosion and my ear and Rue’s dying and the boy from District 1 and the bread. All of which leads to what happened with Thresh and how he was paying off a debt of sorts.

“He let you go because he didn’t want to owe you anything?” asks Peeta in disbelief.

“Yes. I don’t expect you to understand it. You’ve always had enough. But if you’d lived in the Seam, I wouldn’t have to explain,” I say.

“And don’t try. Obviously I’m too dim to get it,” he says.

“It’s like the bread. How I never seem to get over owing you for that,” I say.

“The bread? What? From when we were kids?” he says. “I think we can let that go. I mean, you just brought me back from the dead.”

“But you didn’t know me. We had never even spoken. Besides, it’s the first gift that’s always the hardest to pay back. I wouldn’t even have been here to do it if you hadn’t helped me then,” I say. “Why did you, anyway?”

“Why? You know why,” Peeta says. I give my head a slight, painful shake. “Haymitch said you would take a lot of convincing.”

“Haymitch?” I ask. “What’s he got to do with it?”

“Nothing,” Peeta says. “So, Cato and Thresh, huh? I guess it’s too much to hope that they’ll simultaneously destroy each other?”

But the thought only upsets me. “I think we would like Thresh. I think he’d be our friend back in District Twelve,” I say.

“Then let’s hope Cato kills him, so we don’t have to,” says Peeta grimly.

I don’t want Cato to kill Thresh at all. I don’t want anyone else to die. But this is absolutely not the kind of thing that victors go around saying in the arena. Despite my best efforts, I can feel tears starting to pool in my eyes.

Peeta looks at me in concern. “What is it? Are you in a lot of pain?”

I give him another answer, because it is equally true but can be taken as a brief moment of weakness instead of a terminal one. “I want to go home, Peeta,” I say plaintively, like a small child.

“You will. I promise,” he says, and bends over to give me a kiss.

“I want to go home now,” I say.

“Tell you what. You go back to sleep and dream of home. And you’ll be there for real before you know it,” he says. “Okay?”

“Okay,” I whisper. “Wake me if you need me to keep watch.”

“I’m good and rested, thanks to you and Haymitch. Besides, who knows how long this will last?” he says.

What does he mean? The storm? The brief respite it brings us? The Games themselves? I don’t know, but I’m too sad and tired to ask.

It’s evening when Peeta wakes me again. The rain has turned to a downpour, sending streams of water through our ceiling where earlier there had been only drips. Peeta has placed the broth pot under the worst one and repositioned the plastic to deflect most of it from me. I feel a bit better, able to sit up without getting too dizzy, and I’m absolutely famished. So is Peeta. It’s clear he’s been waiting for me to wake up to eat and is eager to get started.

There's not much left. Two pieces of groosling, a small mishmash of roots, and a handful of dried fruit.

"Should we try and ration it?" Peeta asks.

"No, let's just finish it. The groosling's getting old anyway, and the last thing we need is to get sick off spoiled food," I say, dividing the food into two equal piles. We try and eat slowly, but we're both so hungry we're done in a couple of minutes. My stomach is in no way satisfied.

"Tomorrow's a hunting day," I say.

"I won't be much help with that," Peeta says. "I've never hunted before."

"I'll kill and you cook," I say. "And you can always gather."

"I wish there was some sort of bread bush out there," says Peeta.

"The bread they sent me from District Eleven was still warm," I say with a sigh. "Here, chew these." I hand him a couple of mint leaves and pop a few in my own mouth.

It's hard to even see the projection in the sky, but it's clear enough to know there were no more deaths today. So Cato and Thresh haven't had it out yet.

"Where did Thresh go? I mean, what's on the far side of the circle?" I ask Peeta.

"A field. As far as you can see it's full of grasses as high as my shoulders. I don't know, maybe some of them are grain. There are patches of different colors. But there are no paths," says Peeta.

"I bet some of them are grain. I bet Thresh knows which ones, too," I say. "Did you go in there?"

"No. Nobody really wanted to track Thresh down in that grass. It has a sinister feeling to it. Every time I look at that field, all I can think of are hidden things. Snakes, and rabid animals, and quicksand," Peeta says. "There could be anything in there."

I don't say so but Peeta's words remind me of the warnings they give us about not going beyond the fence in District 12. I can't help, for a moment, comparing him with Gale, who would see that field as a potential source of food as well as a threat. Thresh certainly did. It's not that Peeta's soft exactly, and he's proved he's not a coward. But there are things you don't question too much, I guess, when your home always smells like baking bread, whereas Gale questions everything. What would Peeta think of the irreverent

banter that passes between us as we break the law each day? Would it shock him? The things we say about Panem? Gale's tirades against the Capitol?

"Maybe there is a bread bush in that field," I say. "Maybe that's why Thresh looks better fed now than when we started the Games."

"Either that or he's got very generous sponsors," says Peeta. "I wonder what we'd have to do to get Haymitch to send us some bread."

I raise my eyebrows before I remember he doesn't know about the message Haymitch sent us a couple of nights ago. One kiss equals one pot of broth. It's not the sort of thing I can blurt out, either. To say my thoughts aloud would be tipping off the audience that the romance has been fabricated to play on their sympathies and that would result in no food at all. Somehow, believably, I've got to get things back on track. Something simple to start with. I reach out and take his hand.

"Well, he probably used up a lot of resources helping me knock you out," I say mischievously.

"Yeah, about that," says Peeta, entwining his fingers in mine. "Don't try something like that again."

"Or what?" I ask.

"Or...or..." He can't think of anything good. "Just give me a minute."

"What's the problem?" I say with a grin.

"The problem is we're both still alive. Which only reinforces the idea in your mind that you did the right thing," says Peeta.

"I did do the right thing," I say.

"No! Just don't, Katniss!" His grip tightens, hurting my hand, and there's real anger in his voice. "Don't die for me. You won't be doing me any favors. All right?"

I'm startled by his intensity but recognize an excellent opportunity for getting food, so I try to keep up. "Maybe I did it for myself, Peeta, did you ever think of that? Maybe you aren't the only one who...who worries about...what it would be like if..."

I fumble. I'm not as smooth with words as Peeta. And while I was talking, the idea of actually losing Peeta hit me again and I realized how much I don't want him to die. And it's not about the sponsors. And it's not about what will happen back home. And it's not just that I don't want to be alone. It's him. I do not want to lose the boy with the bread.

"If what, Katniss?" he says softly.

I wish I could pull the shutters closed, blocking out this moment from the prying eyes of Panem. Even if it means losing food. Whatever I'm feeling, it's no one's business but mine.

"That's exactly the kind of topic Haymitch told me to steer clear of," I say evasively, although Haymitch never said anything of the kind. In fact, he's probably cursing me out right now for dropping the ball during such an emotionally charged moment. But Peeta somehow catches it.

"Then I'll just have to fill in the blanks myself," he says, and moves in to me.

This is the first kiss that we're both fully aware of. Neither of us hobbled by sickness or pain or simply unconscious. Our lips neither burning with fever or icy cold. This is the first kiss where I actually feel stirring inside my chest. Warm and curious. This is the first kiss that makes me want another.

But I don't get it. Well, I do get a second kiss, but it's just a light one on the tip of my nose because Peeta's been distracted. "I think your wound is bleeding again. Come on, lie down, it's bedtime anyway," he says.

My socks are dry enough to wear now. I make Peeta put his jacket back on. The damp cold seems to cut right down to my bones, so he must be half frozen. I insist on taking the first watch, too, although neither of us think it's likely anyone will come in this weather. But he won't agree unless I'm in the bag, too, and I'm shivering so hard that it's pointless to object. In stark contrast to two nights ago, when I felt Peeta was a million miles away, I'm struck by his immediacy now. As we settle in, he pulls my head down to use his arm as a pillow; the other rests protectively over me even when he goes to sleep. No one has held me like this in such a long time. Since my father died and I stopped trusting my mother, no one else's arms have made me feel this safe.

With the aid of the glasses, I lie watching the drips of water splatter on the cave floor. Rhythmic and lulling. Several times, I drift off briefly and then snap awake, guilty and angry with myself. After three or four hours, I can't help it, I have to rouse Peeta because I can't keep my eyes open. He doesn't seem to mind.

"Tomorrow, when it's dry, I'll find us a place so high in the trees we can both sleep in peace," I promise as I drift off.

But tomorrow is no better in terms of weather. The deluge continues as if the Gamemakers are intent on washing us all away. The thunder's so

powerful it seems to shake the ground. Peeta's considering heading out anyway to scavenge for food, but I tell him in this storm it would be pointless. He won't be able to see three feet in front of his face and he'll only end up getting soaked to the skin for his troubles. He knows I'm right, but the gnawing in our stomachs is becoming painful.

The day drags on turning into evening and there's no break in the weather. Haymitch is our only hope, but nothing is forthcoming, either from lack of money—everything will cost an exorbitant amount—or because he's dissatisfied with our performance. Probably the latter. I'd be the first to admit we're not exactly riveting today. Starving, weak from injuries, trying not to reopen wounds. We're sitting huddled together wrapped in the sleeping bag, yes, but mostly to keep warm. The most exciting thing either of us does is nap.

I'm not really sure how to ramp up the romance. The kiss last night was nice, but working up to another will take some forethought. There are girls in the Seam, some of the merchant girls, too, who navigate these waters so easily. But I've never had much time or use for it. Anyway, just a kiss isn't enough anymore clearly because if it was we'd have gotten food last night. My instincts tell me Haymitch isn't just looking for physical affection, he wants something more personal. The sort of stuff he was trying to get me to tell about myself when we were practicing for the interview. I'm rotten at it, but Peeta's not. Maybe the best approach is to get him talking.

"Peeta," I say lightly. "You said at the interview you'd had a crush on me forever. When did forever start?"

"Oh, let's see. I guess the first day of school. We were five. You had on a red plaid dress and your hair...it was in two braids instead of one. My father pointed you out when we were waiting to line up," Peeta says.

"Your father? Why?" I ask.

"He said, 'See that little girl? I wanted to marry her mother, but she ran off with a coal miner,'" Peeta says.

"What? You're making that up!" I exclaim.

"No, true story," Peeta says. "And I said, 'A coal miner? Why did she want a coal miner if she could've had you?' And he said, 'Because when he sings...even the birds stop to listen.'"

"That's true. They do. I mean, they did," I say. I'm stunned and surprisingly moved, thinking of the baker telling this to Peeta. It strikes me

that my own reluctance to sing, my own dismissal of music might not really be that I think it's a waste of time. It might be because it reminds me too much of my father.

"So that day, in music assembly, the teacher asked who knew the valley song. Your hand shot right up in the air. She stood you up on a stool and had you sing it for us. And I swear, every bird outside the windows fell silent," Peeta says.

"Oh, please," I say, laughing.

"No, it happened. And right when your song ended, I knew—just like your mother—I was a goner," Peeta says. "Then for the next eleven years, I tried to work up the nerve to talk to you."

"Without success," I add.

"Without success. So, in a way, my name being drawn in the reaping was a real piece of luck," says Peeta.

For a moment, I'm almost foolishly happy and then confusion sweeps over me. Because we're supposed to be making up this stuff, playing at being in love, not actually being in love. But Peeta's story has a ring of truth to it. That part about my father and the birds. And I did sing the first day of school, although I don't remember the song. And that red plaid dress...there was one, a hand-me-down to Prim that got washed to rags after my father's death.

It would explain another thing, too. Why Peeta took a beating to give me the bread on that awful hollow day. So, if those details are true...could it all be true?

"You have a...remarkable memory," I say haltingly.

"I remember everything about you," says Peeta, tucking a loose strand of hair behind my ear. "You're the one who wasn't paying attention."

"I am now," I say.

"Well, I don't have much competition here," he says.

I want to draw away, to close those shutters again, but I know I can't. It's as if I can hear Haymitch whispering in my ear, "Say it! Say it!"

I swallow hard and get the words out. "You don't have much competition anywhere." And this time, it's me who leans in.

Our lips have just barely touched when the clunk outside makes us jump. My bow comes up, the arrow ready to fly, but there's no other sound. Peeta peers through the rocks and then gives a whoop. Before I can stop him, he's out in the rain, then handing something in to me. A silver parachute attached

to a basket. I rip it open at once and inside there's a feast—fresh rolls, goat cheese, apples, and best of all, a tureen of that incredible lamb stew on wild rice. The very dish I told Caesar Flickerman was the most impressive thing the Capitol had to offer.

Peeta wriggles back inside, his face lit up like the sun. "I guess Haymitch finally got tired of watching us starve."

"I guess so," I answer.

But in my head I can hear Haymitch's smug, if slightly exasperated, words, "Yes, *that's* what I'm looking for, sweetheart."

Every cell in my body wants me to dig into the stew and cram it, handful by handful into my mouth. But Peeta's voice stops me. "We better take it slow on that stew. Remember the first night on the train? The rich food made me sick and I wasn't even starving then."

"You're right. And I could just inhale the whole thing!" I say regretfully. But I don't. We are quite sensible. We each have a roll, half an apple, and an egg-size serving of stew and rice. I make myself eat the stew in tiny spoonfuls—they even sent us silverware and plates—savoring each bite. When we finish, I stare longingly at the dish. "I want more."

"Me, too. Tell you what. We wait an hour, if it stays down, then we get another serving," Peeta says.

"Agreed," I say. "It's going to be a long hour."

"Maybe not that long," says Peeta. "What was that you were saying just before the food arrived? Something about me...no competition...best thing that ever happened to you..."

"I don't remember that last part," I say, hoping it's too dim in here for the cameras to pick up my blush.

"Oh, that's right. That's what *I* was thinking," he says. "Scoot over, I'm freezing."

I make room for him in the sleeping bag. We lean back against the cave wall, my head on his shoulder, his arms wrapped around me. I can feel Haymitch nudging me to keep up the act. "So, since we were five, you never even noticed any other girls?" I ask him.

"No, I noticed just about every girl, but none of them made a lasting impression but you," he says.

"I'm sure that would thrill your parents, you liking a girl from the Seam," I say.

"Hardly. But I couldn't care less. Anyway, if we make it back, you won't be a girl from the Seam, you'll be a girl from the Victor's Village," he says.

That's right. If we win, we'll each get a house in the part of town reserved for Hunger Games' victors. Long ago, when the Games began, the

Capitol had built a dozen fine houses in each district. Of course, in ours only one is occupied. Most of the others have never been lived in at all.

A disturbing thought hits me. “But then, our only neighbor will be Haymitch!”

“Ah, that’ll be nice,” says Peeta, tightening his arms around me. “You and me and Haymitch. Very cozy. Picnics, birthdays, long winter nights around the fire retelling old Hunger Games tales.”

“I told you, he hates me!” I say, but I can’t help laughing at the image of Haymitch becoming my new pal.

“Only sometimes. When he’s sober, I’ve never heard him say one negative thing about you,” says Peeta.

“He’s never sober!” I protest.

“That’s right. Who am I thinking of? Oh, I know. It’s Cinna who likes you. But that’s mainly because you didn’t try to run when he set you on fire,” says Peeta. “On the other hand, Haymitch...well, if I were you, I’d avoid Haymitch completely. He hates you.”

“I thought you said I was his favorite,” I say.

“He hates me more,” says Peeta. “I don’t think people in general are his sort of thing.”

I know the audience will enjoy our having fun at Haymitch’s expense. He has been around so long, he’s practically an old friend to some of them. And after his head-dive off the stage at the reaping, everybody knows him. By this time, they’ll have dragged him out of the control room for interviews about us. No telling what sort of lies he’s made up. He’s at something of a disadvantage because most mentors have a partner, another victor to help them whereas Haymitch has to be ready to go into action at any moment. Kind of like me when I was alone in the arena. I wonder how he’s holding up, with the drinking, the attention, and the stress of trying to keep us alive.

It’s funny. Haymitch and I don’t get along well in person, but maybe Peeta is right about us being alike because he seems able to communicate with me by the timing of his gifts. Like how I knew I must be close to water when he withheld it and how I knew the sleep syrup just wasn’t something to ease Peeta’s pain and how I know now that I have to play up the romance. He hasn’t made much effort to connect with Peeta really. Perhaps he thinks a bowl of broth would just be a bowl of broth to Peeta, whereas I’ll see the strings attached to it.

A thought hits me, and I'm amazed the question's taken so long to surface. Maybe it's because I've only recently begun to view Haymitch with a degree of curiosity. "How do you think he did it?"

"Who? Did what?" Peeta asks.

"Haymitch. How do you think he won the Games?" I say.

Peeta considers this quite a while before he answers. Haymitch is sturdily built, but no physical wonder like Cato or Thresh. He's not particularly handsome. Not in the way that causes sponsors to rain gifts on you. And he's so surly, it's hard to imagine anyone teaming up with him. There's only one way Haymitch could have won, and Peeta says it just as I'm reaching this conclusion myself.

"He outsmarted the others," says Peeta.

I nod, then let the conversation drop. But secretly I'm wondering if Haymitch sobered up long enough to help Peeta and me because he thought we just might have the wits to survive. Maybe he wasn't always a drunk. Maybe, in the beginning, he tried to help the tributes. But then it got unbearable. It must be hell to mentor two kids and then watch them die. Year after year after year. I realize that if I get out of here, that will become my job. To mentor the girl from District 12. The idea is so repellent, I thrust it from my mind.

About half an hour has passed before I decide I have to eat again. Peeta's too hungry himself to put up an argument. While I'm dishing up two more small servings of lamb stew and rice, we hear the anthem begin to play. Peeta presses his eyes against a crack in the rocks to watch the sky.

"There won't be anything to see tonight," I say, far more interested in the stew than the sky. "Nothing's happened or we would've heard a cannon."

"Katniss," Peeta says quietly.

"What? Should we split another roll, too?" I ask.

"Katniss," he repeats, but I find myself wanting to ignore him.

"I'm going to split one. But I'll save the cheese for tomorrow," I say. I see Peeta staring at me. "What?"

"Thresh is dead," says Peeta.

"He can't be," I say.

"They must have fired the cannon during the thunder and we missed it," says Peeta.

“Are you sure? I mean, it’s pouring buckets out there. I don’t know how you can see anything,” I say. I push him away from the rocks and squint out into the dark, rainy sky. For about ten seconds, I catch a distorted glimpse of Thresh’s picture and then he’s gone. Just like that.

I slump down against the rocks, momentarily forgetting about the task at hand. Thresh dead. I should be happy, right? One less tribute to face. And a powerful one, too. But I’m not happy. All I can think about is Thresh letting me go, letting me run because of Rue, who died with that spear in her stomach....

“You all right?” asks Peeta.

I give a noncommittal shrug and cup my elbows in my hands, hugging them close to my body. I have to bury the real pain because who’s going to bet on a tribute who keeps sniveling over the deaths of her opponents. Rue was one thing. We were allies. She was so young. But no one will understand my sorrow at Thresh’s murder. The word pulls me up short. Murder! Thankfully, I didn’t say it aloud. That’s not going to win me any points in the arena. What I do say is, “It’s just...if we didn’t win...I wanted Thresh to. Because he let me go. And because of Rue.”

“Yeah, I know,” says Peeta. “But this means we’re one step closer to District Twelve.” He nudges a plate of food into my hands. “Eat. It’s still warm.”

I take a bite of the stew to show I don’t really care, but it’s like glue in my mouth and takes a lot of effort to swallow. “It also means Cato will be back hunting us.”

“And he’s got supplies again,” says Peeta.

“He’ll be wounded, I bet,” I say.

“What makes you say that?” Peeta asks.

“Because Thresh would have never gone down without a fight. He’s so strong, I mean, he was. And they were in his territory,” I say.

“Good,” says Peeta. “The more wounded Cato is the better. I wonder how Foxface is making out.”

“Oh, she’s fine,” I say peevishly. I’m still angry she thought of hiding in the Cornucopia and I didn’t. “Probably be easier to catch Cato than her.”

“Maybe they’ll catch each other and we can just go home,” says Peeta. “But we better be extra careful about the watches. I dozed off a few times.”

“Me, too,” I admit. “But not tonight.”

We finish our food in silence and then Peeta offers to take the first watch. I burrow down in the sleeping bag next to him, pulling my hood up over my face to hide it from the cameras. I just need a few moments of privacy where I can let any emotion cross my face without being seen. Under the hood, I silently say good-bye to Thresh and thank him for my life. I promise to remember him and, if I can, do something to help his family and Rue's, if I win. Then I escape into sleep, comforted by a full belly and the steady warmth of Peeta beside me.

When Peeta wakes me later, the first thing I register is the smell of goat cheese. He's holding out half a roll spread with the creamy white stuff and topped with apple slices. "Don't be mad," he says. "I had to eat again. Here's your half."

"Oh, good," I say, immediately taking a huge bite. The strong fatty cheese tastes just like the kind Prim makes, the apples are sweet and crunchy. "Mm."

"We make a goat cheese and apple tart at the bakery," he says.

"Bet that's expensive," I say.

"Too expensive for my family to eat. Unless it's gone very stale. Of course, practically everything we eat is stale," says Peeta, pulling the sleeping bag up around him. In less than a minute, he's snoring.

Huh. I always assumed the shopkeepers live a soft life. And it's true, Peeta has always had enough to eat. But there's something kind of depressing about living your life on stale bread, the hard, dry loaves that no one else wanted. One thing about us, since I bring our food home on a daily basis, most of it is so fresh you have to make sure it isn't going to make a run for it.

Somewhere during my shift, the rain stops not gradually but all at once. The downpour ends and there's only the residual drippings of water from branches, the rush of the now overflowing stream below us. A full, beautiful moon emerges, and even without the glasses I can see outside. I can't decide if the moon is real or merely a projection of the Gamemakers. I know it was full shortly before I left home. Gale and I watched it rise as we hunted into the late hours.

How long have I been gone? I'm guessing it's been about two weeks in the arena, and there was that week of preparation in the Capitol. Maybe the moon has completed its cycle. For some reason, I badly want it to be my moon, the same one I see from the woods around District 12. That would

give me something to cling to in the surreal world of the arena where the authenticity of everything is to be doubted.

Four of us left.

For the first time, I allow myself to truly think about the possibility that I might make it home. To fame. To wealth. To my own house in the Victor's Village. My mother and Prim would live there with me. No more fear of hunger. A new kind of freedom. But then...what? What would my life be like on a daily basis? Most of it has been consumed with the acquisition of food. Take that away and I'm not really sure who I am, what my identity is. The idea scares me some. I think of Haymitch, with all his money. What did his life become? He lives alone, no wife or children, most of his waking hours drunk. I don't want to end up like that.

"But you won't be alone," I whisper to myself. I have my mother and Prim. Well, for the time being. And then...I don't want to think about then, when Prim has grown up, my mother passed away. I know I'll never marry, never risk bringing a child into the world. Because if there's one thing being a victor doesn't guarantee, it's your children's safety. My kids' names would go right into the reaping balls with everyone else's. And I swear I'll never let that happen.

The sun eventually rises, its light slipping through the cracks and illuminating Peeta's face. Who will he transform into if we make it home? This perplexing, good-natured boy who can spin out lies so convincingly the whole of Panem believes him to be hopelessly in love with me, and I'll admit it, there are moments when he makes me believe it myself? *At least, we'll be friends*, I think. Nothing will change the fact that we've saved each other's lives in here. And beyond that, he will always be the boy with the bread. *Good friends*. Anything beyond that though...and I feel Gale's gray eyes watching me watching Peeta, all the way from District 12.

Discomfort causes me to move. I scoot over and shake Peeta's shoulder. His eyes open sleepily and when they focus on me, he pulls me down for a long kiss.

"We're wasting hunting time," I say when I finally break away.

"I wouldn't call it wasting," he says, giving a big stretch as he sits up. "So do we hunt on empty stomachs to give us an edge?"

"Not us," I say. "We stuff ourselves to give us staying power."

“Count me in,” Peeta says. But I can see he’s surprised when I divide the rest of the stew and rice and hand a heaping plate to him. “All this?”

“We’ll earn it back today,” I say, and we both plow into our plates. Even cold, it’s one of the best things I’ve ever tasted. I abandon my fork and scrape up the last dabs of gravy with my finger. “I can feel Effie Trinket shuddering at my manners.”

“Hey, Effie, watch this!” says Peeta. He tosses his fork over his shoulder and literally licks his plate clean with his tongue making loud, satisfied sounds. Then he blows a kiss out to her in general and calls, “We miss you, Effie!”

I cover his mouth with my hand, but I’m laughing. “Stop! Cato could be right outside our cave.”

He grabs my hand away. “What do I care? I’ve got you to protect me now,” says Peeta, pulling me to him.

“Come on,” I say in exasperation, extricating myself from his grasp but not before he gets in another kiss.

Once we’re packed up and standing outside our cave, our mood shifts to serious. It’s as though for the last few days, sheltered by the rocks and the rain and Cato’s preoccupation with Thresh, we were given a respite, a holiday of sorts. Now, although the day is sunny and warm, we both sense we’re really back in the Games. I hand Peeta my knife, since whatever weapons he once had are long gone, and he slips it into his belt. My last seven arrows—of the twelve I sacrificed three in the explosion, two at the feast—rattle a bit too loosely in the quiver. I can’t afford to lose any more.

“He’ll be hunting us by now,” says Peeta. “Cato isn’t one to wait for his prey to wander by.”

“If he’s wounded—” I begin.

“It won’t matter,” Peeta breaks in. “If he can move, he’s coming.”

With all the rain, the stream has overrun its banks by several feet on either side. We stop there to replenish our water. I check the snares I set days ago and come up empty. Not surprising with the weather. Besides, I haven’t seen many animals or signs of them in this area.

“If we want food, we better head back up to my old hunting grounds,” I say.

“Your call. Just tell me what you need me to do,” Peeta says.

“Keep an eye out,” I say. “Stay on the rocks as much as possible, no sense in leaving him tracks to follow. And listen for both of us.” It’s clear, at this point, that the explosion destroyed the hearing in my left ear for good.

I’d walk in the water to cover our tracks completely, but I’m not sure Peeta’s leg could take the current. Although the drugs have erased the infection, he’s still pretty weak. My forehead hurts along the knife cut, but after three days the bleeding has stopped. I wear a bandage around my head though, just in case physical exertion should bring it back.

As we head up alongside the stream, we pass the place where I found Peeta camouflaged in the weeds and mud. One good thing, between the downpour and the flooded banks, all signs of his hiding place have been wiped out. That means that, if need be, we can come back to our cave. Otherwise, I wouldn’t risk it with Cato after us.

The boulders diminish to rocks that eventually turn to pebbles, and then, to my relief, we’re back on pine needles and the gentle incline of the forest floor. For the first time, I realize we have a problem. Navigating the rocky terrain with a bad leg—well, you’re naturally going to make some noise. But even on the smooth bed of needles, Peeta is loud. And I mean *loud* loud, as if he’s stomping his feet or something. I turn and look at him.

“What?” he asks.

“You’ve got to move more quietly,” I say. “Forget about Cato, you’re chasing off every rabbit in a ten-mile radius.”

“Really?” he says. “Sorry, I didn’t know.”

So, we start up again and he’s a tiny bit better, but even with only one working ear, he’s making me jump.

“Can you take your boots off?” I suggest.

“Here?” he asks in disbelief, as if I’d asked him to walk barefoot on hot coals or something. I have to remind myself that he’s still not used to the woods, that it’s the scary, forbidden place beyond the fences of District 12. I think of Gale, with his velvet tread. It’s eerie how little sound he makes, even when the leaves have fallen and it’s a challenge to move at all without chasing off the game. I feel certain he’s laughing back home.

“Yes,” I say patiently. “I will, too. That way we’ll both be quieter.” Like I was making any noise. So we both strip off our boots and socks and, while there’s some improvement, I could swear he’s making an effort to snap every branch we encounter.

Needless to say, although it takes several hours to reach my old camp with Rue, I've shot nothing. If the stream would settle down, fish might be an option, but the current is still too strong. As we stop to rest and drink water, I try to work out a solution. Ideally, I'd dump Peeta now with some simple root-gathering chore and go hunt, but then he'd be left with only a knife to defend himself against Cato's spears and superior strength. So what I'd really like is to try and conceal him somewhere safe, then go hunt, and come back and collect him. But I have a feeling his ego isn't going to go for that suggestion.

"Katniss," he says. "We need to split up. I know I'm chasing away the game."

"Only because your leg's hurt," I say generously, because really, you can tell that's only a small part of the problem.

"I know," he says. "So, why don't you go on? Show me some plants to gather and that way we'll both be useful."

"Not if Cato comes and kills you." I tried to say it in a nice way, but it still sounds like I think he's a weakling.

Surprisingly, he just laughs. "Look, I can handle Cato. I fought him before, didn't I?"

Yeah, and that turned out great. You ended up dying in a mud bank. That's what I want to say, but I can't. He did save my life by taking on Cato after all. I try another tactic. "What if you climbed up in a tree and acted as a lookout while I hunted?" I say, trying to make it sound like very important work.

"What if you show me what's edible around here and go get us some meat?" he says, mimicking my tone. "Just don't go far, in case you need help."

I sigh and show him some roots to dig. We do need food, no question. One apple, two rolls, and a blob of cheese the size of a plum won't last long. I'll just go a short distance and hope Cato is a long way off.

I teach him a bird whistle—not a melody like Rue's but a simple two-note whistle—which we can use to communicate that we're all right. Fortunately, he's good at this. Leaving him with the pack, I head off.

I feel like I'm eleven again, tethered not to the safety of the fence but to Peeta, allowing myself twenty, maybe thirty yards of hunting space. Away from him though, the woods come alive with animal sounds. Reassured by his periodic whistles, I allow myself to drift farther away, and soon have two

rabbits and a fat squirrel to show for it. I decide it's enough. I can set snares and maybe get some fish. With Peeta's roots, this will be enough for now.

As I travel the short distance back, I realize we haven't exchanged signals in a while. When my whistle receives no response, I run. In no time, I find the pack, a neat pile of roots beside it. The sheet of plastic has been laid on the ground where the sun can reach the single layer of berries that covers it. But where is he?

"Peeta!" I call out in a panic. "Peeta!" I turn to the rustle of brush and almost send an arrow through him. Fortunately, I pull my bow at the last second and it sticks in an oak trunk to his left. He jumps back, flinging a handful of berries into the foliage.

My fear comes out as anger. "What are you doing? You're supposed to be here, not running around in the woods!"

"I found some berries down by the stream," he says, clearly confused by my outburst.

"I whistled. Why didn't you whistle back?" I snap at him.

"I didn't hear. The water's too loud, I guess," he says. He crosses and puts his hands on my shoulders. That's when I feel that I'm trembling.

"I thought Cato killed you!" I almost shout.

"No, I'm fine." Peeta wraps his arms around me, but I don't respond. "Katniss?"

I push away, trying to sort out my feelings. "If two people agree on a signal, they stay in range. Because if one of them doesn't answer, they're in trouble, all right?"

"All right!" he says.

"All right. Because that's what happened with Rue, and I watched her die!" I say. I turn away from him, go to the pack and open a fresh bottle of water, although I still have some in mine. But I'm not ready to forgive him. I notice the food. The rolls and apples are untouched, but someone's definitely picked away part of the cheese. "And you ate without me!" I really don't care, I just want something else to be mad about.

"What? No, I didn't," Peeta says.

"Oh, and I suppose the apples ate the cheese," I say.

"I don't know what ate the cheese," Peeta says slowly and distinctly, as if trying not to lose his temper, "but it wasn't me. I've been down by the stream collecting berries. Would you care for some?"

I would actually, but I don't want to relent too soon. I do walk over and look at them. I've never seen this type before. No, I have. But not in the arena. These aren't Rue's berries, although they resemble them. Nor do they match any I learned about in training. I lean down and scoop up a few, rolling them between my fingers.

My father's voice comes back to me. "Not these, Katniss. Never these. They're nightlock. You'll be dead before they reach your stomach."

Just then, the cannon fires. I whip around, expecting Peeta to collapse to the ground, but he only raises his eyebrows. The hovercraft appears a hundred yards or so away. What's left of Foxface's emaciated body is lifted into the air. I can see the red glint of her hair in the sunlight.

I should have known the moment I saw the missing cheese....

Peeta has me by the arm, pushing me toward a tree. "Climb. He'll be here in a second. We'll stand a better chance fighting him from above."

I stop him, suddenly calm. "No, Peeta, she's your kill, not Cato's."

"What? I haven't even seen her since the first day," he says. "How could I have killed her?"

In answer, I hold out the berries.

It takes a while to explain the situation to Peeta. How Foxface stole the food from the supply pile before I blew it up, how she tried to take enough to stay alive but not enough that anyone would notice it, how she wouldn't question the safety of berries we were preparing to eat ourselves.

"I wonder how she found us," says Peeta. "My fault, I guess, if I'm as loud as you say."

We were about as hard to follow as a herd of cattle, but I try to be kind. "And she's very clever, Peeta. Well, she was. Until you outfoxed her."

"Not on purpose. Doesn't seem fair somehow. I mean, we would have both been dead, too, if she hadn't eaten the berries first." He checks himself. "No, of course, we wouldn't. You recognized them, didn't you?"

I give a nod. "We call them nightlock."

"Even the name sounds deadly," he says. "I'm sorry, Katniss. I really thought they were the same ones you'd gathered."

"Don't apologize. It just means we're one step closer to home, right?" I ask.

"I'll get rid of the rest," Peeta says. He gathers up the sheet of blue plastic, careful to trap the berries inside, and goes to toss them into the woods.

"Wait!" I cry. I find the leather pouch that belonged to the boy from District 1 and fill it with a few handfuls of berries from the plastic. "If they fooled Foxface, maybe they can fool Cato as well. If he's chasing us or something, we can act like we accidentally drop the pouch and if he eats them—"

"Then hello District Twelve," says Peeta.

"That's it," I say, securing the pouch to my belt.

"He'll know where we are now," says Peeta. "If he was anywhere nearby and saw that hovercraft, he'll know we killed her and come after us."

Peeta's right. This could be just the opportunity Cato's been waiting for. But even if we run now, there's the meat to cook and our fire will be another

sign of our whereabouts. “Let’s make a fire. Right now.” I begin to gather branches and brush.

“Are you ready to face him?” Peeta asks.

“I’m ready to eat. Better to cook our food while we have the chance. If he knows we’re here, he knows. But he also knows there’s two of us and probably assumes we were hunting Foxface. That means you’re recovered. And the fire means we’re not hiding, we’re inviting him here. Would you show up?” I ask.

“Maybe not,” he says.

Peeta’s a whiz with fires, coaxing a blaze out of the damp wood. In no time, I have the rabbits and squirrel roasting, the roots, wrapped in leaves, baking in the coals. We take turns gathering greens and keeping a careful watch for Cato, but as I anticipated, he doesn’t make an appearance. When the food’s cooked, I pack most of it up, leaving us each a rabbit’s leg to eat as we walk.

I want to move higher into the woods, climb a good tree, and make camp for the night, but Peeta resists. “I can’t climb like you, Katniss, especially with my leg, and I don’t think I could ever fall asleep fifty feet above the ground.”

“It’s not safe to stay in the open, Peeta,” I say.

“Can’t we go back to the cave?” he asks. “It’s near water and easy to defend.”

I sigh. Several more hours of walking—or should I say crashing—through the woods to reach an area we’ll just have to leave in the morning to hunt. But Peeta doesn’t ask for much. He’s followed my instructions all day and I’m sure if things were reversed, he wouldn’t make me spend the night in a tree. It dawns on me that I haven’t been very nice to Peeta today. Nagging him about how loud he was, screaming at him over disappearing. The playful romance we had sustained in the cave has disappeared out in the open, under the hot sun, with the threat of Cato looming over us. Haymitch has probably just about had it with me. And as for the audience...

I reach up and give him a kiss. “Sure. Let’s go back to the cave.”

He looks pleased and relieved. “Well, that was easy.”

I work my arrow out of the oak, careful not to damage the shaft. These arrows are food, safety, and life itself now.

We toss a bunch more wood on the fire. It should be sending off smoke for a few more hours, although I doubt Cato assumes anything at this point. When we reach the stream, I see the water has dropped considerably and moves at its old leisurely pace, so I suggest we walk back in it. Peeta's happy to oblige and since he's a lot quieter in water than on land, it's a doubly good idea. It's a long walk back to the cave though, even going downward, even with the rabbit to give us a boost. We're both exhausted by our hike today and still way too underfed. I keep my bow loaded, both for Cato and any fish I might see, but the stream seems strangely empty of creatures.

By the time we reach our destination, our feet are dragging and the sun sits low on the horizon. We fill up our water bottles and climb the little slope to our den. It's not much, but out here in the wilderness, it's the closest thing we have to a home. It will be warmer than a tree, too, because it provides some shelter from the wind that has begun to blow steadily in from the west. I set a good dinner out, but halfway through Peeta begins to nod off. After days of inactivity, the hunt has taken its toll. I order him into the sleeping bag and set aside the rest of his food for when he wakes. He drops off immediately. I pull the sleeping bag up to his chin and kiss his forehead, not for the audience, but for me. Because I'm so grateful that he's still here, not dead by the stream as I'd thought. So glad that I don't have to face Cato alone.

Brutal, bloody Cato who can snap a neck with a twist of his arm, who had the power to overcome Thresh, who has had it out for me since the beginning. He probably has had a special hatred for me ever since I outscored him in training. A boy like Peeta would simply shrug that off. But I have a feeling it drove Cato to distraction. Which is not that hard. I think of his ridiculous reaction to finding the supplies blown up. The others were upset, of course, but he was completely unhinged. I wonder now if Cato might not be entirely sane.

The sky lights up with the seal, and I watch Foxface shine in the sky and then disappear from the world forever. He hasn't said it, but I don't think Peeta felt good about killing her, even if it was essential. I can't pretend I'll miss her, but I have to admire her. My guess is if they had given us some sort of test, she would have been the smartest of all the tributes. If, in fact, we had been setting a trap for her, I bet she'd have sensed it and avoided the berries. It was Peeta's own ignorance that brought her down. I've spent so much time

making sure I don't underestimate my opponents that I've forgotten it's just as dangerous to overestimate them as well.

That brings me back to Cato. But while I think I had a sense of Foxface, who she was and how she operated, he's a little more slippery. Powerful, well trained, but smart? I don't know. Not like she was. And utterly lacking in the control Foxface demonstrated. I believe Cato could easily lose his judgment in a fit of temper. Not that I can feel superior on that point. I think of the moment I sent the arrow flying into the apple in the pig's mouth when I was so enraged. Maybe I do understand Cato better than I think.

Despite the fatigue in my body, my mind's alert, so I let Peeta sleep long past our usual switch. In fact, a soft gray day has begun when I shake his shoulder. He looks out, almost in alarm. "I slept the whole night. That's not fair, Katniss, you should have woken me."

I stretch and burrow down into the bag. "I'll sleep now. Wake me if anything interesting happens."

Apparently nothing does, because when I open my eyes, bright hot afternoon light gleams through the rocks. "Any sign of our friend?" I ask.

Peeta shakes his head. "No, he's keeping a disturbingly low profile."

"How long do you think we'll have before the Gamemakers drive us together?" I ask.

"Well, Foxface died almost a day ago, so there's been plenty of time for the audience to place bets and get bored. I guess it could happen at any moment," says Peeta.

"Yeah, I have a feeling today's the day," I say. I sit up and look out at the peaceful terrain. "I wonder how they'll do it."

Peeta remains silent. There's not really any good answer.

"Well, until they do, no sense in wasting a hunting day. But we should probably eat as much as we can hold just in case we run into trouble," I say.

Peeta packs up our gear while I lay out a big meal. The rest of the rabbits, roots, greens, the rolls spread with the last bit of cheese. The only thing I leave in reserve is the squirrel and the apple.

By the time we're done, all that's left is a pile of rabbit bones. My hands are greasy, which only adds to my growing feeling of grubbiness. Maybe we don't bathe daily in the Seam, but we keep cleaner than I have of late. Except for my feet, which have walked in the stream, I'm covered in a layer of grime.

Leaving the cave has a sense of finality about it. I don't think there will be another night in the arena somehow. One way or the other, dead or alive, I have the feeling I'll escape it today. I give the rocks a pat good-bye and we head down to the stream to wash up. I can feel my skin, itching for the cool water. I may do my hair and braid it back wet. I'm wondering if we might even be able to give our clothes a quick scrub when we reach the stream. Or what used to be the stream. Now there's only a bone-dry bed. I put my hand down to feel it.

"Not even a little damp. They must have drained it while we slept," I say. A fear of the cracked tongue, aching body and fuzzy mind brought on by my previous dehydration creeps into my consciousness. Our bottles and skin are fairly full, but with two drinking and this hot sun it won't take long to deplete them.

"The lake," says Peeta. "That's where they want us to go."

"Maybe the ponds still have some," I say hopefully.

"We can check," he says, but he's just humoring me. I'm humoring myself because I know what I'll find when we return to the pond where I soaked my leg. A dusty, gaping mouth of a hole. But we make the trip anyway just to confirm what we already know.

"You're right. They're driving us to the lake," I say. Where there's no cover. Where they're guaranteed a bloody fight to the death with nothing to block their view. "Do you want to go straightaway or wait until the water's tapped out?"

"Let's go now, while we've had food and rest. Let's just go end this thing," he says.

I nod. It's funny. I feel almost as if it's the first day of the Games again. That I'm in the same position. Twenty-one tributes are dead, but I still have yet to kill Cato. And really, wasn't he always the one to kill? Now it seems the other tributes were just minor obstacles, distractions, keeping us from the real battle of the Games. Cato and me.

But no, there's the boy waiting beside me. I feel his arms wrap around me.

"Two against one. Should be a piece of cake," he says.

"Next time we eat, it will be in the Capitol," I answer.

"You bet it will," he says.

We stand there a while, locked in an embrace, feeling each other, the sunlight, the rustle of the leaves at our feet. Then without a word, we break apart and head for the lake.

I don't care now that Peeta's footfalls send rodents scurrying, make birds take wing. We have to fight Cato and I'd just as soon do it here as on the plain. But I doubt I'll have that choice. If the Gamemakers want us in the open, then in the open we will be.

We stop to rest for a few moments under the tree where the Careers trapped me. The husk of the tracker jacker nest, beaten to a pulp by the heavy rains and dried in the burning sun, confirms the location. I touch it with the tip of my boot, and it dissolves into dust that is quickly carried off by the breeze. I can't help looking up in the tree where Rue secretly perched, waiting to save my life. Tracker jackers. Glimmer's bloated body. The terrifying hallucinations...

"Let's move on," I say, wanting to escape the darkness that surrounds this place. Peeta doesn't object.

Given our late start to the day, when we reach the plain it's already early evening. There's no sign of Cato. No sign of anything except the gold Cornucopia glowing in the slanting sun rays. Just in case Cato decided to pull a Foxface on us, we circle the Cornucopia to make sure it's empty. Then obediently, as if following instructions, we cross to the lake and fill our water containers.

I frown at the shrinking sun. "We don't want to fight him after dark. There's only the one pair of glasses."

Peeta carefully squeezes drops of iodine into the water. "Maybe that's what he's waiting for. What do you want to do? Go back to the cave?"

"Either that or find a tree. But let's give him another half an hour or so. Then we'll take cover," I answer.

We sit by the lake, in full sight. There's no point in hiding now. In the trees at the edge of the plain, I can see the mockingjays flitting about. Bouncing melodies back and forth between them like brightly colored balls. I open my mouth and sing out Rue's four-note run. I can feel them pause curiously at the sound of my voice, listening for more. I repeat the notes in the silence. First one mockingjay trills the tune back, then another. Then the whole world comes alive with the sound.

"Just like your father," says Peeta.

My fingers find the pin on my shirt. “That’s Rue’s song,” I say. “I think they remember it.”

The music swells and I recognize the brilliance of it. As the notes overlap, they complement one another, forming a lovely, unearthly harmony. It was this sound then, thanks to Rue, that sent the orchard workers of District 11 home each night. Does someone start it at quitting time, I wonder, now that she is dead?

For a while, I just close my eyes and listen, mesmerized by the beauty of the song. Then something begins to disrupt the music. Runs cut off in jagged, imperfect lines. Dissonant notes intersperse with the melody. The mockingjays’ voices rise up in a shrieking cry of alarm.

We’re on our feet, Peeta wielding his knife, me poised to shoot, when Cato smashes through the trees and bears down on us. He has no spear. In fact, his hands are empty, yet he runs straight for us. My first arrow hits his chest and inexplicably falls aside.

“He’s got some kind of body armor!” I shout to Peeta.

Just in time, too, because Cato is upon us. I brace myself, but he rockets right between us with no attempt to check his speed. I can tell from his panting, the sweat pouring off his purplish face, that he’s been running hard a long time. Not toward us. From something. But what?

My eyes scan the woods just in time to see the first creature leap onto the plain. As I’m turning away, I see another half dozen join it. Then I am stumbling blindly after Cato with no thought of anything but to save myself.

Mutations. No question about it. I've never seen these mutts, but they're no natural-born animals. They resemble huge wolves, but what wolf lands and then balances easily on its hind legs? What wolf waves the rest of the pack forward with its front paw as though it had a wrist? These things I can see at a distance. Up close, I'm sure their more menacing attributes will be revealed.

Cato has made a beeline for the Cornucopia, and without question I follow him. If he thinks it's the safest place, who am I to argue? Besides, even if I could make it to the trees, it would be impossible for Peeta to outrun them on that leg—Peeta! My hands have just landed on the metal at the pointed tail of the Cornucopia when I remember I'm part of a team. He's about fifteen yards behind me, hobbling as fast as he can, but the mutts are closing in on him fast. I send an arrow into the pack and one goes down, but there are plenty to take its place.

Peeta's waving me up the horn, "Go, Katniss! Go!"

He's right. I can't protect either of us on the ground. I start climbing, scaling the Cornucopia on my hands and feet. The pure gold surface has been designed to resemble the woven horn that we fill at harvest, so there are little ridges and seams to get a decent hold on. But after a day in the arena sun, the metal feels hot enough to blister my hands.

Cato lies on his side at the very top of the horn, twenty feet above the ground, gasping to catch his breath as he gags over the edge. Now's my chance to finish him off. I stop midway up the horn and load another arrow, but just as I'm about to let it fly, I hear Peeta cry out. I twist around and see he's just reached the tail, and the mutts are right on his heels.

"Climb!" I yell. Peeta starts up hampered by not only the leg but the knife in his hand. I shoot my arrow down the throat of the first mutt that places its paws on the metal. As it dies the creature lashes out, inadvertently opening gashes on a few of its companions. That's when I get a look at the claws. Four inches and clearly razor-sharp.

Peeta reaches my feet and I grab his arm and pull him along. Then I remember Cato waiting at the top and whip around, but he's doubled over with cramps and apparently more preoccupied with the mutts than us. He coughs out something unintelligible. The snuffling, growling sound coming from the mutts isn't helping.

"What?" I shout at him.

"He said, 'Can they climb it?'" answers Peeta, drawing my focus back to the base of the horn.

The mutts are beginning to assemble. As they join together, they raise up again to stand easily on their back legs giving them an eerily human quality. Each has a thick coat, some with fur that is straight and sleek, others curly, and the colors vary from jet black to what I can only describe as blond. There's something else about them, something that makes the hair rise up on the back of my neck, but I can't put my finger on it.

They put their snouts on the horn, sniffing and tasting the metal, scraping paws over the surface and then making high-pitched yipping sounds to one another. This must be how they communicate because the pack backs up as if to make room. Then one of them, a good-size mutt with silky waves of blond fur takes a running start and leaps onto the horn. Its back legs must be incredibly powerful because it lands a mere ten feet below us, its pink lips pulled back in a snarl. For a moment it hangs there, and in that moment I realize what else unsettled me about the mutts. The green eyes glowering at me are unlike any dog or wolf, any canine I've ever seen. They are unmistakably human. And that revelation has barely registered when I notice the collar with the number *I* inlaid with jewels and the whole horrible thing hits me. The blonde hair, the green eyes, the number...it's Glimmer.

A shriek escapes my lips and I'm having trouble holding the arrow in place. I have been waiting to fire, only too aware of my dwindling supply of arrows. Waiting to see if the creatures can, in fact, climb. But now, even though the mutt has begun to slide backward, unable to find any purchase on the metal, even though I can hear the slow screeching of the claws like nails on a blackboard, I fire into its throat. Its body twitches and flops onto the ground with a thud.

"Katniss?" I can feel Peeta's grip on my arm.

"It's her!" I get out.

"Who?" asks Peeta.

My head snaps from side to side as I examine the pack, taking in the various sizes and colors. The small one with the red coat and amber eyes... Foxface! And there, the ashen hair and hazel eyes of the boy from District 9 who died as we struggled for the backpack! And worst of all, the smallest mutt, with dark glossy fur, huge brown eyes and a collar that reads *11* in woven straw. Teeth bared in hatred. Rue...

"What is it, Katniss?" Peeta shakes my shoulder.

"It's them. It's all of them. The others. Rue and Foxface and...all of the other tributes," I choke out.

I hear Peeta's gasp of recognition. "What did they do to them? You don't think...those could be their real eyes?"

Their eyes are the least of my worries. What about their brains? Have they been given any of the real tributes memories? Have they been programmed to hate our faces particularly because we have survived and they were so callously murdered? And the ones we actually killed...do they believe they're avenging their own deaths?

Before I can get this out, the mutts begin a new assault on the horn. They've split into two groups at the sides of the horn and are using those powerful hindquarters to launch themselves at us. A pair of teeth ring together just inches from my hand and then I hear Peeta cry out, feel the yank on his body, the heavy weight of boy and mutt pulling me over the side. If not for the grip on my arm, he'd be on the ground, but as it is, it takes all my strength to keep us both on the curved back of the horn. And more tributes are coming.

"Kill it, Peeta! Kill it!" I'm shouting, and although I can't quite see what's happening, I know he must have stabbed the thing because the pull lessens. I'm able to haul him back onto the horn where we drag ourselves toward the top where the lesser of two evils awaits.

Cato has still not regained his feet, but his breathing is slowing and I know soon he'll be recovered enough to come for us, to hurl us over the side to our deaths. I arm my bow, but the arrow ends up taking out a mutt that can only be Thresh. Who else could jump so high? I feel a moment's relief because we must finally be up above the mutt line and I'm just turning back to face Cato when Peeta's jerked from my side. I'm sure the pack has got him until his blood splatters my face.

Cato stands before me, almost at the lip of the horn, holding Peeta in some kind of headlock, cutting off his air. Peeta's clawing at Cato's arm, but weakly, as if confused over whether it's more important to breathe or try and stem the gush of blood from the gaping hole a mutt left in his calf.

I aim one of my last two arrows at Cato's head, knowing it'll have no effect on his trunk or limbs, which I can now see are clothed in a skintight, flesh-colored mesh. Some high-grade body armor from the Capitol. Was that what was in his pack at the feast? Body armor to defend against my arrows? Well, they neglected to send a face guard.

Cato just laughs. "Shoot me and he goes down with me."

He's right. If I take him out and he falls to the mutts, Peeta is sure to die with him. We've reached a stalemate. I can't shoot Cato without killing Peeta, too. He can't kill Peeta without guaranteeing an arrow in his brain. We stand like statues, both of us seeking an out.

My muscles are strained so tightly, they feel they might snap at any moment. My teeth clenched to the breaking point. The mutts go silent and the only thing I can hear is the blood pounding in my good ear.

Peeta's lips are turning blue. If I don't do something quickly, he'll die of asphyxiation and then I'll have lost him and Cato will probably use his body as a weapon against me. In fact, I'm sure this is Cato's plan because while he's stopped laughing, his lips are set in a triumphant smile.

As if in a last-ditch effort, Peeta raises his fingers, dripping with blood from his leg, up to Cato's arm. Instead of trying to wrestle his way free, his forefinger veers off and makes a deliberate *X* on the back of Cato's hand. Cato realizes what it means exactly one second after I do. I can tell by the way the smile drops from his lips. But it's one second too late because, by that time, my arrow is piercing his hand. He cries out and reflexively releases Peeta who slams back against him. For a horrible moment, I think they're both going over. I dive forward just catching hold of Peeta as Cato loses his footing on the blood-slick horn and plummets to the ground.

We hear him hit, the air leaving his body on impact, and then the mutts attack him. Peeta and I hold on to each other, waiting for the cannon, waiting for the competition to finish, waiting to be released. But it doesn't happen. Not yet. Because this is the climax of the Hunger Games, and the audience expects a show.

I don't watch, but I can hear the snarls, the growls, the howls of pain from both human and beast as Cato takes on the mutt pack. I can't understand how he can be surviving until I remember the body armor protecting him from ankle to neck and I realize what a long night this could be. Cato must have a knife or sword or something, too, something he had hidden in his clothes, because on occasion there's the death scream of a mutt or the sound of metal on metal as the blade collides with the golden horn. The combat moves around the side of the Cornucopia, and I know Cato must be attempting the one maneuver that could save his life—to make his way back around to the tail of the horn and rejoin us. But in the end, despite his remarkable strength and skill, he is simply overpowered.

I don't know how long it has been, maybe an hour or so, when Cato hits the ground and we hear the mutts dragging him, dragging him back into the Cornucopia. *Now they'll finish him off*, I think. But there's still no cannon.

Night falls and the anthem plays and there's no picture of Cato in the sky, only the faint moans coming through the metal beneath us. The icy air blowing across the plain reminds me that the Games are not over and may not be for who knows how long, and there is still no guarantee of victory.

I turn my attention to Peeta and discover his leg is bleeding as badly as ever. All our supplies, our packs, remain down by the lake where we abandoned them when we fled from the mutts. I have no bandage, nothing to staunch the flow of blood from his calf. Although I'm shaking in the biting wind, I rip off my jacket, remove my shirt, and zip back into the jacket as swiftly as possible. That brief exposure sets my teeth chattering beyond control.

Peeta's face is gray in the pale moonlight. I make him lie down before I probe his wound. Warm, slippery blood runs over my fingers. A bandage will not be enough. I've seen my mother tie a tourniquet a handful of times and try to replicate it. I cut free a sleeve from my shirt, wrap it twice around his leg just under his knee, and tie a half knot. I don't have a stick, so I take my remaining arrow and insert it in the knot, twisting it as tightly as I dare. It's risky business—Peeta may end up losing his leg—but when I weigh this against him losing his life, what alternative do I have? I bandage the wound in the rest of my shirt and lie down with him.

"Don't go to sleep," I tell him. I'm not sure if this is exactly medical protocol, but I'm terrified that if he drifts off he'll never wake again.

“Are you cold?” he asks. He unzips his jacket and I press against him as he fastens it around me. It’s a bit warmer, sharing our body heat inside my double layer of jackets, but the night is young. The temperature will continue to drop. Even now I can feel the Cornucopia, which burned so when I first climbed it, slowly turning to ice.

“Cato may win this thing yet,” I whisper to Peeta.

“Don’t you believe it,” he says, pulling up my hood, but he’s shaking harder than I am.

The next hours are the worst in my life, which if you think about it, is saying something. The cold would be torture enough, but the real nightmare is listening to Cato, moaning, begging, and finally just whimpering as the mutts work away at him. After a very short time, I don’t care who he is or what he’s done, all I want is for his suffering to end.

“Why don’t they just kill him?” I ask Peeta.

“You know why,” he says, and pulls me closer to him.

And I do. No viewer could turn away from the show now. From the Gamemakers’ point of view, this is the final word in entertainment.

It goes on and on and on and eventually completely consumes my mind, blocking out memories and hopes of tomorrow, erasing everything but the present, which I begin to believe will never change. There will never be anything but cold and fear and the agonized sounds of the boy dying in the horn.

Peeta begins to doze off now, and each time he does, I find myself yelling his name louder and louder because if he goes and dies on me now, I know I’ll go completely insane. He’s fighting it, probably more for me than for him, and it’s hard because unconsciousness would be its own form of escape. But the adrenaline pumping through my body would never allow me to follow him, so I can’t let him go. I just can’t.

The only indication of the passage of time lies in the heavens, the subtle shift of the moon. So Peeta begins pointing it out to me, insisting I acknowledge its progress and sometimes, for just a moment I feel a flicker of hope before the agony of the night engulfs me again.

Finally, I hear him whisper that the sun is rising. I open my eyes and find the stars fading in the pale light of dawn. I can see, too, how bloodless Peeta’s face has become. How little time he has left. And I know I have to get him back to the Capitol.

Still, no cannon has fired. I press my good ear against the horn and can just make out Cato's voice.

"I think he's closer now. Katniss, can you shoot him?" Peeta asks.

If he's near the mouth, I may be able to take him out. It would be an act of mercy at this point.

"My last arrow's in your tourniquet," I say.

"Make it count," says Peeta, unzipping his jacket, letting me loose.

So I free the arrow, tying the tourniquet back as tightly as my frozen fingers can manage. I rub my hands together, trying to regain circulation. When I crawl to the lip of the horn and hang over the edge, I feel Peeta's hands grip me for support.

It takes a few moments to find Cato in the dim light, in the blood. Then the raw hunk of meat that used to be my enemy makes a sound, and I know where his mouth is. And I think the word he's trying to say is *please*.

Pity, not vengeance, sends my arrow flying into his skull. Peeta pulls me back up, bow in hand, quiver empty.

"Did you get him?" he whispers.

The cannon fires in answer.

"Then we won, Katniss," he says hollowly.

"Hurray for us," I get out, but there's no joy of victory in my voice.

A hole opens in the plain and as if on cue, the remaining mutts bound into it, disappearing as the earth closes above them.

We wait, for the hovercraft to take Cato's remains, for the trumpets of victory that should follow, but nothing happens.

"Hey!" I shout into air. "What's going on?" The only response is the chatter of waking birds.

"Maybe it's the body. Maybe we have to move away from it," says Peeta.

I try to remember. Do you have to distance yourself from the dead tribute on the final kill? My brain is too muddled to be sure, but what else could be the reason for the delay?

"Okay. Think you could make it to the lake?" I ask.

"Think I better try," says Peeta. We inch down to the tail of the horn and fall to the ground. If the stiffness in my limbs is this bad, how can Peeta even move? I rise first, swinging and bending my arms and legs until I think I can help him up. Somehow, we make it back to the lake. I scoop up a handful of the cold water for Peeta and bring a second to my lips.

A mockingjay gives the long, low whistle, and tears of relief fill my eyes as the hovercraft appears and takes Cato's body away. Now they will take us. Now we can go home.

But again there's no response.

"What are they waiting for?" says Peeta weakly. Between the loss of the tourniquet and the effort it took to get to the lake, his wound has opened up again.

"I don't know," I say. Whatever the holdup is, I can't watch him lose any more blood. I get up to find a stick but almost immediately come across the arrow that bounced off Cato's body armor. It will do as well as the other arrow. As I stoop to pick it up, Claudius Templesmith's voice booms into the arena.

"Greetings to the final contestants of the Seventy-fourth Hunger Games. The earlier revision has been revoked. Closer examination of the rule book has disclosed that only one winner may be allowed," he says. "Good luck and may the odds be ever in your favor."

There's a small burst of static and then nothing more. I stare at Peeta in disbelief as the truth sinks in. They never intended to let us both live. This has all been devised by the Gamemakers to guarantee the most dramatic showdown in history. And like a fool, I bought into it.

"If you think about it, it's not that surprising," he says softly. I watch as he painfully makes it to his feet. Then he's moving toward me, as if in slow motion, his hand is pulling the knife from his belt—

Before I am even aware of my actions, my bow is loaded with the arrow pointed straight at his heart. Peeta raises his eyebrows and I see the knife has already left his hand on its way to the lake where it splashes in the water. I drop my weapons and take a step back, my face burning in what can only be shame.

"No," he says. "Do it." Peeta limps toward me and thrusts the weapons back in my hands.

"I can't," I say. "I won't."

"Do it. Before they send those mutts back or something. I don't want to die like Cato," he says.

"Then you shoot me," I say furiously, shoving the weapons back at him. "You shoot me and go home and live with it!" And as I say it, I know death right here, right now would be the easier of the two.

“You know I can’t,” Peeta says, discarding the weapons. “Fine, I’ll go first anyway.” He leans down and rips the bandage off his leg, eliminating the final barrier between his blood and the earth.

“No, you can’t kill yourself,” I say. I’m on my knees, desperately plastering the bandage back onto his wound.

“Katniss,” he says. “It’s what I want.”

“You’re not leaving me here alone,” I say. Because if he dies, I’ll never go home, not really. I’ll spend the rest of my life in this arena trying to think my way out.

“Listen,” he says, pulling me to my feet. “We both know they have to have a victor. It can only be one of us. Please, take it. For me.” And he goes on about how he loves me, what life would be without me but I’ve stopped listening because his previous words are trapped in my head, thrashing desperately around.

We both know they have to have a victor.

Yes, they have to have a victor. Without a victor, the whole thing would blow up in the Gamemakers’ faces. They’d have failed the Capitol. Might possibly even be executed, slowly and painfully while the cameras broadcast it to every screen in the country.

If Peeta and I were both to die, or they thought we were...

My fingers fumble with the pouch on my belt, freeing it. Peeta sees it and his hand clamps on my wrist. “No, I won’t let you.”

“Trust me,” I whisper. He holds my gaze for a long moment then lets me go. I loosen the top of the pouch and pour a few spoonfuls of berries into his palm. Then I fill my own. “On the count of three?”

Peeta leans down and kisses me once, very gently. “The count of three,” he says.

We stand, our backs pressed together, our empty hands locked tight.

“Hold them out. I want everyone to see,” he says.

I spread out my fingers, and the dark berries glisten in the sun. I give Peeta’s hand one last squeeze as a signal, as a good-bye, and we begin counting. “One.” Maybe I’m wrong. “Two.” Maybe they don’t care if we both die. “Three!” It’s too late to change my mind. I lift my hand to my mouth, taking one last look at the world. The berries have just passed my lips when the trumpets begin to blare.

The frantic voice of Claudius Templesmith shouts above them. “Stop! Stop! Ladies and gentlemen, I am pleased to present the victors of the Seventy-fourth Hunger Games, Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mellark! I give you—the tributes of District Twelve!”

I spew the berries from my mouth, wiping my tongue with the end of my shirt to make sure no juice remains. Peeta pulls me to the lake where we both flush our mouths with water and then collapse into each other's arms.

"You didn't swallow any?" I ask him.

He shakes his head. "You?"

"Guess I'd be dead by now if I did," I say. I can see his lips moving in reply, but I can't hear him over the roar of the crowd in the Capitol that they're playing live over the speakers.

The hovercraft materializes overhead and two ladders drop, only there's no way I'm letting go of Peeta. I keep one arm around him as I help him up, and we each place a foot on the first rung of the ladder. The electric current freezes us in place, and this time I'm glad because I'm not really sure Peeta can hang on for the whole ride. And since my eyes were looking down, I can see that while our muscles are immobile, nothing is preventing the blood from draining out of Peeta's leg. Sure enough, the minute the door closes behind us and the current stops, he slumps to the floor unconscious.

My fingers are still gripping the back of his jacket so tightly that when they take him away it tears leaving me with a fistful of black fabric. Doctors in sterile white, masked and gloved, already prepped to operate, go into action. Peeta's so pale and still on a silver table, tubes and wires springing out of him every which way, and for a moment I forget we're out of the Games and I see the doctors as just one more threat, one more pack of mutts designed to kill him. Petrified, I lunge for him, but I'm caught and thrust back into another room, and a glass door seals between us. I pound on the glass, screaming my head off. Everyone ignores me except for some Capitol attendant who appears behind me and offers me a beverage.

I slump down on the floor, my face against the door, staring uncomprehendingly at the crystal glass in my hand. Icy cold, filled with orange juice, a straw with a frilly white collar. How wrong it looks in my bloody, filthy hand with its dirt-caked nails and scars. My mouth waters at

the smell, but I place it carefully on the floor, not trusting anything so clean and pretty.

Through the glass, I see the doctors working feverishly on Peeta, their brows creased in concentration. I see the flow of liquids, pumping through the tubes, watch a wall of dials and lights that mean nothing to me. I'm not sure, but I think his heart stops twice.

It's like being home again, when they bring in the hopelessly mangled person from the mine explosion, or the woman in her third day of labor, or the famished child struggling against pneumonia and my mother and Prim, they wear that same look on their faces. Now is the time to run away to the woods, to hide in the trees until the patient is long gone and in another part of the Seam the hammers make the coffin. But I'm held here both by the hovercraft walls and the same force that holds the loved ones of the dying. How often I've seen them, ringed around our kitchen table and I thought, *Why don't they leave? Why do they stay to watch?*

And now I know. It's because you have no choice.

I startle when I catch someone staring at me from only a few inches away and then realize it's my own face reflecting back in the glass. Wild eyes, hollow cheeks, my hair in a tangled mat. Rabid. Feral. Mad. No wonder everyone is keeping a safe distance from me.

The next thing I know we've landed back on the roof of the Training Center and they're taking Peeta but leaving me behind the door. I start hurling myself against the glass, shrieking and I think I just catch a glimpse of pink hair—it must be Effie, it has to be Effie coming to my rescue—when the needle jabs me from behind.

When I wake, I'm afraid to move at first. The entire ceiling glows with a soft yellow light allowing me to see that I'm in a room containing just my bed. No doors, no windows are visible. The air smells of something sharp and antiseptic. My right arm has several tubes that extend into the wall behind me. I'm naked, but the bedclothes are soothing against my skin. I tentatively lift my left hand above the cover. Not only has it been scrubbed clean, the nails are filed in perfect ovals, the scars from the burns are less prominent. I touch my cheek, my lips, the puckered scar above my eyebrow, and am just running my fingers through my silken hair when I freeze. Apprehensively I ruffle the hair by my left ear. No, it wasn't an illusion. I can hear again.

I try and sit up, but some sort of wide restraining band around my waist keeps me from rising more than a few inches. The physical confinement makes me panic and I'm trying to pull myself up and wriggle my hips through the band when a portion of the wall slides open and in steps the redheaded Avox girl carrying a tray. The sight of her calms me and I stop trying to escape. I want to ask her a million questions, but I'm afraid any familiarity would cause her harm. Obviously I am being closely monitored. She sets the tray across my thighs and presses something that raises me to a sitting position. While she adjusts my pillows, I risk one question. I say it out loud, as clearly as my rusty voice will allow, so nothing will seem secretive. "Did Peeta make it?" She gives me a nod, and as she slips a spoon into my hand, I feel the pressure of friendship.

I guess she did not wish me dead after all. And Peeta has made it. Of course, he did. With all their expensive equipment here. Still, I hadn't been sure until now.

As the Avox leaves, the door closes noiselessly after her and I turn hungrily to the tray. A bowl of clear broth, a small serving of applesauce, and a glass of water. *This is it?* I think grouchy. Shouldn't my homecoming dinner be a little more spectacular? But I find it's an effort to finish the spare meal before me. My stomach seems to have shrunk to the size of a chestnut, and I have to wonder how long I've been out because I had no trouble eating a fairly sizable breakfast that last morning in the arena. There's usually a lag of a few days between the end of the competition and the presentation of the victor so that they can put the starving, wounded, mess of a person back together again. Somewhere, Cinna and Portia will be creating our wardrobes for the public appearances. Haymitch and Effie will be arranging the banquet for our sponsors, reviewing the questions for our final interviews. Back home, District 12 is probably in chaos as they try and organize the homecoming celebrations for Peeta and me, given that the last one was close to thirty years ago.

Home! Prim and my mother! Gale! Even the thought of Prim's scruffy old cat makes me smile. Soon I will be home!

I want to get out of this bed. To see Peeta and Cinna, to find out more about what's been going on. And why shouldn't I? I feel fine. But as I start to work my way out of the band, I feel a cold liquid seeping into my vein from one of the tubes and almost immediately lose consciousness.

This happens on and off for an indeterminate amount of time. My waking, eating, and, even though I resist the impulse to try and escape the bed, being knocked out again. I seem to be in a strange, continual twilight. Only a few things register. The redheaded Avox girl has not returned since the feeding, my scars are disappearing, and do I imagine it? Or do I hear a man's voice yelling? Not in the Capitol accent, but in the rougher cadences of home. And I can't help having a vague, comforting feeling that someone is looking out for me.

Then finally, the time arrives when I come to and there's nothing plugged into my right arm. The restraint around my middle has been removed and I am free to move about. I start to sit up but am arrested by the sight of my hands. The skin's perfection, smooth and glowing. Not only are the scars from the arena gone, but those accumulated over years of hunting have vanished without a trace. My forehead feels like satin, and when I try to find the burn on my calf, there's nothing.

I slip my legs out of bed, nervous about how they will bear my weight, and find them strong and steady. Lying at the foot of the bed is an outfit that makes me flinch. It's what all of us tributes wore in the arena. I stare at it as if it had teeth until I remember that, of course, this is what I will wear to greet my team.

I'm dressed in less than a minute and fidgeting in front of the wall where I know there's a door even if I can't see it when suddenly it slides open. I step into a wide, deserted hall that appears to have no other doors on it. But it must. And behind one of them must be Peeta. Now that I'm conscious and moving, I'm growing more and more anxious about him. He must be all right or the Avox girl wouldn't have said so. But I need to see him for myself.

"Peeta!" I call out, since there's no one to ask. I hear my name in response, but it's not his voice. It's a voice that provokes first irritation and then eagerness. Effie.

I turn and see them all waiting in a big chamber at the end of the hall—Effie, Haymitch, and Cinna. My feet take off without hesitation. Maybe a victor should show more restraint, more superiority, especially when she knows this will be on tape, but I don't care. I run for them and surprise even myself when I launch into Haymitch's arms first. When he whispers in my ear, "Nice job, sweetheart," it doesn't sound sarcastic. Effie's somewhat teary and keeps patting my hair and talking about how she told everyone we

were pearls. Cinna just hugs me tight and doesn't say anything. Then I notice Portia is absent and get a bad feeling.

"Where's Portia? Is she with Peeta? He is all right, isn't he? I mean, he's alive?" I blurt out.

"He's fine. Only they want to do your reunion live on air at the ceremony," says Haymitch.

"Oh. That's all," I say. The awful moment of thinking Peeta's dead again passes. "I guess I'd want to see that myself."

"Go on with Cinna. He has to get you ready," says Haymitch.

It's a relief to be alone with Cinna, to feel his protective arm around my shoulders as he guides me away from the cameras, down a few passages and to an elevator that leads to the lobby of the Training Center. The hospital then is far underground, even beneath the gym where the tributes practiced tying knots and throwing spears. The windows of the lobby are darkened, and a handful of guards stand on duty. No one else is there to see us cross to the tribute elevator. Our footsteps echo in the emptiness. And when we ride up to the twelfth floor, the faces of all the tributes who will never return flash across my mind and there's a heavy, tight place in my chest.

When the elevator doors open, Venia, Flavius, and Octavia engulf me, talking so quickly and ecstatically I can't make out their words. The sentiment is clear though. They are truly thrilled to see me and I'm happy to see them, too, although not like I was to see Cinna. It's more in the way one might be glad to see an affectionate trio of pets at the end of a particularly difficult day.

They sweep me into the dining room and I get a real meal—roast beef and peas and soft rolls—although my portions are still being strictly controlled. Because when I ask for seconds, I'm refused.

"No, no, no. They don't want it all coming back up on the stage," says Octavia, but she secretly slips me an extra roll under the table to let me know she's on my side.

We go back to my room and Cinna disappears for a while as the prep team gets me ready.

"Oh, they did a full body polish on you," says Flavius enviously. "Not a flaw left on your skin."

But when I look at my naked body in the mirror, all I can see is how skinny I am. I mean, I'm sure I was worse when I came out of the arena, but I

can easily count my ribs.

They take care of the shower settings for me, and they go to work on my hair, nails, and makeup when I'm done. They chatter so continuously that I barely have to reply, which is good, since I don't feel very talkative. It's funny, because even though they're rattling on about the Games, it's all about where they were or what they were doing or how they felt when a specific event occurred. "I was still in bed!" "I had just had my eyebrows dyed!" "I swear I nearly fainted!" Everything is about them, not the dying boys and girls in the arena.

We don't wallow around in the Games this way in District 12. We grit our teeth and watch because we must and try to get back to business as soon as possible when they're over. To keep from hating the prep team, I effectively tune out most of what they're saying.

Cinna comes in with what appears to be an unassuming yellow dress across his arms.

"Have you given up the whole 'girl on fire' thing?" I ask.

"You tell me," he says, and slips it over my head. I immediately notice the padding over my breasts, adding curves that hunger has stolen from my body. My hands go to my chest and I frown.

"I know," says Cinna before I can object. "But the Gamemakers wanted to alter you surgically. Haymitch had a huge fight with them over it. This was the compromise." He stops me before I can look at my reflection. "Wait, don't forget the shoes." Venia helps me into a pair of flat leather sandals and I turn to the mirror.

I am still the "girl on fire." The sheer fabric softly glows. Even the slight movement in the air sends a ripple up my body. By comparison, the chariot costume seems garish, the interview dress too contrived. In this dress, I give the illusion of wearing candlelight.

"What do you think?" asks Cinna.

"I think it's the best yet," I say. When I manage to pull my eyes away from the flickering fabric, I'm in for something of a shock. My hair's loose, held back by a simple hairband. The makeup rounds and fills out the sharp angles of my face. A clear polish coats my nails. The sleeveless dress is gathered at my ribs, not my waist, largely eliminating any help the padding would have given my figure. The hem falls just to my knees. Without heels, you can see my true stature. I look, very simply, like a girl. A young one. Fourteen at the

most. Innocent. Harmless. Yes, it is shocking that Cinna has pulled this off when you remember I've just won the Games.

This is a very calculated look. Nothing Cinna designs is arbitrary. I bite my lip trying to figure out his motivation.

"I thought it'd be something more...sophisticated-looking," I say.

"I thought Peeta would like this better," he answers carefully.

Peeta? No, it's not about Peeta. It's about the Capitol and the Gamemakers and the audience. Although I do not yet understand Cinna's design, it's a reminder the Games are not quite finished. And beneath his benign reply, I sense a warning. Of something he can't even mention in front of his own team.

We take the elevator to the level where we trained. It's customary for the victor and his or her support team to rise from beneath the stage. First the prep team, followed by the escort, the stylist, the mentor, and finally the victor. Only this year, with two victors who share both an escort and a mentor, the whole thing has had to be rethought. I find myself in a poorly lit area under the stage. A brand-new metal plate has been installed to transport me upward. You can still see small piles of sawdust, smell fresh paint. Cinna and the prep team peel off to change into their own costumes and take their positions, leaving me alone. In the gloom, I see a makeshift wall about ten yards away and assume Peeta's behind it.

The rumbling of the crowd is loud, so I don't notice Haymitch until he touches my shoulder. I spring away, startled, still half in the arena, I guess.

"Easy, just me. Let's have a look at you," Haymitch says. I hold out my arms and turn once. "Good enough."

It's not much of a compliment. "But what?" I say.

Haymitch's eyes shift around my musty holding space, and he seems to make a decision. "But nothing. How about a hug for luck?"

Okay, that's an odd request from Haymitch but, after all, we are victors. Maybe a hug for luck is in order. Only, when I put my arms around his neck, I find myself trapped in his embrace. He begins talking, very fast, very quietly in my ear, my hair concealing his lips.

"Listen up. You're in trouble. Word is the Capitol's furious about you showing them up in the arena. The one thing they can't stand is being laughed at and they're the joke of Panem," says Haymitch.

I feel dread coursing through me now, but I laugh as though Haymitch is saying something completely delightful because nothing is covering my mouth. “So, what?”

“Your only defense can be you were so madly in love you weren’t responsible for your actions.” Haymitch pulls back and adjusts my hairband. “Got it, sweetheart?” He could be talking about anything now.

“Got it,” I say. “Did you tell Peeta this?”

“Don’t have to,” says Haymitch. “He’s already there.”

“But you think I’m not?” I say, taking the opportunity to straighten a bright red bow tie Cinna must have wrestled him into.

“Since when does it matter what I think?” says Haymitch. “Better take our places.” He leads me to the metal circle. “This is your night, sweetheart. Enjoy it.” He kisses me on the forehead and disappears into the gloom.

I tug on my skirt, willing it to be longer, wanting it to cover the knocking in my knees. Then I realize it’s pointless. My whole body’s shaking like a leaf. Hopefully, it will be put down to excitement. After all, it’s my night.

The damp, moldy smell beneath the stage threatens to choke me. A cold, clammy sweat breaks out on my skin and I can’t rid myself of the feeling that the boards above my head are about to collapse, to bury me alive under the rubble. When I left the arena, when the trumpets played, I was supposed to be safe. From then on. For the rest of my life. But if what Haymitch says is true, and he’s got no reason to lie, I’ve never been in such a dangerous place in my life.

It’s so much worse than being hunted in the arena. There, I could only die. End of story. But out here Prim, my mother, Gale, the people of District 12, everyone I care about back home could be punished if I can’t pull off the girl-driven-crazy-by-love scenario Haymitch has suggested.

So I still have a chance, though. Funny, in the arena, when I poured out those berries, I was only thinking of outsmarting the Gamemakers, not how my actions would reflect on the Capitol. But the Hunger Games are their weapon and you are not supposed to be able to defeat it. So now the Capitol will act as if they’ve been in control the whole time. As if they orchestrated the whole event, right down to the double suicide. But that will only work if I play along with them.

And Peeta...Peeta will suffer, too, if this goes wrong. But what was it Haymitch said when I asked if he had told Peeta the situation? That he had to

pretend to be desperately in love?

“Don’t have to. He’s already there.”

Already thinking ahead of me in the Games again and well aware of the danger we’re in? Or...already desperately in love? I don’t know. I haven’t even begun to separate out my feelings about Peeta. It’s too complicated. What I did as part of the Games. As opposed to what I did out of anger at the Capitol. Or because of how it would be viewed back in District 12. Or simply because it was the only decent thing to do. Or what I did because I cared about him.

These are questions to be unraveled back home, in the peace and quiet of the woods, when no one is watching. Not here with every eye upon me. But I won’t have that luxury for who knows how long. And right now, the most dangerous part of the Hunger Games is about to begin.

The anthem booms in my ears, and then I hear Caesar Flickerman greeting the audience. Does he know how crucial it is to get every word right from now on? He must. He will want to help us. The crowd breaks into applause as the prep teams are presented. I imagine Flavius, Venia, and Octavia bouncing around and taking ridiculous, bobbing bows. It's a safe bet they're clueless. Then Effie's introduced. How long she's waited for this moment. I hope she's able to enjoy it because as misguided as Effie can be, she has a very keen instinct about certain things and must at least suspect we're in trouble. Portia and Cinna receive huge cheers, of course, they've been brilliant, had a dazzling debut. I now understand Cinna's choice of dress for me for tonight. I'll need to look as girlish and innocent as possible. Haymitch's appearance brings a round of stomping that goes on at least five minutes. Well, he's accomplished a first. Keeping not only one but two tributes alive. What if he hadn't warned me in time? Would I have acted differently? Flaunted the moment with the berries in the Capitol's face? No, I don't think so. But I could easily have been a lot less convincing than I need to be now. Right now. Because I can feel the plate lifting me up to the stage.

Blinding lights. The deafening roar rattles the metal under my feet. Then there's Peeta just a few yards away. He looks so clean and healthy and beautiful, I can hardly recognize him. But his smile is the same whether in mud or in the Capitol and when I see it, I take about three steps and fling myself into his arms. He staggers back, almost losing his balance, and that's when I realize the slim, metal contraption in his hand is some kind of cane. He rights himself and we just cling to each other while the audience goes insane. He's kissing me and all the time I'm thinking, *Do you know? Do you know how much danger we're in?* After about ten minutes of this, Caesar Flickerman taps on his shoulder to continue the show, and Peeta just pushes him aside without even glancing at him. The audience goes berserk. Whether he knows or not, Peeta is, as usual, playing the crowd exactly right.

Finally, Haymitch interrupts us and gives us a good-natured shove toward the victor's chair. Usually, this is a single, ornate chair from which the

winning tribute watches a film of the highlights of the Games, but since there are two of us, the Gamemakers have provided a plush red velvet couch. A small one, my mother would call it a love seat, I think. I sit so close to Peeta that I'm practically on his lap, but one look from Haymitch tells me it isn't enough. Kicking off my sandals, I tuck my feet to the side and lean my head against Peeta's shoulder. His arm goes around me automatically, and I feel like I'm back in the cave, curled up against him, trying to keep warm. His shirt is made of the same yellow material as my dress, but Portia's put him in long black pants. No sandals, either, but a pair of sturdy black boots he keeps solidly planted on the stage. I wish Cinna had given me a similar outfit, I feel so vulnerable in this flimsy dress. But I guess that was the point.

Caesar Flickerman makes a few more jokes, and then it's time for the show. This will last exactly three hours and is required viewing for all of Panem. As the lights dim and the seal appears on the screen, I realize I'm unprepared for this. I do not want to watch my twenty-two fellow tributes die. I saw enough of them die the first time. My heart starts pounding and I have a strong impulse to run. How have the other victors faced this alone? During the highlights, they periodically show the winner's reaction up on a box in the corner of the screen. I think back to earlier years...some are triumphant, pumping their fists in the air, beating their chests. Most just seem stunned. All I know is that the only thing keeping me on this love seat is Peeta—his arm around my shoulder, his other hand claimed by both of mine. Of course, the previous victors didn't have the Capitol looking for a way to destroy them.

Condensing several weeks into three hours is quite a feat, especially when you consider how many cameras were going at once. Whoever puts together the highlights has to choose what sort of story to tell. This year, for the first time, they tell a love story. I know Peeta and I won, but a disproportionate amount of time is spent on us, right from the beginning. I'm glad though, because it supports the whole crazy-in-love thing that's my defense for defying the Capitol, plus it means we won't have as much time to linger over the deaths.

The first half hour or so focuses on the pre-arena events, the reaping, the chariot ride through the Capitol, our training scores, and our interviews. There's this sort of upbeat soundtrack playing under it that makes it twice as awful because, of course, almost everyone on-screen is dead.

Once we're in the arena, there's detailed coverage of the bloodbath and then the filmmakers basically alternate between shots of tributes dying and shots of us. Mostly Peeta really, there's no question he's carrying this romance thing on his shoulders. Now I see what the audience saw, how he misled the Careers about me, stayed awake the entire night under the tracker jacker tree, fought Cato to let me escape and even while he lay in that mud bank, whispered my name in his sleep. I seem heartless in comparison—dodging fireballs, dropping nests, and blowing up supplies—until I go hunting for Rue. They play her death in full, the spearing, my failed rescue attempt, my arrow through the boy from District 1's throat, Rue drawing her last breath in my arms. And the song. I get to sing every note of the song. Something inside me shuts down and I'm too numb to feel anything. It's like watching complete strangers in another Hunger Games. But I do notice they omit the part where I covered her in flowers.

Right. Because even that smacks of rebellion.

Things pick up for me once they've announced two tributes from the same district can live and I shout out Peeta's name and then clap my hands over my mouth. If I've seemed indifferent to him earlier, I make up for it now, by finding him, nursing him back to health, going to the feast for the medicine, and being very free with my kisses. Objectively, I can see the mutts and Cato's death are as gruesome as ever, but again, I feel it happens to people I have never met.

And then comes the moment with the berries. I can hear the audience hushing one another, not wanting to miss anything. A wave of gratitude to the filmmakers sweeps over me when they end not with the announcement of our victory, but with me pounding on the glass door of the hovercraft, screaming Peeta's name as they try to revive him.

In terms of survival, it's my best moment all night.

The anthem's playing yet again and we rise as President Snow himself takes the stage followed by a little girl carrying a cushion that holds the crown. There's just one crown, though, and you can hear the crowd's confusion—whose head will he place it on?—until President Snow gives it a twist and it separates into two halves. He places the first around Peeta's brow with a smile. He's still smiling when he settles the second on my head, but his eyes, just inches from mine, are as unforgiving as a snake's.

That's when I know that even though both of us would have eaten the berries, I am to blame for having the idea. I'm the instigator. I'm the one to be punished.

Much bowing and cheering follows. My arm is about to fall off from waving when Caesar Flickerman finally bids the audience good night, reminding them to tune in tomorrow for the final interviews. As if they have a choice.

Peeta and I are whisked to the president's mansion for the Victory Banquet, where we have very little time to eat as Capitol officials and particularly generous sponsors elbow one another out of the way as they try to get their picture with us. Face after beaming face flashes by, becoming increasingly intoxicated as the evening wears on. Occasionally, I catch a glimpse of Haymitch, which is reassuring, or President Snow, which is terrifying, but I keep laughing and thanking people and smiling as my picture is taken. The one thing I never do is let go of Peeta's hand.

The sun is just peeking over the horizon when we straggle back to the twelfth floor of the Training Center. I think now I'll finally get a word alone with Peeta, but Haymitch sends him off with Portia to get something fitted for the interview and personally escorts me to my door.

"Why can't I talk to him?" I ask.

"Plenty of time for talk when we get home," says Haymitch. "Go to bed, you're on air at two."

Despite Haymitch's running interference, I'm determined to see Peeta privately. After I toss and turn for a few hours, I slip into the hall. My first thought is to check the roof, but it's empty. Even the city streets far below are deserted after the celebration last night. I go back to bed for a while and then decide to go directly to his room, but when I try to turn the knob, I find my own bedroom door has been locked from the outside. I suspect Haymitch initially, but then there's a more insidious fear that the Capitol may be monitoring and confining me. I've been unable to escape since the Hunger Games began, but this feels different, much more personal. This feels like I've been imprisoned for a crime and I'm awaiting sentencing. I quickly get back in bed and pretend to sleep until Effie Trinket comes to alert me to the start of another "big, big, big day!"

I have about five minutes to eat a bowl of hot grain and stew before the prep team descends. All I have to say is, "The crowd loved you!" and it's

unnecessary to speak for the next couple of hours. When Cinna comes in, he shoos them out and dresses me in a white, gauzy dress and pink shoes. Then he personally adjusts my makeup until I seem to radiate a soft, rosy glow. We make idle chitchat, but I'm afraid to ask him anything of real importance because after the incident with the door, I can't shake the feeling that I'm being watched constantly.

The interview takes place right down the hall in the sitting room. A space has been cleared and the love seat has been moved in and surrounded by vases of red and pink roses. There are only a handful of cameras to record the event. No live audience at least.

Caesar Flickerman gives me a warm hug when I come in. "Congratulations, Katniss. How are you faring?"

"Fine. Nervous about the interview," I say.

"Don't be. We're going to have a fabulous time," he says, giving my cheek a reassuring pat.

"I'm not good at talking about myself," I say.

"Nothing you say will be wrong," he says.

And I think, *Oh, Caesar, if only that were true. But actually, President Snow may be arranging some sort of "accident" for me as we speak.*

Then Peeta's there looking handsome in red and white, pulling me off to the side. "I hardly get to see you. Haymitch seems bent on keeping us apart."

Haymitch is actually bent on keeping us alive, but there are too many ears listening, so I just say, "Yes, he's gotten very responsible lately."

"Well, there's just this and we go home. Then he can't watch us all the time," says Peeta.

I feel a sort of shiver run through me and there's no time to analyze why, because they're ready for us. We sit somewhat formally on the love seat, but Caesar says, "Oh, go ahead and curl up next to him if you want. It looked very sweet." So I tuck my feet up and Peeta pulls me in close to him.

Someone counts backward and just like that, we're being broadcast live to the entire country. Caesar Flickerman is wonderful, teasing, joking, getting choked up when the occasion presents itself. He and Peeta already have the rapport they established that night of the first interview, that easy banter, so I just smile a lot and try to speak as little as possible. I mean, I have to talk some, but as soon as I can I redirect the conversation back to Peeta.

Eventually though, Caesar begins to pose questions that insist on fuller answers. “Well, Peeta, we know, from our days in the cave, that it was love at first sight for you from what, age five?” Caesar says.

“From the moment I laid eyes on her,” says Peeta.

“But, Katniss, what a ride for you. I think the real excitement for the audience was watching you fall for him. When did you realize you were in love with him?” asks Caesar.

“Oh, that’s a hard one...” I give a faint, breathy laugh and look down at my hands. Help.

“Well, I know when it hit me. The night when you shouted out his name from that tree,” says Caesar.

Thank you, Caesar! I think, and then go with his idea. “Yes, I guess that was it. I mean, until that point, I just tried not to think about what my feelings might be, honestly, because it was so confusing and it only made things worse if I actually cared about him. But then, in the tree, everything changed,” I say.

“Why do you think that was?” urges Caesar.

“Maybe...because for the first time...there was a chance I could keep him,” I say.

Behind a cameraman, I see Haymitch give a sort of huff with relief and I know I’ve said the right thing. Caesar pulls out a handkerchief and has to take a moment because he’s so moved. I can feel Peeta press his forehead into my temple and he asks, “So now that you’ve got me, what are you going to do with me?”

I turn in to him. “Put you somewhere you can’t get hurt.” And when he kisses me, people in the room actually sigh.

For Caesar, this is a natural place to segue into all the ways we did get hurt in the arena, from burns, to stings, to wounds. But it’s not until we get around to the mutts that I forget I’m on camera. When Caesar asks Peeta how his “new leg” is working out.

“New leg?” I say, and I can’t help reaching out and pulling up the bottom of Peeta’s pants. “Oh, no,” I whisper, taking in the metal-and-plastic device that has replaced his flesh.

“No one told you?” asks Caesar gently. I shake my head.

“I haven’t had the chance,” says Peeta with a slight shrug.

“It’s my fault,” I say. “Because I used that tourniquet.”

“Yes, it’s your fault I’m alive,” says Peeta.

“He’s right,” says Caesar. “He’d have bled to death for sure without it.”

I guess this is true, but I can’t help feeling upset about it to the extent that I’m afraid I might cry and then I remember everyone in the country is watching me so I just bury my face in Peeta’s shirt. It takes them a couple of minutes to coax me back out because it’s better in the shirt, where no one can see me, and when I do come out, Caesar backs off questioning me so I can recover. In fact, he pretty much leaves me alone until the berries come up.

“Katniss, I know you’ve had a shock, but I’ve got to ask. The moment when you pulled out those berries. What was going on in your mind...hm?” he says.

I take a long pause before I answer, trying to collect my thoughts. This is the crucial moment where I either challenged the Capitol or went so crazy at the idea of losing Peeta that I can’t be held responsible for my actions. It seems to call for a big, dramatic speech, but all I get out is one almost inaudible sentence. “I don’t know, I just...couldn’t bear the thought of...being without him.”

“Peeta? Anything to add?” asks Caesar.

“No. I think that goes for both of us,” he says.

Caesar signs off and it’s over. Everyone’s laughing and crying and hugging, but I’m still not sure until I reach Haymitch. “Okay?” I whisper.

“Perfect,” he answers.

I go back to my room to collect a few things and find there’s nothing to take but the mockingjay pin Madge gave me. Someone returned it to my room after the Games. They drive us through the streets in a car with blackened windows, and the train’s waiting for us. We barely have time to say good-bye to Cinna and Portia, although we’ll see them in a few months, when we tour the districts for a round of victory ceremonies. It’s the Capitol’s way of reminding people that the Hunger Games never really go away. We’ll be given a lot of useless plaques, and everyone will have to pretend they love us.

The train begins moving and we’re plunged into night until we clear the tunnel and I take my first free breath since the reaping. Effie is accompanying us back and Haymitch, too, of course. We eat an enormous dinner and settle into silence in front of the television to watch a replay of the interview. With the Capitol growing farther away every second, I begin to think of home. Of Prim and my mother. Of Gale. I excuse myself to change out of my dress and

into a plain shirt and pants. As I slowly, thoroughly wash the makeup from my face and put my hair in its braid, I begin transforming back into myself. Katniss Everdeen. A girl who lives in the Seam. Hunts in the woods. Trades in the Hob. I stare in the mirror as I try to remember who I am and who I am not. By the time I join the others, the pressure of Peeta's arm around my shoulders feels alien.

When the train makes a brief stop for fuel, we're allowed to go outside for some fresh air. There's no longer any need to guard us. Peeta and I walk down along the track, hand in hand, and I can't find anything to say now that we're alone. He stops to gather a bunch of wildflowers for me. When he presents them, I work hard to look pleased. Because he can't know that the pink-and-white flowers are the tops of wild onions and only remind me of the hours I've spent gathering them with Gale.

Gale. The idea of seeing Gale in a matter of hours makes my stomach churn. But why? I can't quite frame it in my mind. I only know that I feel like I've been lying to someone who trusts me. Or more accurately, to two people. I've been getting away with it up to this point because of the Games. But there will be no Games to hide behind back home.

"What's wrong?" Peeta asks.

"Nothing," I answer. We continue walking, past the end of the train, out where even I'm fairly sure there are no cameras hidden in the scrubby bushes along the track. Still no words come.

Haymitch startles me when he lays a hand on my back. Even now, in the middle of nowhere, he keeps his voice down. "Great job, you two. Just keep it up in the district until the cameras are gone. We should be okay." I watch him head back to the train, avoiding Peeta's eyes.

"What's he mean?" Peeta asks me.

"It's the Capitol. They didn't like our stunt with the berries," I blurt out.

"What? What are you talking about?" he says.

"It seemed too rebellious. So, Haymitch has been coaching me through the last few days. So I didn't make it worse," I say.

"Coaching you? But not me," says Peeta.

"He knew you were smart enough to get it right," I say.

"I didn't know there was anything to get right," says Peeta. "So, what you're saying is, these last few days and then I guess...back in the arena... that was just some strategy you two worked out."

“No. I mean, I couldn’t even talk to him in the arena, could I?” I stammer.

“But you knew what he wanted you to do, didn’t you?” says Peeta. I bite my lip. “Katniss?” He drops my hand and I take a step, as if to catch my balance.

“It was all for the Games,” Peeta says. “How you acted.”

“Not all of it,” I say, tightly holding on to my flowers.

“Then how much? No, forget that. I guess the real question is what’s going to be left when we get home?” he says.

“I don’t know. The closer we get to District Twelve, the more confused I get,” I say. He waits, for further explanation, but none’s forthcoming.

“Well, let me know when you work it out,” he says, and the pain in his voice is palpable.

I know my ears are healed because, even with the rumble of the engine, I can hear every step he takes back to the train. By the time I’ve climbed aboard, Peeta has disappeared into his room for the night. I don’t see him the next morning, either. In fact, the next time he turns up, we’re pulling into District 12. He gives me a nod, his face expressionless.

I want to tell him that he’s not being fair. That we were strangers. That I did what it took to stay alive, to keep us both alive in the arena. That I can’t explain how things are with Gale because I don’t know myself. That it’s no good loving me because I’m never going to get married anyway and he’d just end up hating me later instead of sooner. That if I do have feelings for him, it doesn’t matter because I’ll never be able to afford the kind of love that leads to a family, to children. And how can he? How can he after what we’ve just been through?

I also want to tell him how much I already miss him. But that wouldn’t be fair on my part.

So we just stand there silently, watching our grimy little station rise up around us. Through the window, I can see the platform’s thick with cameras. Everyone will be eagerly watching our homecoming.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Peeta extend his hand. I look at him, unsure. “One more time? For the audience?” he says. His voice isn’t angry. It’s hollow, which is worse. Already the boy with the bread is slipping away from me.

I take his hand, holding on tightly, preparing for the cameras, and dreading the moment when I will finally have to let go.

END OF BOOK ONE

Catching Fire

Suzanne Collins



SCHOLASTIC PRESS / NEW YORK

**For my parents,
Jane and Michael Collins,**

**and my parents-in-law,
Dixie and Charles Pryor**

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PART I
“THE SPARK”

1

I clasp the flask between my hands even though the warmth from the tea has long since leached into the frozen air. My muscles are clenched tight against the cold. If a pack of wild dogs were to appear at this moment, the odds of scaling a tree before they attacked are not in my favor. I should get up, move around, and work the stiffness from my limbs. But instead I sit, as motionless as the rock beneath me, while the dawn begins to lighten the woods. I can't fight the sun. I can only watch helplessly as it drags me into a day that I've been dreading for months.

By noon they will all be at my new house in the Victor's Village. The reporters, the camera crews, even Effie Trinket, my old escort, will have made their way to District 12 from the Capitol. I wonder if Effie will still be wearing that silly pink wig, or if she'll be sporting some other unnatural color especially for the Victory Tour. There will be others waiting, too. A staff to cater to my every need on the long train trip. A prep team to beautify me for public appearances. My stylist and friend, Cinna, who designed the gorgeous outfits that first made the audience take notice of me in the Hunger Games.

If it were up to me, I would try to forget the Hunger Games entirely. Never speak of them. Pretend they were nothing but a bad dream. But the Victory Tour makes that impossible. Strategically placed almost midway between the annual Games, it is the Capitol's way of keeping the horror fresh and immediate. Not only are we in the districts forced to remember the iron grip of the Capitol's power each year, we are forced to celebrate it. And this year, I am one of the stars of the show. I will have to travel from district to district, to stand before the cheering crowds who secretly loathe me, to look down into the faces of the families whose children I have killed...

The sun persists in rising, so I make myself stand. All my joints complain and my left leg has been asleep for so long that it takes several minutes of pacing to bring the feeling back into it. I've been in the woods three hours, but as I've made no real attempt at hunting, I have nothing to show for it. It doesn't matter for my mother and little sister, Prim, anymore. They can afford

to buy butcher meat in town, although none of us likes it any better than fresh game. But my best friend, Gale Hawthorne, and his family will be depending on today's haul and I can't let them down. I start the hour-and-a-half trek it will take to cover our snare line. Back when we were in school, we had time in the afternoons to check the line and hunt and gather and still get back to trade in town. But now that Gale has gone to work in the coal mines—and I have nothing to do all day—I've taken over the job.

By this time Gale will have clocked in at the mines, taken the stomach-churning elevator ride into the depths of the earth, and be pounding away at a coal seam. I know what it's like down there. Every year in school, as part of our training, my class had to tour the mines. When I was little, it was just unpleasant. The claustrophobic tunnels, foul air, suffocating darkness on all sides. But after my father and several other miners were killed in an explosion, I could barely force myself onto the elevator. The annual trip became an enormous source of anxiety. Twice I made myself so sick in anticipation of it that my mother kept me home because she thought I had contracted the flu.

I think of Gale, who is only really alive in the woods, with its fresh air and sunlight and clean, flowing water. I don't know how he stands it. Well... yes, I do. He stands it because it's the way to feed his mother and two younger brothers and sister. And here I am with buckets of money, far more than enough to feed both our families now, and he won't take a single coin. It's even hard for him to let me bring in meat, although he'd surely have kept my mother and Prim supplied if I'd been killed in the Games. I tell him he's doing me a favor, that it drives me nuts to sit around all day. Even so, I never drop off the game while he's at home. Which is easy since he works twelve hours a day.

The only time I really get to see Gale now is on Sundays, when we meet up in the woods to hunt together. It's still the best day of the week, but it's not like it used to be before, when we could tell each other anything. The Games have spoiled even that. I keep hoping that as time passes we'll regain the ease between us, but part of me knows it's futile. There's no going back.

I get a good haul from the traps—eight rabbits, two squirrels, and a beaver that swam into a wire contraption Gale designed himself. He's something of a whiz with snares, rigging them to bent saplings so they pull the kill out of the reach of predators, balancing logs on delicate stick triggers,

weaving inescapable baskets to capture fish. As I go along, carefully resetting each snare, I know I can never quite replicate his eye for balance, his instinct for where the prey will cross the path. It's more than experience. It's a natural gift. Like the way I can shoot at an animal in almost complete darkness and still take it down with one arrow.

By the time I make it back to the fence that surrounds District 12, the sun is well up. As always, I listen a moment, but there's no telltale hum of electrical current running through the chain link. There hardly ever is, even though the thing is supposed to be charged full-time. I wriggle through the opening at the bottom of the fence and come up in the Meadow, just a stone's throw from my home. My old home. We still get to keep it since officially it's the designated dwelling of my mother and sister. If I should drop dead right now, they would have to return to it. But at present, they're both happily installed in the new house in the Victor's Village, and I'm the only one who uses the squat little place where I was raised. To me, it's my real home.

I go there now to switch my clothes. Exchange my father's old leather jacket for a fine wool coat that always seems too tight in the shoulders. Leave my soft, worn hunting boots for a pair of expensive machine-made shoes that my mother thinks are more appropriate for someone of my status. I've already stowed my bow and arrows in a hollow log in the woods. Although time is ticking away, I allow myself a few minutes to sit in the kitchen. It has an abandoned quality with no fire on the hearth, no cloth on the table. I mourn my old life here. We barely scraped by, but I knew where I fit in, I knew what my place was in the tightly interwoven fabric that was our life. I wish I could go back to it because, in retrospect, it seems so secure compared with now, when I am so rich and so famous and so hated by the authorities in the Capitol.

A wailing at the back door demands my attention. I open it to find Buttercup, Prim's scruffy old tomcat. He dislikes the new house almost as much as I do and always leaves it when my sister's at school. We've never been particularly fond of each other, but now we have this new bond. I let him in, feed him a chunk of beaver fat, and even rub him between the ears for a bit. "You're hideous, you know that, right?" I ask him. Buttercup nudges my hand for more petting, but we have to go. "Come on, you." I scoop him up with one hand, grab my game bag with the other, and haul them both out onto the street. The cat springs free and disappears under a bush.

The shoes pinch my toes as I crunch along the cinder street. Cutting down alleys and through backyards gets me to Gale's house in minutes. His mother, Hazelle, sees me through the window, where she's bent over the kitchen sink. She dries her hands on her apron and disappears to meet me at the door.

I like Hazelle. Respect her. The explosion that killed my father took out her husband as well, leaving her with three boys and a baby due any day. Less than a week after she gave birth, she was out hunting the streets for work. The mines weren't an option, what with a baby to look after, but she managed to get laundry from some of the merchants in town. At fourteen, Gale, the eldest of the kids, became the main supporter of the family. He was already signed up for tesserae, which entitled them to a meager supply of grain and oil in exchange for his entering his name extra times in the drawing to become a tribute. On top of that, even back then, he was a skilled trapper. But it wasn't enough to keep a family of five without Hazelle working her fingers to the bone on that washboard. In winter her hands got so red and cracked, they bled at the slightest provocation. Still would if it wasn't for a salve my mother concocted. But they are determined, Hazelle and Gale, that the other boys, twelve-year-old Rory and ten-year-old Vick, and the baby, four-year-old Posy, will never have to sign up for tesserae.

Hazelle smiles when she sees the game. She takes the beaver by the tail, feeling its weight. "He's going to make a nice stew." Unlike Gale, she has no problem with our hunting arrangement.

"Good pelt, too," I answer. It's comforting here with Hazelle. Weighing the merits of the game, just as we always have. She pours me a mug of herb tea, which I wrap my chilled fingers around gratefully. "You know, when I get back from the tour, I was thinking I might take Rory out with me sometimes. After school. Teach him to shoot." Hazelle nods. "That'd be good. Gale means to, but he's only got his Sundays, and I think he likes saving those for you."

I can't stop the redness that floods my cheeks. It's stupid, of course. Hardly anybody knows me better than Hazelle. Knows the bond I share with Gale. I'm sure plenty of people assumed that we'd eventually get married even if I never gave it any thought. But that was before the Games. Before my fellow tribute, Peeta Mellark, announced he was madly in love with me. Our romance became a key strategy for our survival in the arena. Only it wasn't just a strategy for Peeta. I'm not sure what it was for me. But I know now it

was nothing but painful for Gale. My chest tightens as I think about how, on the Victory Tour, Peeta and I will have to present ourselves as lovers again.

I gulp my tea even though it's too hot and push back from the table. "I better get going. Make myself presentable for the cameras."

Hazelle hugs me. "Enjoy the food."

"Absolutely," I say.

My next stop is the Hob, where I've traditionally done the bulk of my trading. Years ago it was a warehouse to store coal, but when it fell into disuse, it became a meeting place for illegal trades and then blossomed into a full-time black market. If it attracts a somewhat criminal element, then I belong here, I guess. Hunting in the woods surrounding District 12 violates at least a dozen laws and is punishable by death.

Although they never mention it, I owe the people who frequent the Hob. Gale told me that Greasy Sae, the old woman who serves up soup, started a collection to sponsor Peeta and me during the Games. It was supposed to be just a Hob thing, but a lot of other people heard about it and chipped in. I don't know exactly how much it was, and the price of any gift in the arena was exorbitant. But for all I know, it made the difference between my life and death.

It's still odd to drag open the front door with an empty game bag, with nothing to trade, and instead feel the heavy pocket of coins against my hip. I try to hit as many stalls as possible, spreading out my purchases of coffee, buns, eggs, yarn, and oil. As an afterthought, I buy three bottles of white liquor from a one-armed woman named Ripper, a victim of a mine accident who was smart enough to find a way to stay alive.

The liquor isn't for my family. It's for Haymitch, who acted as mentor for Peeta and me in the Games. He's surly, violent, and drunk most of the time. But he did his job—more than his job—because for the first time in history, two tributes were allowed to win. So no matter who Haymitch is, I owe him, too. And that's for always. I'm getting the white liquor because a few weeks ago he ran out and there was none for sale and he had a withdrawal, shaking and screaming at terrifying things only he could see. He scared Prim to death and, frankly, it wasn't much fun for me to see him like that, either. Ever since then I've been sort of stockpiling the stuff just in case there's a shortage again.

Cray, our Head Peacekeeper, frowns when he sees me with the bottles. He's an older man with a few strands of silver hair combed sideways above his bright red face. "That stuff's too strong for you, girl." He should know. Next to Haymitch, Cray drinks more than anyone I've ever met.

"Aw, my mother uses it in medicines," I say indifferently.

"Well, it'd kill just about anything," he says, and slaps down a coin for a bottle.

When I reach Greasy Sae's stall, I boost myself up to sit on the counter and order some soup, which looks to be some kind of gourd and bean mixture. A Peacekeeper named Darius comes up and buys a bowl while I'm eating. As law enforcers go, he's one of my favorites. Never really throwing his weight around, usually good for a joke. He's probably in his twenties, but he doesn't seem much older than I do. Something about his smile, his red hair that sticks out every which way, gives him a boyish quality.

"Aren't you supposed to be on a train?" he asks me.

"They're collecting me at noon," I answer.

"Shouldn't you look better?" he asks in a loud whisper. I can't help smiling at his teasing, in spite of my mood. "Maybe a ribbon in your hair or something?" He flicks my braid with his hand and I brush him away.

"Don't worry. By the time they get through with me I'll be unrecognizable," I say.

"Good," he says. "Let's show a little district pride for a change, Miss Everdeen. Hm?" He shakes his head at Greasy Sae in mock disapproval and walks off to join his friends.

"I'll want that bowl back," Greasy Sae calls after him, but since she's laughing, she doesn't sound particularly stern. "Gale going to see you off?" she asks me.

"No, he wasn't on the list," I say. "I saw him Sunday, though."

"Think he'd have made the list. Him being your cousin and all," she says wryly.

It's just one more part of the lie the Capitol has concocted. When Peeta and I made it into the final eight in the Hunger Games, they sent reporters to do personal stories about us. When they asked about my friends, everyone directed them to Gale. But it wouldn't do, what with the romance I was playing out in the arena, to have my best friend be Gale. He was too handsome, too male, and not the least bit willing to smile and play nice for

the cameras. We do resemble each other, though, quite a bit. We have that Seam look. Dark straight hair, olive skin, gray eyes. So some genius made him my cousin. I didn't know about it until we were already home, on the platform at the train station, and my mother said, "Your cousins can hardly wait to see you!" Then I turned and saw Gale and Hazelle and all the kids waiting for me, so what could I do but go along?

Greasy Sae knows we're not related, but even some of the people who have known us for years seem to have forgotten.

"I just can't wait for the whole thing to be over," I whisper.

"I know," says Greasy Sae. "But you've got to go through it to get to the end of it. Better not be late."

A light snow starts to fall as I make my way to the Victor's Village. It's about a half-mile walk from the square in the center of town, but it seems like another world entirely. It's a separate community built around a beautiful green, dotted with flowering bushes. There are twelve houses, each large enough to hold ten of the one I was raised in. Nine stand empty, as they always have. The three in use belong to Haymitch, Peeta, and me.

The houses inhabited by my family and Peeta give off a warm glow of life. Lit windows, smoke from the chimneys, bunches of brightly colored corn affixed to the front doors as decoration for the upcoming Harvest Festival. However, Haymitch's house, despite the care taken by the groundskeeper, exudes an air of abandonment and neglect. I brace myself at his front door, knowing it will be foul, then push inside.

My nose immediately wrinkles in disgust. Haymitch refuses to let anyone in to clean and does a poor job himself. Over the years the odors of liquor and vomit, boiled cabbage and burned meat, unwashed clothes and mouse droppings have intermingled into a stench that brings tears to my eyes. I wade through a litter of discarded wrappings, broken glass, and bones to where I know I will find Haymitch. He sits at the kitchen table, his arms sprawled across the wood, his face in a puddle of liquor, snoring his head off.

I nudge his shoulder. "Get up!" I say loudly, because I've learned there's no subtle way to wake him. His snoring stops for a moment, questioningly, and then resumes. I push him harder. "Get up, Haymitch. It's tour day!" I force the window up, inhaling deep breaths of the clean air outside. My feet shift through the garbage on the floor, and I unearth a tin coffeepot and fill it at the sink. The stove isn't completely out and I manage to coax the few live

coals into a flame. I pour some ground coffee into the pot, enough to make sure the resulting brew will be good and strong, and set it on the stove to boil.

Haymitch is still dead to the world. Since nothing else has worked, I fill a basin with icy cold water, dump it on his head, and spring out of the way. A guttural animal sound comes from his throat. He jumps up, kicking his chair ten feet behind him and wielding a knife. I forgot he always sleeps with one clutched in his hand. I should have pried it from his fingers, but I've had a lot on my mind. Spewing profanity, he slashes the air a few moments before coming to his senses. He wipes his face on his shirtsleeve and turns to the windowsill where I perch, just in case I need to make a quick exit.

"What are you doing?" he sputters.

"You told me to wake you an hour before the cameras come," I say.

"What?" he says.

"Your idea," I insist.

He seems to remember. "Why am I all wet?"

"I couldn't shake you awake," I say. "Look, if you wanted to be babied, you should have asked Peeta."

"Asked me what?" Just the sound of his voice twists my stomach into a knot of unpleasant emotions like guilt, sadness, and fear. And longing. I might as well admit there's some of that, too. Only it has too much competition to ever win out.

I watch as Peeta crosses to the table, the sunlight from the window picking up the glint of fresh snow in his blond hair. He looks strong and healthy, so different from the sick, starving boy I knew in the arena, and you can barely even notice his limp now. He sets a loaf of fresh-baked bread on the table and holds out his hand to Haymitch.

"Asked you to wake me without giving me pneumonia," says Haymitch, passing over his knife. He pulls off his filthy shirt, revealing an equally soiled undershirt, and rubs himself down with the dry part.

Peeta smiles and douses Haymitch's knife in white liquor from a bottle on the floor. He wipes the blade clean on his shirttail and slices the bread. Peeta keeps all of us in fresh baked goods. I hunt. He bakes. Haymitch drinks. We have our own ways to stay busy, to keep thoughts of our time as contestants in the Hunger Games at bay. It's not until he's handed Haymitch the heel that he even looks at me for the first time. "Would you like a piece?"

“No, I ate at the Hob,” I say. “But thank you.” My voice doesn’t sound like my own, it’s so formal. Just as it’s been every time I’ve spoken to Peeta since the cameras finished filming our happy homecoming and we returned to our real lives.

“You’re welcome,” he says back stiffly.

Haymitch tosses his shirt somewhere into the mess. “Brrr. You two have got a lot of warming up to do before showtime.”

He’s right, of course. The audience will be expecting the pair of lovebirds who won the Hunger Games. Not two people who can barely look each other in the eye. But all I say is, “Take a bath, Haymitch.” Then I swing out the window, drop to the ground, and head across the green to my house.

The snow has begun to stick and I leave a trail of footprints behind me. At the front door, I pause to knock the wet stuff from my shoes before I go in. My mother’s been working day and night to make everything perfect for the cameras, so it’s no time to be tracking up her shiny floors. I’ve barely stepped inside when she’s there, holding my arm as if to stop me.

“Don’t worry, I’m taking them off here,” I say, leaving my shoes on the mat.

My mother gives an odd, breathy laugh and removes the game bag loaded with supplies from my shoulder. “It’s just snow. Did you have a nice walk?”

“Walk?” She knows I’ve been in the woods half the night. Then I see the man standing behind her in the kitchen doorway. One look at his tailored suit and surgically perfected features and I know he’s from the Capitol. Something is wrong. “It was more like skating. It’s really getting slippery out there.”

“Someone’s here to see you,” says my mother. Her face is too pale and I can hear the anxiety she’s trying to hide.

“I thought they weren’t due until noon.” I pretend not to notice her state. “Did Cinna come early to help me get ready?”

“No, Katniss, it’s—” my mother begins.

“This way, please, Miss Everdeen,” says the man. He gestures down the hallway. It’s weird to be ushered around your own home, but I know better than to comment on it.

As I go, I give my mother a reassuring smile over my shoulder. “Probably more instructions for the tour.” They’ve been sending me all kinds of stuff about my itinerary and what protocol will be observed in each district. But

as I walk toward the door of the study, a door I have never even seen closed until this moment, I can feel my mind begin to race. *Who is here? What do they want? Why is my mother so pale?*

“Go right in,” says the Capitol man, who has followed me down the hallway.

I twist the polished brass knob and step inside. My nose registers the conflicting scents of roses and blood. A small, white-haired man who seems vaguely familiar is reading a book. He holds up a finger as if to say, “Give me a moment.” Then he turns and my heart skips a beat.

I’m staring into the snakelike eyes of President Snow.

2

In my mind, President Snow should be viewed in front of marble pillars hung with oversized flags. It's jarring to see him surrounded by the ordinary objects in the room. Like taking the lid off a pot and finding a fanged viper instead of stew.

What could he be doing here? My mind rushes back to the opening days of other Victory Tours. I remember seeing the winning tributes with their mentors and stylists. Even some high government officials have made appearances occasionally. But I have never seen President Snow. He attends celebrations in the Capitol. Period.

If he's made the journey all the way from his city, it can only mean one thing. I'm in serious trouble. And if I am, so is my family. A shiver goes through me when I think of the proximity of my mother and sister to this man who despises me. Will always despise me. Because I outsmarted his sadistic Hunger Games, made the Capitol look foolish, and consequently undermined his control.

All I was doing was trying to keep Peeta and myself alive. Any act of rebellion was purely coincidental. But when the Capitol decrees that only one tribute can live and you have the audacity to challenge it, I guess that's a rebellion in itself. My only defense was pretending that I was driven insane by a passionate love for Peeta. So we were both allowed to live. To be crowned victors. To go home and celebrate and wave good-bye to the cameras and be left alone. Until now.

Perhaps it is the newness of the house or the shock of seeing him or the mutual understanding that he could have me killed in a second that makes me feel like the intruder. As if this is his home and I'm the uninvited party. So I don't welcome him or offer him a chair. I don't say anything. In fact, I treat him as if he's a real snake, the venomous kind. I stand motionless, my eyes locked on him, considering plans of retreat.

"I think we'll make this whole situation a lot simpler by agreeing not to lie to each other," he says. "What do you think?"

I think my tongue has frozen and speech will be impossible, so I surprise myself by answering back in a steady voice, “Yes, I think that would save time.”

President Snow smiles and I notice his lips for the first time. I’m expecting snake lips, which is to say none. But his are overly full, the skin stretched too tight. I have to wonder if his mouth has been altered to make him more appealing. If so, it was a waste of time and money, because he’s not appealing at all. “My advisors were concerned you would be difficult, but you’re not planning on being difficult, are you?” he asks.

“No,” I answer.

“That’s what I told them. I said any girl who goes to such lengths to preserve her life isn’t going to be interested in throwing it away with both hands. And then there’s her family to think of. Her mother, her sister, and all those...cousins.” By the way he lingers on the word “cousins,” I can tell he knows that Gale and I don’t share a family tree.

Well, it’s all on the table now. Maybe that’s better. I don’t do well with ambiguous threats. I’d much rather know the score.

“Let’s sit.” President Snow takes a seat at the large desk of polished wood where Prim does her homework and my mother her budgets. Like our home, this is a place that he has no right, but ultimately every right, to occupy. I sit in front of the desk on one of the carved, straight-backed chairs. It’s made for someone taller than I am, so only my toes rest on the ground.

“I have a problem, Miss Everdeen,” says President Snow. “A problem that began the moment you pulled out those poisonous berries in the arena.”

That was the moment when I guessed that if the Gamemakers had to choose between watching Peeta and me commit suicide—which would mean having no victor—and letting us both live, they would take the latter.

“If the Head Gamemaker, Seneca Crane, had had any brains, he’d have blown you to dust right then. But he had an unfortunate sentimental streak. So here you are. Can you guess where he is?” he asks.

I nod because, by the way he says it, it’s clear that Seneca Crane has been executed. The smell of roses and blood has grown stronger now that only a desk separates us. There’s a rose in President Snow’s lapel, which at least suggests a source of the flower perfume, but it must be genetically enhanced, because no real rose reeks like that. As for the blood...I don’t know.

“After that, there was nothing to do but let you play out your little scenario. And you were pretty good, too, with the love-crazed schoolgirl bit. The people in the Capitol were quite convinced. Unfortunately, not everyone in the districts fell for your act,” he says.

My face must register at least a flicker of bewilderment, because he addresses it.

“This, of course, you don’t know. You have no access to information about the mood in other districts. In several of them, however, people viewed your little trick with the berries as an act of defiance, not an act of love. And if a girl from District Twelve of all places can defy the Capitol and walk away unharmed, what is to stop them from doing the same?” he says. “What is to prevent, say, an uprising?”

It takes a moment for his last sentence to sink in. Then the full weight of it hits me. “There have been uprisings?” I ask, both chilled and somewhat elated by the possibility.

“Not yet. But they’ll follow if the course of things doesn’t change. And uprisings have been known to lead to revolution.” President Snow rubs a spot over his left eyebrow, the very spot where I myself get headaches. “Do you have any idea what that would mean? How many people would die? What conditions those left would have to face? Whatever problems anyone may have with the Capitol, believe me when I say that if it released its grip on the districts for even a short time, the entire system would collapse.”

I’m taken aback by the directness and even the sincerity of this speech. As if his primary concern is the welfare of the citizens of Panem, when nothing could be further from the truth. I don’t know how I dare to say the next words, but I do. “It must be very fragile, if a handful of berries can bring it down.”

There’s a long pause while he examines me. Then he simply says, “It is fragile, but not in the way that you suppose.”

There’s a knock at the door, and the Capitol man sticks his head in. “Her mother wants to know if you want tea.”

“I would. I would like tea,” says the president. The door opens wider, and there stands my mother, holding a tray with a china tea set she brought to the Seam when she married. “Set it here, please.” He places his book on the corner of the desk and pats the center.

My mother sets the tray on the desk. It holds a china teapot and cups, cream and sugar, and a plate of cookies. They are beautifully iced with softly colored flowers. The frosting work can only be Peeta's.

"What a welcome sight. You know, it's funny how often people forget that presidents need to eat, too," President Snow says charmingly. Well, it seems to relax my mother a bit, anyway.

"Can I get you anything else? I can cook something more substantial if you're hungry," she offers.

"No, this could not be more perfect. Thank you," he says, clearly dismissing her. My mother nods, shoots me a glance, and goes. President Snow pours tea for both of us and fills his with cream and sugar, then takes a long time stirring. I sense he has had his say and is waiting for me to respond.

"I didn't mean to start any uprisings," I tell him.

"I believe you. It doesn't matter. Your stylist turned out to be prophetic in his wardrobe choice. Katniss Everdeen, the girl who was on fire, you have provided a spark that, left unattended, may grow to an inferno that destroys Panem," he says.

"Why don't you just kill me now?" I blurt out.

"Publicly?" he asks. "That would only add fuel to the flames."

"Arrange an accident, then," I say.

"Who would buy it?" he asks. "Not you, if you were watching."

"Then just tell me what you want me to do. I'll do it," I say.

"If only it were that simple." He picks up one of the flowered cookies and examines it. "Lovely. Your mother made these?"

"Peeta." And for the first time, I find I can't hold his gaze. I reach for my tea but set it back down when I hear the cup rattling against the saucer. To cover I quickly take a cookie.

"Peeta. How *is* the love of your life?" he asks.

"Good," I say.

"At what point did he realize the exact degree of your indifference?" he asks, dipping his cookie in his tea.

"I'm not indifferent," I say.

"But perhaps not as taken with the young man as you would have the country believe," he says.

"Who says I'm not?" I say.

“I do,” says the president. “And I wouldn’t be here if I were the only person who had doubts. How’s the handsome cousin?”

“I don’t know...I don’t...” My revulsion at this conversation, at discussing my feelings for two of the people I care most about with President Snow, chokes me off.

“Speak, Miss Everdeen. Him I can easily kill off if we don’t come to a happy resolution,” he says. “You aren’t doing him a favor by disappearing into the woods with him each Sunday.”

If he knows this, what else does he know? And how does he know it? Many people could tell him that Gale and I spend our Sundays hunting. Don’t we show up at the end of each one loaded down with game? Haven’t we for years? The real question is what he thinks goes on in the woods beyond District 12. Surely they haven’t been tracking us in there. Or have they? Could we have been followed? That seems impossible. At least by a person. Cameras? That never crossed my mind until this moment. The woods have always been our place of safety, our place beyond the reach of the Capitol, where we’re free to say what we feel, be who we are. At least before the Games. If we’ve been watched since, what have they seen? Two people hunting, saying treasonous things against the Capitol, yes. But not two people in love, which seems to be President Snow’s implication. We are safe on that charge. Unless...unless...

It only happened once. It was fast and unexpected, but it did happen.

After Peeta and I got home from the Games, it was several weeks before I saw Gale alone. First there were the obligatory celebrations. A banquet for the victors that only the most high-ranking people were invited to. A holiday for the whole district with free food and entertainers brought in from the Capitol. Parcel Day, the first of twelve, in which food packages were delivered to every person in the district. That was my favorite. To see all those hungry kids in the Seam running around, waving cans of applesauce, tins of meat, even candy. Back home, too big to carry, would be bags of grain, cans of oil. To know that once a month for a year they would all receive another parcel. That was one of the few times I actually felt good about winning the Games.

So between the ceremonies and events and the reporters documenting my every move as I presided and thanked and kissed Peeta for the audience, I had no privacy at all. After a few weeks, things finally died down. The

camera crews and reporters packed up and went home. Peeta and I assumed the cool relationship we've had ever since. My family settled into our house in the Victor's Village. The everyday life of District 12—workers to the mines, kids to school—resumed its usual pace. I waited until I thought the coast was really clear, and then one Sunday, without telling anyone, I got up hours before dawn and took off for the woods.

The weather was still warm enough that I didn't need a jacket. I packed along a bag filled with special foods, cold chicken and cheese and bakery bread and oranges. Down at my old house, I put on my hunting boots. As usual, the fence was not charged and it was simple to slip into the woods and retrieve my bow and arrows. I went to our place, Gale's and mine, where we had shared breakfast the morning of the reaping that sent me into the Games.

I waited at least two hours. I'd begun to think that he'd given up on me in the weeks that had passed. Or that he no longer cared about me. Hated me even. And the idea of losing him forever, my best friend, the only person I'd ever trusted with my secrets, was so painful I couldn't stand it. Not on top of everything else that had happened. I could feel my eyes tearing up and my throat starting to close the way it does when I get upset.

Then I looked up and there he was, ten feet away, just watching me. Without even thinking, I jumped up and threw my arms around him, making some weird sound that combined laughing, choking, and crying. He was holding me so tightly that I couldn't see his face, but it was a really long time before he let me go and then he didn't have much choice, because I'd gotten this unbelievably loud case of the hiccups and had to get a drink.

We did what we always did that day. Ate breakfast. Hunted and fished and gathered. Talked about people in town. But not about us, his new life in the mines, my time in the arena. Just about other things. By the time we were at the hole in the fence that's nearest the Hob, I think I really believed that things could be the same. That we could go on as we always had. I'd given all the game to Gale to trade since we had so much food now. I told him I'd skip the Hob, even though I was looking forward to going there, because my mother and sister didn't even know I'd gone hunting and they'd be wondering where I was. Then suddenly, as I was suggesting I take over the daily snare run, he took my face in his hands and kissed me.

I was completely unprepared. You would think that after all the hours I'd spent with Gale—watching him talk and laugh and frown—that I would know

all there was to know about his lips. But I hadn't imagined how warm they would feel pressed against my own. Or how those hands, which could set the most intricate of snares, could as easily entrap me. I think I made some sort of noise in the back of my throat, and I vaguely remember my fingers, curled tightly closed, resting on his chest. Then he let go and said, "I had to do that. At least once." And he was gone.

Despite the fact that the sun was setting and my family would be worried, I sat by a tree next to the fence. I tried to decide how I felt about the kiss, if I had liked it or resented it, but all I really remembered was the pressure of Gale's lips and the scent of the oranges that still lingered on his skin. It was pointless comparing it with the many kisses I'd exchanged with Peeta. I still hadn't figured out if any of those counted. Finally I went home.

That week I managed the snares and dropped off the meat with Hazelle. But I didn't see Gale until Sunday. I had this whole speech worked out, about how I didn't want a boyfriend and never planned on marrying, but I didn't end up using it. Gale acted as if the kiss had never happened. Maybe he was waiting for me to say something. Or kiss him back. Instead I just pretended it had never happened, either. But it had. Gale had shattered some invisible barrier between us and, with it, any hope I had of resuming our old, uncomplicated friendship. Whatever I pretended, I could never look at his lips in quite the same way.

This all flashes through my head in an instant as President Snow's eyes bore into me on the heels of his threat to kill Gale. How stupid I've been to think the Capitol would just ignore me once I'd returned home! Maybe I didn't know about the potential uprisings. But I knew they were angry with me. Instead of acting with the extreme caution the situation called for, what have I done? From the president's point of view, I've ignored Peeta and flaunted my preference for Gale's company before the whole district. And by doing so made it clear I was, in fact, mocking the Capitol. Now I've endangered Gale and his family and my family and Peeta, too, by my carelessness.

"Please don't hurt Gale," I whisper. "He's just my friend. He's been my friend for years. That's all that's between us. Besides, everyone thinks we're cousins now."

"I'm only interested in how it affects your dynamic with Peeta, thereby affecting the mood in the districts," he says.

“It will be the same on the tour. I’ll be in love with him just as I was,” I say.

“Just as you are,” corrects President Snow.

“Just as I am,” I confirm.

“Only you’ll have to do even better if the uprisings are to be averted,” he says. “This tour will be your only chance to turn things around.”

“I know. I will. I’ll convince everyone in the districts that I wasn’t defying the Capitol, that I was crazy with love,” I say.

President Snow rises and dabs his puffy lips with a napkin. “Aim higher in case you fall short.”

“What do you mean? How can I aim higher?” I ask.

“Convince *me*,” he says. He drops the napkin and retrieves his book. I don’t watch him as he heads for the door, so I flinch when he whispers in my ear. “By the way, I know about the kiss.” Then the door clicks shut behind him.

3

The smell of blood...it was on his breath.

What does he do? I think. *Drink it?* I imagine him sipping it from a teacup. Dipping a cookie into the stuff and pulling it out dripping red.

Outside the window, a car comes to life, soft and quiet like the purr of a cat, then fades away into the distance. It slips off as it arrived, unnoticed.

The room seems to be spinning in slow, lopsided circles, and I wonder if I might black out. I lean forward and clutch the desk with one hand. The other still holds Peeta's beautiful cookie. I think it had a tiger lily on it, but now it's been reduced to crumbs in my fist. I didn't even know I was crushing it, but I guess I had to hold on to something while my world veered out of control.

A visit from President Snow. Districts on the verge of uprisings. A direct death threat to Gale, with others to follow. Everyone I love doomed. And who knows who else will pay for my actions? Unless I turn things around on this tour. Quiet the discontent and put the president's mind at rest. And how? By proving to the country beyond any shadow of a doubt that I love Peeta Mellark.

I can't do it, I think. *I'm not that good*. Peeta's the good one, the likable one. He can make people believe anything. I'm the one who shuts up and sits back and lets him do as much of the talking as possible. But it isn't Peeta who has to prove his devotion. It's me.

I hear my mother's light, quick tread in the hall. *She can't know*, I think. *Not about any of this*. I reach my hands over the tray and quickly brush the bits of cookie from my palm and fingers. I take a shaky sip of my tea.

"Is everything all right, Katniss?" she asks.

"It's fine. We never see it on television, but the president always visits the victors before the tour to wish them luck," I say brightly.

My mother's face floods with relief. "Oh. I thought there was some kind of trouble."

"No, not at all," I say. "The trouble will start when my prep team sees how I've let my eyebrows grow back in." My mother laughs, and I think

about how there was no going back after I took over caring for the family when I was eleven. How I will always have to protect her.

“Why don’t I start your bath?” she asks.

“Great,” I say, and I can see how pleased she is by my response.

Since I’ve been home I’ve been trying hard to mend my relationship with my mother. Asking her to do things for me instead of brushing aside any offer of help, as I did for years out of anger. Letting her handle all the money I won. Returning her hugs instead of tolerating them. My time in the arena made me realize how I needed to stop punishing her for something she couldn’t help, specifically the crushing depression she fell into after my father’s death. Because sometimes things happen to people and they’re not equipped to deal with them.

Like me, for instance. Right now.

Besides, there’s one wonderful thing she did when I arrived back in the district. After our families and friends had greeted Peeta and me at the train station, there were a few questions allowed from reporters. Someone asked my mother what she thought of my new boyfriend, and she replied that, while Peeta was the very model of what a young man should be, I wasn’t old enough to have any boyfriend at all. She followed this with a pointed look at Peeta. There was a lot of laughter and comments like “Somebody’s in trouble” from the press, and Peeta dropped my hand and sidestepped away from me. That didn’t last long—there was too much pressure to act otherwise—but it gave us an excuse to be a little more reserved than we’d been in the Capitol. And maybe it can help account for how little I’ve been seen in Peeta’s company since the cameras left.

I go upstairs to the bathroom, where a steaming tub awaits. My mother has added a small bag of dried flowers that perfumes the air. None of us are used to the luxury of turning on a tap and having a limitless supply of hot water at our fingertips. We had only cold at our home in the Seam, and a bath meant boiling the rest over the fire. I undress and lower myself into the silky water—my mother has poured in some kind of oil as well—and try to get a grip on things.

The first question is who to tell, if anyone. Not my mother or Prim, obviously; they’d only become sick with worry. Not Gale. Even if I could get word to him. What would he do with the information, anyway? If he were alone, I might try to persuade him to run away. Certainly he could survive in

the woods. But he's not alone and he'd never leave his family. Or me. When I get home I'll have to tell him something about why our Sundays are a thing of the past, but I can't think about that now. Only about my next move. Besides, Gale's already so angry and frustrated with the Capitol that I sometimes think he's going to arrange his own uprising. The last thing he needs is an incentive. No, I can't tell anyone I'm leaving behind in District 12.

There are still three people I might confide in, starting with Cinna, my stylist. But my guess is Cinna might already be at risk, and I don't want to pull him into any more trouble by closer association with me. Then there's Peeta, who will be my partner in this deception, but how do I begin that conversation? *Hey, Peeta, remember how I told you I was kind of faking being in love with you? Well, I really need you to forget about that now and act extra in love with me or the president might kill Gale.* I can't do it. Besides, Peeta will perform well whether he knows what's at stake or not. That leaves Haymitch. Drunken, cranky, confrontational Haymitch, who I just poured a basin of ice water on. As my mentor in the Games it was his duty to keep me alive. I only hope he's still up for the job.

I slide down into the water, letting it block out the sounds around me. I wish the tub would expand so I could go swimming, like I used to on hot summer Sundays in the woods with my father. Those days were a special treat. We would leave early in the morning and hike farther into the woods than usual to a small lake he'd found while hunting. I don't even remember learning to swim, I was so young when he taught me. I just remember diving, turning somersaults, and paddling around. The muddy bottom of the lake beneath my toes. The smell of blossoms and greenery. Floating on my back, as I am now, staring at the blue sky while the chatter of the woods was muted by the water. He'd bag the waterfowl that nested around the shore, I'd hunt for eggs in the grasses, and we'd both dig for katniss roots, the plant for which he named me, in the shallows. At night, when we got home, my mother would pretend not to recognize me because I was so clean. Then she'd cook up an amazing dinner of roasted duck and baked katniss tubers with gravy.

I never took Gale to the lake. I could have. It's time-consuming to get there, but the waterfowl are such easy pickings you can make up for lost hunting time. It's a place I've never really wanted to share with anyone, though, a place that belonged only to my father and me. Since the Games, when I've had little to occupy my days, I've gone there a couple of times.

The swimming was still nice, but mostly the visits depressed me. Over the course of the last five years, the lake's remarkably unchanged and I'm almost unrecognizable.

Even underwater I can hear the sounds of commotion. Honking car horns, shouts of greeting, doors banging shut. It can only mean my entourage has arrived. I just have time to towel off and slip into a robe before my prep team bursts into the bathroom. There's no question of privacy. When it comes to my body, we have no secrets, these three people and me.

"Katniss, your eyebrows!" Venia shrieks right off, and even with the black cloud hanging over me, I have to stifle a laugh. Her aqua hair has been styled so it sticks out in sharp points all over her head, and the gold tattoos that used to be confined above her brows have curled around under her eyes, all contributing to the impression that I've literally shocked her.

Octavia comes up and pats Venia's back soothingly, her curvy body looking plumper than usual next to Venia's thin, angular one. "There, there. You can fix those in no time. But what am I going to do with these nails?" She grabs my hand and pins it flat between her two pea green ones. No, her skin isn't exactly pea green now. It's more of a light evergreen. The shift in shade is no doubt an attempt to stay abreast of the capricious fashion trends of the Capitol. "Really, Katniss, you could have left me something to work with!" she wails.

It's true. I've bitten my nails to stubs in the past couple of months. I thought about trying to break the habit but couldn't think of a good reason I should. "Sorry," I mutter. I hadn't really been spending much time worrying about how it might affect my prep team.

Flavius lifts a few strands of my wet, tangled hair. He gives his head a disapproving shake, causing his orange corkscrew curls to bounce around. "Has anyone touched this since you last saw us?" he asks sternly. "Remember, we specifically asked you to leave your hair alone."

"Yes!" I say, grateful that I can show I haven't totally taken them for granted. "I mean, no, no one's cut it. I did remember that." No, I didn't. It's more like the issue never came up. Since I've been home, all I've done is stick it in its usual old braid down my back.

This seems to mollify them, and they all kiss me, set me on a chair in my bedroom, and, as usual, start talking nonstop without bothering to notice if I'm listening. While Venia reinvents my eyebrows and Octavia gives me fake

nails and Flavius massages goo into my hair, I hear all about the Capitol. What a hit the Games were, how dull things have been since, how no one can wait until Peeta and I visit again at the end of the Victory Tour. After that, it won't be long before the Capitol begins gearing up for the Quarter Quell.

"Isn't it thrilling?"

"Don't you feel so lucky?"

"In your very first year of being a victor, you get to be a mentor in a Quarter Quell!"

Their words overlap in a blur of excitement.

"Oh, yes," I say neutrally. It's the best I can do. In a normal year, being a mentor to the tributes is the stuff of nightmares. I can't walk by the school now without wondering what kid I'll have to coach. But to make things even worse, this is the year of the Seventy-fifth Hunger Games, and that means it's also a Quarter Quell. They occur every twenty-five years, marking the anniversary of the districts' defeat with over-the-top celebrations and, for extra fun, some miserable twist for the tributes. I've never been alive for one, of course. But in school I remember hearing that for the second Quarter Quell, the Capitol demanded that twice the number of tributes be provided for the arena. The teachers didn't go into much more detail, which is surprising, because that was the year District 12's very own Haymitch Abernathy won the crown.

"Haymitch better be preparing himself for a lot of attention!" squeals Octavia.

Haymitch has never mentioned his personal experience in the arena to me. I would never ask. And if I ever saw his Games televised in reruns, I must've been too young to remember it. But the Capitol won't let him forget it this year. In a way, it's a good thing Peeta and I will both be available as mentors during the Quell, because it's a sure bet that Haymitch will be wasted.

After they've exhausted the topic of the Quarter Quell, my prep team launches into a whole lot of stuff about their incomprehensibly silly lives. Who said what about someone I've never heard of and what sort of shoes they just bought and a long story from Octavia about what a mistake it was to have everyone wear feathers to her birthday party.

Soon my brows are stinging, my hair's smooth and silky, and my nails are ready to be painted. Apparently they've been given instruction to prepare

only my hands and face, probably because everything else will be covered in the cold weather. Flavius badly wants to use his own trademark purple lipstick on me but resigns himself to a pink as they begin to color my face and nails. I can see by the palette Cinna has assigned that we're going for girlish, not sexy. Good. I'll never convince anyone of anything if I'm trying to be provocative. Haymitch made that very clear when he was coaching me for my interview for the Games.

My mother comes in, somewhat shyly, and says that Cinna has asked her to show the preps how she did my hair the day of the reaping. They respond with enthusiasm and then watch, thoroughly engrossed, as she breaks down the process of the elaborate braided hairdo. In the mirror, I can see their earnest faces following her every move, their eagerness when it is their turn to try a step. In fact, all three are so readily respectful and nice to my mother that I feel bad about how I go around feeling so superior to them. Who knows who I would be or what I would talk about if I'd been raised in the Capitol? Maybe my biggest regret would be having feathered costumes at my birthday party, too.

When my hair is done, I find Cinna downstairs in the living room, and just the sight of him makes me feel more hopeful. He looks the same as always, simple clothes, short brown hair, just a hint of gold eyeliner. We embrace, and I can barely keep from spilling out the entire episode with President Snow. But no, I've decided to tell Haymitch first. He'll know best who to burden with it. It's so easy to talk to Cinna, though. Lately we've been speaking a lot on the telephone that came with the house. It's sort of a joke, because almost no one else we know owns one. There's Peeta, but obviously I don't call him. Haymitch tore his out of the wall years ago. My friend Madge, the mayor's daughter, has a telephone in her house, but if we want to talk, we do it in person. At first, the thing barely ever got used. Then Cinna started to call to work on my talent.

Every victor is supposed to have one. Your talent is the activity you take up since you don't have to work either in school or your district's industry. It can be anything, really, anything that they can interview you about. Peeta, it turns out, actually has a talent, which is painting. He's been frosting those cakes and cookies for years in his family's bakery. But now that he's rich, he can afford to smear real paint on canvases. I don't have a talent, unless you count hunting illegally, which they don't. Or maybe singing, which I wouldn't

do for the Capitol in a million years. My mother tried to interest me in a variety of suitable alternatives from a list Effie Trinket sent her. Cooking, flower arranging, playing the flute. None of them took, although Prim had a knack for all three. Finally Cinna stepped in and offered to help me develop my passion for designing clothes, which really required development since it was nonexistent. But I said yes because it meant getting to talk to Cinna, and he promised he'd do all the work.

Now he's arranging things around my living room: clothing, fabrics, and sketchbooks with designs he's drawn. I pick up one of the sketchbooks and examine a dress I supposedly created. "You know, I think I show a lot of promise," I say.

"Get dressed, you worthless thing," he says, tossing a bundle of clothes at me.

I may have no interest in designing clothes but I do love the ones Cinna makes for me. Like these. Flowing black pants made of a thick, warm material. A comfortable white shirt. A sweater woven from green and blue and gray strands of kitten-soft wool. Laced leather boots that don't pinch my toes.

"Did I design my outfit?" I ask.

"No, you aspire to design your outfit and be like me, your fashion hero," says Cinna. He hands me a small stack of cards. "You'll read these off camera while they're filming the clothes. Try to sound like you care."

Just then, Effie Trinket arrives in a pumpkin orange wig to remind everyone, "We're on a schedule!" She kisses me on both cheeks while waving in the camera crew, then orders me into position. Effie's the only reason we got anywhere on time in the Capitol, so I try to accommodate her. I start bobbing around like a puppet, holding up outfits and saying meaningless things like "Don't you love it?" The sound team records me reading from my cards in a chirpy voice so they can insert it later, then I'm tossed out of the room so they can film my/Cinna's designs in peace.

Prim got out early from school for the event. Now she stands in the kitchen, being interviewed by another crew. She looks lovely in a sky blue frock that brings out her eyes, her blond hair pulled back in a matching ribbon. She's leaning a bit forward on the toes of her shiny white boots like she's about to take flight, like—

Bam! It's like someone actually hits me in the chest. No one has, of course, but the pain is so real I take a step back. I squeeze my eyes shut and I don't see Prim—I see Rue, the twelve-year-old girl from District 11 who was my ally in the arena. She could fly, birdlike, from tree to tree, catching on to the slenderest branches. Rue, who I didn't save. Who I let die. I picture her lying on the ground with the spear still wedged in her stomach...

Who else will I fail to save from the Capitol's vengeance? Who else will be dead if I don't satisfy President Snow?

I realize Cinna's trying to put a coat on me, so I raise my arms. I feel fur, inside and out, encasing me. It's from no animal I've ever seen. "Ermine," he tells me as I stroke the white sleeve. Leather gloves. A bright red scarf. Something furry covers my ears. "You're bringing earmuffs back in style."

I hate earmuffs, I think. They make it hard to hear, and since I was blasted deaf in one ear in the arena, I dislike them even more. After I won, the Capitol repaired my ear, but I still find myself testing it.

My mother hurries up with something cupped in her hand. "For good luck," she says.

It's the pin Madge gave me before I left for the Games. A mockingjay flying in a circle of gold. I tried to give it to Rue but she wouldn't take it. She said the pin was the reason she'd decided to trust me. Cinna fixes it on the knot in the scarf.

Effie Trinket's nearby, clapping her hands. "Attention, everyone! We're about to do the first outdoor shot, where the victors greet each other at the beginning of their marvelous trip. All right, Katniss, big smile, you're very excited, right?" I don't exaggerate when I say she shoves me out the door.

For a moment I can't quite see right because of the snow, which is now coming down in earnest. Then I make out Peeta coming through his front door. In my head I hear President Snow's directive, "*Convince me.*" And I know I must.

My face breaks into a huge smile and I start walking in Peeta's direction. Then, as if I can't stand it another second, I start running. He catches me and spins me around and then he slips—he still isn't entirely in command of his artificial leg—and we fall into the snow, me on top of him, and that's where we have our first kiss in months. It's full of fur and snowflakes and lipstick, but underneath all that, I can feel the steadiness that Peeta brings to everything. And I know I'm not alone. As badly as I have hurt him, he won't

expose me in front of the cameras. Won't condemn me with a halfhearted kiss. He's still looking out for me. Just as he did in the arena. Somehow the thought makes me want to cry. Instead I pull him to his feet, tuck my glove through the crook of his arm, and merrily pull him on our way.

The rest of the day is a blur of getting to the station, bidding everyone good-bye, the train pulling out, the old team—Peeta and me, Effie and Haymitch, Cinna and Portia, Peeta's stylist—dining on an indescribably delicious meal I don't remember. And then I'm swathed in pajamas and a voluminous robe, sitting in my plush compartment, waiting for the others to go to sleep. I know Haymitch will be up for hours. He doesn't like to sleep when it's dark out.

When the train seems quiet, I put on my slippers and pad down to his door. I have to knock several times before he answers, scowling, as if he's certain I've brought bad news.

"What do you want?" he says, nearly knocking me out with a cloud of wine fumes.

"I have to talk to you," I whisper.

"Now?" he says. I nod. "This better be good." He waits, but I feel certain every word we utter on a Capitol train is being recorded. "Well?" he barks.

The train starts to brake and for a second I think President Snow is watching me and doesn't approve of my confiding in Haymitch and has decided to go ahead and kill me now. But we're just stopping for fuel.

"The train's so stuffy," I say.

It's a harmless phrase, but I see Haymitch's eyes narrow in understanding. "I know what you need." He pushes past me and lurches down the hall to a door. When he wrestles it open, a blast of snow hits us. He trips out onto the ground.

A Capitol attendant rushes to help, but Haymitch waves her away good-naturedly as he staggers off. "Just want some fresh air. Only be a minute."

"Sorry. He's drunk," I say apologetically. "I'll get him." I hop down and stumble along the track behind him, soaking my slippers with snow, as he leads me beyond the end of the train so we will not be overheard. Then he turns on me.

"What?"

I tell him everything. About the president's visit, about Gale, about how we're all going to die if I fail.

His face sobers, grows older in the glow of the red taillights. “Then you can’t fail.”

“If you could just help me get through this trip—” I begin.

“No, Katniss, it’s not just this trip,” he says.

“What do you mean?” I say.

“Even if you pull it off, they’ll be back in another few months to take us all to the Games. You and Peeta, you’ll be mentors now, every year from here on out. And every year they’ll revisit the romance and broadcast the details of your private life, and you’ll never, ever be able to do anything but live happily ever after with that boy.”

The full impact of what he’s saying hits me. I will never have a life with Gale, even if I want to. I will never be allowed to live alone. I will have to be forever in love with Peeta. The Capitol will insist on it. I’ll have a few years maybe, because I’m still only sixteen, to stay with my mother and Prim. And then...and then...

“Do you understand what I mean?” he presses me.

I nod. He means there’s only one future, if I want to keep those I love alive and stay alive myself. I’ll have to marry Peeta.

4

We slog back to the train in silence. In the hallway outside my door, Haymitch gives my shoulder a pat and says, “You could do a lot worse, you know.” He heads off to his compartment, taking the smell of wine with him.

In my room, I remove my sodden slippers, my wet robe and pajamas. There are more in the drawers but I just crawl between the covers of my bed in my underclothes. I stare into the darkness, thinking about my conversation with Haymitch. Everything he said was true about the Capitol’s expectations, my future with Peeta, even his last comment. Of course, I could do a lot worse than Peeta. That isn’t really the point, though, is it? One of the few freedoms we have in District 12 is the right to marry who we want or not marry at all. And now even that has been taken away from me. I wonder if President Snow will insist we have children. If we do, they’ll have to face the reaping each year. And wouldn’t it be something to see the child of not one but two victors chosen for the arena? Victors’ children have been in the ring before. It always causes a lot of excitement and generates talk about how the odds are not in that family’s favor. But it happens too frequently to just be about odds. Gale’s convinced the Capitol does it on purpose, rigs the drawings to add extra drama. Given all the trouble I’ve caused, I’ve probably guaranteed any child of mine a spot in the Games.

I think of Haymitch, unmarried, no family, blotting out the world with drink. He could have had his choice of any woman in the district. And he chose solitude. Not solitude—that sounds too peaceful. More like solitary confinement. Was it because, having been in the arena, he knew it was better than risking the alternative? I had a taste of that alternative when they called Prim’s name on reaping day and I watched her walk to the stage to her death. But as her sister I could take her place, an option forbidden to our mother.

My mind searches frantically for a way out. I can’t let President Snow condemn me to this. Even if it means taking my own life. Before that, though, I’d try to run away. What would they do if I simply vanished? Disappeared into the woods and never came out? Could I even manage to take everyone I

love with me, start a new life deep in the wild? Highly unlikely but not impossible.

I shake my head to clear it. This is not the time to be making wild escape plans. I must focus on the Victory Tour. Too many people's fates depend on my giving a good show.

Dawn comes before sleep does, and there's Effie rapping on my door. I pull on whatever clothes are at the top of the drawer and drag myself down to the dining car. I don't see what difference it makes when I get up, since this is a travel day, but then it turns out that yesterday's makeover was just to get me to the train station. Today I'll get the works from my prep team.

"Why? It's too cold for anything to show," I grumble.

"Not in District Eleven," says Effie.

District 11. Our first stop. I'd rather start in any other district, since this was Rue's home. But that's not how the Victory Tour works. Usually it kicks off in 12 and then goes in descending district order to 1, followed by the Capitol. The victor's district is skipped and saved for very last. Since 12 puts on the least fabulous celebration—usually just a dinner for the tributes and a victory rally in the square, where nobody looks like they're having any fun—it's probably best to get us out of the way as soon as possible. This year, for the first time since Haymitch won, the final stop on the tour will be 12, and the Capitol will spring for the festivities.

I try to enjoy the food like Hazelle said. The kitchen staff clearly wants to please me. They've prepared my favorite, lamb stew with dried plums, among other delicacies. Orange juice and a pot of steaming hot chocolate wait at my place at the table. So I eat a lot, and the meal is beyond reproach, but I can't say I'm enjoying it. I'm also annoyed that no one but Effie and I has shown up.

"Where's everybody else?" I ask.

"Oh, who knows where Haymitch is," says Effie. I didn't really expect Haymitch, because he's probably just getting to bed. "Cinna was up late working on organizing your garment car. He must have over a hundred outfits for you. Your evening clothes are exquisite. And Peeta's team is probably still asleep."

"Doesn't he need prepping?" I ask.

"Not the way you do," Effie replies.

What does this mean? It means I get to spend the morning having the hair ripped off my body while Peeta sleeps in. I hadn't thought about it much, but in the arena at least some of the boys got to keep their body hair whereas none of the girls did. I can remember Peeta's now, as I bathed him by the stream. Very blond in the sunlight, once the mud and blood had been washed away. Only his face remained completely smooth. Not one of the boys grew a beard, and many were old enough to. I wonder what they did to them.

If I feel ragged, my prep team seems in worse condition, knocking back coffee and sharing brightly colored little pills. As far as I can tell, they never get up before noon unless there's some sort of national emergency, like my leg hair. I was so happy when it grew back in, too. As if it were a sign that things might be returning to normal. I run my fingers along the soft, curly down on my legs and give myself over to the team. None of them are up to their usual chatter, so I can hear every strand being yanked from its follicle. I have to soak in a tub full of a thick, unpleasant-smelling solution, while my face and hair are plastered with creams. Two more baths follow in other, less offensive, concoctions. I'm plucked and scoured and massaged and anointed until I'm raw.

Flavius tilts up my chin and sighs. "It's a shame Cinna said no alterations on you."

"Yes, we could really make you something special," says Octavia.

"When she's older," says Venia almost grimly. "Then he'll have to let us."

Do what? Blow my lips up like President Snow's? Tattoo my breasts? Dye my skin magenta and implant gems in it? Cut decorative patterns in my face? Give me curved talons? Or cat's whiskers? I saw all these things and more on the people in the Capitol. Do they really have no idea how freakish they look to the rest of us?

The thought of being left to my prep team's fashion whims only adds to the miseries competing for my attention—my abused body, my lack of sleep, my mandatory marriage, and the terror of being unable to satisfy President Snow's demands. By the time I reach lunch, where Effie, Cinna, Portia, Haymitch, and Peeta have started without me, I'm too weighed down to talk. They're raving about the food and how well they sleep on trains. Everyone's all full of excitement about the tour. Well, everyone but Haymitch. He's nursing a hangover and picking at a muffin. I'm not really hungry, either,

maybe because I loaded up on too much rich stuff this morning or maybe because I'm so unhappy. I play around with a bowl of broth, eating only a spoonful or two. I can't even look at Peeta—my designated future husband—although I know none of this is his fault.

People notice, try to bring me into the conversation, but I just brush them off. At some point, the train stops. Our server reports it will not just be for a fuel stop—some part has malfunctioned and must be replaced. It will require at least an hour. This sends Effie into a state. She pulls out her schedule and begins to work out how the delay will impact every event for the rest of our lives. Finally I just can't stand to listen to her anymore.

"No one cares, Effie!" I snap. Everyone at the table stares at me, even Haymitch, who you'd think would be on my side in this matter since Effie drives him nuts. I'm immediately put on the defensive. "Well, no one does!" I say, and get up and leave the dining car.

The train suddenly seems stifling and I'm definitely queasy now. I find the exit door, force it open—triggering some sort of alarm, which I ignore—and jump to the ground, expecting to land in snow. But the air's warm and balmy against my skin. The trees still wear green leaves. How far south have we come in a day? I walk along the track, squinting against the bright sunlight, already regretting my words to Effie. She's hardly to blame for my current predicament. I should go back and apologize. My outburst was the height of bad manners, and manners matter deeply to her. But my feet continue on along the track, past the end of the train, leaving it behind. An hour's delay. I can walk at least twenty minutes in one direction and make it back with plenty of time to spare. Instead, after a couple hundred yards, I sink to the ground and sit there, looking into the distance. If I had a bow and arrows, would I just keep going?

After a while I hear footsteps behind me. It'll be Haymitch, coming to chew me out. It's not like I don't deserve it, but I still don't want to hear it. "I'm not in the mood for a lecture," I warn the clump of weeds by my shoes.

"I'll try to keep it brief." Peeta takes a seat beside me.

"I thought you were Haymitch," I say.

"No, he's still working on that muffin." I watch as Peeta positions his artificial leg. "Bad day, huh?"

"It's nothing," I say.

He takes a deep breath. “Look, Katniss, I’ve been wanting to talk to you about the way I acted on the train. I mean, the last train. The one that brought us home. I knew you had something with Gale. I was jealous of him before I even officially met you. And it wasn’t fair to hold you to anything that happened in the Games. I’m sorry.”

His apology takes me by surprise. It’s true that Peeta froze me out after I confessed that my love for him during the Games was something of an act. But I don’t hold that against him. In the arena, I’d played that romance angle for all it was worth. There had been times when I didn’t honestly know how I felt about him. I still don’t, really.

“I’m sorry, too,” I say. I’m not sure for what exactly. Maybe because there’s a real chance I’m about to destroy him.

“There’s nothing for you to be sorry about. You were just keeping us alive. But I don’t want us to go on like this, ignoring each other in real life and falling into the snow every time there’s a camera around. So I thought if I stopped being so, you know, wounded, we could take a shot at just being friends,” he says.

All my friends are probably going to end up dead, but refusing Peeta wouldn’t keep him safe. “Okay,” I say. His offer does make me feel better. Less duplicitous somehow. It would be nice if he’d come to me with this earlier, before I knew that President Snow had other plans and just being friends was not an option for us anymore. But either way, I’m glad we’re speaking again.

“So what’s wrong?” he asks.

I can’t tell him. I pick at the clump of weeds.

“Let’s start with something more basic. Isn’t it strange that I know you’d risk your life to save mine...but I don’t know what your favorite color is?” he says.

A smile creeps onto my lips. “Green. What’s yours?”

“Orange,” he says.

“Orange? Like Effie’s hair?” I say.

“A bit more muted,” he says. “More like...sunset.”

Sunset. I can see it immediately, the rim of the descending sun, the sky streaked with soft shades of orange. Beautiful. I remember the tiger lily cookie and, now that Peeta is talking to me again, it’s all I can do not to

recount the whole story about President Snow. But I know Haymitch wouldn't want me to. I'd better stick to small talk.

"You know, everyone's always raving about your paintings. I feel bad I haven't seen them," I say.

"Well, I've got a whole train car full." He rises and offers me his hand. "Come on."

It's good to feel his fingers entwined with mine again, not for show but in actual friendship. We walk back to the train hand in hand. At the door, I remember. "I've got to apologize to Effie first."

"Don't be afraid to lay it on thick," Peeta tells me.

So when we go back to the dining car, where the others are still at lunch, I give Effie an apology that I think is overkill but in her mind probably just manages to compensate for my breach of etiquette. To her credit, Effie accepts graciously. She says it's clear I'm under a lot of pressure. And her comments about the necessity of *someone* attending to the schedule only last about five minutes. Really, I've gotten off easily.

When Effie finishes, Peeta leads me down a few cars to see his paintings. I don't know what I expected. Larger versions of the flower cookies maybe. But this is something entirely different. Peeta has painted the Games.

Some you wouldn't get right away, if you hadn't been with him in the arena yourself. Water dripping through the cracks in our cave. The dry pond bed. A pair of hands, his own, digging for roots. Others any viewer would recognize. The golden horn called the Cornucopia. Clove arranging the knives inside her jacket. One of the mutts, unmistakably the blond, green-eyed one meant to be Glimmer, snarling as it makes its way toward us. And me. I am everywhere. High up in a tree. Beating a shirt against the stones in the stream. Lying unconscious in a pool of blood. And one I can't place—perhaps this is how I looked when his fever was high—emerging from a silver gray mist that matches my eyes exactly.

"What do you think?" he asks.

"I hate them," I say. I can almost smell the blood, the dirt, the unnatural breath of the mutt. "All I do is go around trying to forget the arena and you've brought it back to life. How do you remember these things so exactly?"

"I see them every night," he says.

I know what he means. Nightmares—which I was no stranger to before the Games—now plague me whenever I sleep. But the old standby, the one of

my father being blown to bits in the mines, is rare. Instead I relive versions of what happened in the arena. My worthless attempt to save Rue. Peeta bleeding to death. Glimmer's bloated body disintegrating in my hands. Cato's horrific end with the muttations. These are the most frequent visitors. "Me, too. Does it help? To paint them out?"

"I don't know. I think I'm a little less afraid of going to sleep at night, or I tell myself I am," he says. "But they haven't gone anywhere."

"Maybe they won't. Haymitch's haven't." Haymitch doesn't say so, but I'm sure this is why he doesn't like to sleep in the dark.

"No. But for me, it's better to wake up with a paint-brush than a knife in my hand," he says. "So you really hate them?"

"Yes. But they're extraordinary. Really," I say. And they are. But I don't want to look at them anymore. "Want to see my talent? Cinna did a great job on it."

Peeta laughs. "Later." The train lurches forward, and I can see the land moving past us through the window. "Come on, we're almost to District Eleven. Let's go take a look at it."

We go down to the last car on the train. There are chairs and couches to sit on, but what's wonderful is that the back windows retract into the ceiling so you're riding outside, in the fresh air, and you can see a wide sweep of the landscape. Huge open fields with herds of dairy cattle grazing in them. So unlike our own heavily wooded home.

We slow slightly and I think we might be coming in for another stop, when a fence rises up before us. Towering at least thirty-five feet in the air and topped with wicked coils of barbed wire, it makes ours back in District 12 look childish. My eyes quickly inspect the base, which is lined with enormous metal plates. There would be no burrowing under those, no escaping to hunt. Then I see the watchtowers, placed evenly apart, manned with armed guards, so out of place among the fields of wildflowers around them.

"That's something different," says Peeta.

Rue did give me the impression that the rules in District 11 were more harshly enforced. But I never imagined something like this.

Now the crops begin, stretched out as far as the eye can see. Men, women, and children wearing straw hats to keep off the sun straighten up, turn our way, take a moment to stretch their backs as they watch our train go

by. I can see orchards in the distance, and I wonder if that's where Rue would have worked, collecting the fruit from the slimmest branches at the tops of the trees. Small communities of shacks—by comparison the houses in the Seam are upscale—spring up here and there, but they're all deserted. Every hand must be needed for the harvest.

On and on it goes. I can't believe the size of District 11. "How many people do you think live here?" Peeta asks. I shake my head. In school they refer to it as a large district, that's all. No actual figures on the population. But those kids we see on camera waiting for the reaping each year, they can't be but a sampling of the ones who actually live here. What do they do? Have preliminary drawings? Pick the winners ahead of time and make sure they're in the crowd? How exactly did Rue end up on that stage with nothing but the wind offering to take her place?

I begin to weary of the vastness, the endlessness of this place. When Effie comes to tell us to dress, I don't object. I go to my compartment and let the prep team do my hair and makeup. Cinna comes in with a pretty orange frock patterned with autumn leaves. I think how much Peeta will like the color.

Effie gets Peeta and me together and goes through the day's program one last time. In some districts the victors ride through the city while the residents cheer. But in 11—maybe because there's not much of a city to begin with, things being so spread out, or maybe because they don't want to waste so many people while the harvest is on—the public appearance is confined to the square. It takes place before their Justice Building, a huge marble structure. Once, it must have been a thing of beauty, but time has taken its toll. Even on television you can see ivy overtaking the crumbling facade, the sag of the roof. The square itself is ringed with run-down storefronts, most of which are abandoned. Wherever the well-to-do live in District 11, it's not here.

Our entire public performance will be staged outside on what Effie refers to as the verandah, the tiled expanse between the front doors and the stairs that's shaded by a roof supported by columns. Peeta and I will be introduced, the mayor of 11 will read a speech in our honor, and we'll respond with a scripted thank-you provided by the Capitol. If a victor had any special allies among the dead tributes, it is considered good form to add a few personal comments as well. I should say something about Rue, and Thresh, too, really, but every time I tried to write it at home, I ended up with a blank paper

staring me in the face. It's hard for me to talk about them without getting emotional. Fortunately, Peeta has a little something worked up, and with some slight alterations, it can count for both of us. At the end of the ceremony, we'll be presented with some sort of plaque, and then we can withdraw to the Justice Building, where a special dinner will be served.

As the train is pulling into the District 11 station, Cinna puts the finishing touches on my outfit, switching my orange hairband for one of metallic gold and securing the mockingjay pin I wore in the arena to my dress. There's no welcoming committee on the platform, just a squad of eight Peacekeepers who direct us into the back of an armored truck. Effie sniffs as the door clanks closed behind us. "Really, you'd think we were all criminals," she says.

Not all of us, Effie. Just me, I think.

The truck lets us out at the back of the Justice Building. We're hurried inside. I can smell an excellent meal being prepared, but it doesn't block out the odors of mildew and rot. They've left us no time to look around. As we make a beeline for the front entrance, I can hear the anthem beginning outside in the square. Someone clips a microphone on me. Peeta takes my left hand. The mayor's introducing us as the massive doors open with a groan.

"Big smiles!" Effie says, and gives us a nudge. Our feet start moving forward.

This is it. This is where I have to convince everybody how in love I am with Peeta, I think. The solemn ceremony is pretty tightly mapped out, so I'm not sure how to do it. It's not a time for kissing, but maybe I can work one in.

There's loud applause, but none of the other responses we got in the Capitol, the cheers and whoops and whistles. We walk across the shaded verandah until the roof runs out and we're standing at the top of a big flight of marble stairs in the glaring sun. As my eyes adjust, I see the buildings on the square have been hung with banners that help cover up their neglected state. It's packed with people, but again, just a fraction of the number who live here.

As usual, a special platform has been constructed at the bottom of the stage for the families of the dead tributes. On Thresh's side, there's only an old woman with a hunched back and a tall, muscular girl I'm guessing is his sister. On Rue's...I'm not prepared for Rue's family. Her parents, whose faces are still fresh with sorrow. Her five younger siblings, who resemble

her so closely. The slight builds, the luminous brown eyes. They form a flock of small dark birds.

The applause dies out and the mayor gives the speech in our honor. Two little girls come up with tremendous bouquets of flowers. Peeta does his part of the scripted reply and then I find my lips moving to conclude it. Fortunately my mother and Prim have drilled me so I can do it in my sleep.

Peeta had his personal comments written on a card, but he doesn't pull it out. Instead he speaks in his simple, winning style about Thresh and Rue making it to the final eight, about how they both kept me alive—thereby keeping him alive—and about how this is a debt we can never repay. And then he hesitates before adding something that wasn't written on the card. Maybe because he thought Effie might make him remove it. "It can in no way replace your losses, but as a token of our thanks we'd like for each of the tributes' families from District Eleven to receive one month of our winnings every year for the duration of our lives."

The crowd can't help but respond with gasps and murmurs. There is no precedent for what Peeta has done. I don't even know if it's legal. He probably doesn't know, either, so he didn't ask in case it isn't. As for the families, they just stare at us in shock. Their lives were changed forever when Thresh and Rue were lost, but this gift will change them again. A month of tribute winnings can easily provide for a family for a year. As long as we live, they will not hunger.

I look at Peeta and he gives me a sad smile. I hear Haymitch's voice. "*You could do a lot worse.*" At this moment, it's impossible to imagine how I could do any better. The gift...it is perfect. So when I rise up on tiptoe to kiss him, it doesn't seem forced at all.

The mayor steps forward and presents us each with a plaque that's so large I have to put down my bouquet to hold it. The ceremony's about to end when I notice one of Rue's sisters staring at me. She must be about nine and is almost an exact replica of Rue, down to the way she stands with her arms slightly extended. Despite the good news about the winnings, she's not happy. In fact, her look is reproachful. Is it because I didn't save Rue?

No. It's because I still haven't thanked her, I think.

A wave of shame rushes through me. The girl is right. How can I stand here, passive and mute, leaving all the words to Peeta? If she had won, Rue would never have let my death go unsung. I remember how I took care in the

arena to cover her with flowers, to make sure her loss did not go unnoticed. But that gesture will mean nothing if I don't support it now.

"Wait!" I stumble forward, pressing the plaque to my chest. My allotted time for speaking has come and gone, but I must say something. I owe too much. And even if I had pledged all my winnings to the families, it would not excuse my silence today. "Wait, please." I don't know how to start, but once I do, the words rush from my lips as if they've been forming in the back of my mind for a long time.

"I want to give my thanks to the tributes of District Eleven," I say. I look at the pair of women on Thresh's side. "I only ever spoke to Thresh one time. Just long enough for him to spare my life. I didn't know him, but I always respected him. For his power. For his refusal to play the Games on anyone's terms but his own. The Careers wanted him to team up with them from the beginning, but he wouldn't do it. I respected him for that."

For the first time the old hunched woman—is she Thresh's grandmother?—raises her head and the trace of a smile plays on her lips.

The crowd has fallen silent now, so silent that I wonder how they manage it. They must all be holding their breath.

I turn to Rue's family. "But I feel as if I did know Rue, and she'll always be with me. Everything beautiful brings her to mind. I see her in the yellow flowers that grow in the Meadow by my house. I see her in the mockingjays that sing in the trees. But most of all, I see her in my sister, Prim." My voice is undependable, but I am almost finished. "Thank you for your children." I raise my chin to address the crowd. "And thank you all for the bread."

I stand there, feeling broken and small, thousands of eyes trained on me. There's a long pause. Then, from somewhere in the crowd, someone whistles Rue's four-note mockingjay tune. The one that signaled the end of the workday in the orchards. The one that meant safety in the arena. By the end of the tune, I have found the whistler, a wizened old man in a faded red shirt and overalls. His eyes meet mine.

What happens next is not an accident. It is too well executed to be spontaneous, because it happens in complete unison. Every person in the crowd presses the three middle fingers of their left hand against their lips and extends them to me. It's our sign from District 12, the last good-bye I gave Rue in the arena.

If I hadn't spoken to President Snow, this gesture might move me to tears. But with his recent orders to calm the districts fresh in my ears, it fills me with dread. What will he think of this very public salute to the girl who defied the Capitol?

The full impact of what I've done hits me. It was not intentional—I only meant to express my thanks—but I have elicited something dangerous. An act of dissent from the people of District 11. This is exactly the kind of thing I am supposed to be defusing!

I try to think of something to say to undermine what has just happened, to negate it, but I can hear the slight burst of static indicating my microphone has been cut off and the mayor has taken over. Peeta and I acknowledge a final round of applause. He leads me back toward the doors, unaware that anything has gone wrong.

I feel funny and have to stop for a moment. Little bits of bright sunshine dance before my eyes. "Are you all right?" Peeta asks.

"Just dizzy. The sun was so bright," I say. I see his bouquet. "I forgot my flowers," I mumble.

"I'll get them," he says.

"I can," I answer.

We would be safe inside the Justice Building by now, if I hadn't stopped, if I hadn't left my flowers. Instead, from the deep shade of the verandah, we see the whole thing.

A pair of Peacekeepers dragging the old man who whistled to the top of the steps. Forcing him to his knees before the crowd. And putting a bullet through his head.

5

The man has only just crumpled to the ground when a wall of white Peacekeeper uniforms blocks our view. Several of the soldiers have automatic weapons held lengthwise as they push us back toward the door.

“We’re going!” says Peeta, shoving the Peacekeeper who’s pressing on me. “We get it, all right? Come on, Katniss.” His arm encircles me and guides me back into the Justice Building. The Peacekeepers follow a pace or two behind us. The moment we’re inside, the doors slam shut and we hear the Peacekeepers’ boots moving back toward the crowd.

Haymitch, Effie, Portia, and Cinna wait under a staticfilled screen that’s mounted on the wall, their faces tight with anxiety.

“What happened?” Effie hurries over. “We lost the feed just after Katniss’s beautiful speech, and then Haymitch said he thought he heard a gun fire, and I said it was ridiculous, but who knows? There are lunatics everywhere!”

“Nothing happened, Effie. An old truck backfired,” says Peeta evenly.

Two more shots. The door doesn’t muffle their sound much. Who was that? Thresh’s grandmother? One of Rue’s little sisters?

“Both of you. With me,” says Haymitch. Peeta and I follow him, leaving the others behind. The Peacekeepers who are stationed around the Justice Building take little interest in our movements now that we are safely inside. We ascend a magnificent curved marble staircase. At the top, there’s a long hall with worn carpet on the floor. Double doors stand open, welcoming us into the first room we encounter. The ceiling must be twenty feet high. Designs of fruit and flowers are carved into the molding and small, fat children with wings look down at us from every angle. Vases of blossoms give off a cloying scent that makes my eyes itch. Our evening clothes hang on racks against the wall. This room has been prepared for our use, but we’re barely there long enough to drop off our gifts. Then Haymitch yanks the microphones from our chests, stuffs them beneath a couch cushion, and waves us on.

As far as I know, Haymitch has only been here once, when he was on his Victory Tour decades ago. But he must have a remarkable memory or reliable instincts, because he leads us up through a maze of twisting staircases and increasingly narrow halls. At times he has to stop and force a door. By the protesting squeak of the hinges you can tell it's been a long time since it was opened. Eventually we climb a ladder to a trapdoor. When Haymitch pushes it aside, we find ourselves in the dome of the Justice Building. It's a huge place filled with broken furniture, piles of books and ledgers, and rusty weapons. The coat of dust blanketing everything is so thick it's clear it hasn't been disturbed for years. Light struggles to filter in through four grimy square windows set in the sides of the dome. Haymitch kicks the trapdoor shut and turns on us.

"What happened?" he asks.

Peeta relates all that occurred in the square. The whistle, the salute, our hesitation on the verandah, the murder of the old man. "What's going on, Haymitch?"

"It will be better coming from you," Haymitch says to me.

I don't agree. I think it will be a hundred times worse coming from me. But I tell Peeta everything as calmly as I can. About President Snow, the unrest in the districts. I don't even omit the kiss with Gale. I lay out how we are all in jeopardy, how the whole country is in jeopardy because of my trick with the berries. "I was supposed to fix things on this tour. Make everyone who had doubted believe I acted out of love. Calm things down. But obviously, all I've done today is get three people killed, and now everyone in the square will be punished." I feel so sick that I have to sit down on a couch, despite the exposed springs and stuffing.

"Then I made things worse, too. By giving the money," says Peeta. Suddenly he strikes out at a lamp that sits precariously on a crate and knocks it across the room, where it shatters against the floor. "This has to stop. Right now. This—this—game you two play, where you tell each other secrets but keep them from me like I'm too inconsequential or stupid or weak to handle them."

"It's not like that, Peeta—" I begin.

"It's exactly like that!" he yells at me. "I have people I care about, too, Katniss! Family and friends back in District Twelve who will be just as dead

as yours if we don't pull this thing off. So, after all we went through in the arena, don't I even rate the truth from you?"

"You're always so reliably good, Peeta," says Haymitch. "So smart about how you present yourself before the cameras. I didn't want to disrupt that."

"Well, you overestimated me. Because I really screwed up today. What do you think is going to happen to Rue's and Thresh's families? Do you think they'll get their share of our winnings? Do you think I gave them a bright future? Because I think they'll be lucky if they survive the day!" Peeta sends something else flying, a statue. I've never seen him like this.

"He's right, Haymitch," I say. "We were wrong not to tell him. Even back in the Capitol."

"Even in the arena, you two had some sort of system worked out, didn't you?" asks Peeta. His voice is quieter now. "Something I wasn't part of."

"No. Not officially. I just could tell what Haymitch wanted me to do by what he sent, or didn't send," I say.

"Well, I never had that opportunity. Because he never sent me anything until you showed up," says Peeta.

I haven't thought much about this. How it must have looked from Peeta's perspective when I appeared in the arena having received burn medicine and bread when he, who was at death's door, had gotten nothing. Like Haymitch was keeping me alive at his expense.

"Look, boy—" Haymitch begins.

"Don't bother, Haymitch. I know you had to choose one of us. And I'd have wanted it to be her. But this is something different. People are dead out there. More will follow unless we're very good. We all know I'm better than Katniss in front of the cameras. No one needs to coach me on what to say. But I have to know what I'm walking into," says Peeta.

"From now on, you'll be fully informed," Haymitch promises.

"I better be," says Peeta. He doesn't even bother to look at me before he leaves.

The dust he disrupted billows up and looks for new places to land. My hair, my eyes, my shiny gold pin.

"Did you choose me, Haymitch?" I ask.

"Yeah," he says.

"Why? You like him better," I say.

“That’s true. But remember, until they changed the rules, I could only hope to get one of you out of there alive,” he says. “I thought since he was determined to protect you, well, between the three of us, we might be able to bring you home.”

“Oh” is all I can think to say.

“You’ll see, the choices you’ll have to make. If we survive this,” says Haymitch. “You’ll learn.”

Well, I’ve learned one thing today. This place is not a larger version of District 12. Our fence is unguarded and rarely charged. Our Peacekeepers are unwelcome but less brutal. Our hardships evoke more fatigue than fury. Here in 11, they suffer more acutely and feel more desperation. President Snow is right. A spark could be enough to set them ablaze.

Everything is happening too fast for me to process it. The warning, the shootings, the recognition that I may have set something of great consequence in motion. The whole thing is so improbable. And it would be one thing if I had planned to stir things up, but given the circumstances...how on earth did I cause so much trouble?

“Come on. We’ve got a dinner to attend,” says Haymitch.

I stand in the shower as long as they let me before I have to come out to be readied. The prep team seems oblivious to the events of the day. They’re all excited about the dinner. In the districts they’re important enough to attend, whereas back in the Capitol they almost never score invitations to prestigious parties. While they try to predict what dishes will be served, I keep seeing the old man’s head being blown off. I don’t even pay attention to what anyone is doing to me until I’m about to leave and I see myself in the mirror. A pale pink strapless dress brushes my shoes. My hair is pinned back from my face and falling down my back in a shower of ringlets.

Cinna comes up behind me and arranges a shimmering silver wrap around my shoulders. He catches my eye in the mirror. “Like it?”

“It’s beautiful. As always,” I say.

“Let’s see how it looks with a smile,” he says gently. It’s his reminder that in a minute, there will be cameras again. I manage to raise the corners of my lips. “There we go.”

When we all assemble to go down to the dinner, I can see Effie is out of sorts. Surely, Haymitch hasn’t told her about what happened in the square. I wouldn’t be surprised if Cinna and Portia know, but there seems to be an

unspoken agreement to leave Effie out of the bad-news loop. It doesn't take long to hear about the problem, though.

Effie runs through the evening's schedule, then tosses it aside. "And then, thank goodness, we can all get on that train and get out of here," she says.

"Is something wrong, Effie?" asks Cinna.

"I don't like the way we've been treated. Being stuffed into trucks and barred from the platform. And then, about an hour ago, I decided to look around the Justice Building. I'm something of an expert in architectural design, you know," she says.

"Oh, yes, I've heard that," says Portia before the pause gets too long.

"So, I was just having a peek around because district ruins are going to be all the rage this year, when two Peacemakers showed up and ordered me back to our quarters. One of them actually poked me with her gun!" says Effie.

I can't help thinking this is the direct result of Haymitch, Peeta, and me disappearing earlier in the day. It's a little reassuring, actually, to think that Haymitch might have been right. That no one would have been monitoring the dusty dome where we talked. Although I bet they are now.

Effie looks so distressed that I spontaneously give her a hug. "That's awful, Effie. Maybe we shouldn't go to the dinner at all. At least until they've apologized." I know she'll never agree to this, but she brightens considerably at the suggestion, at the validation of her complaint.

"No, I'll manage. It's part of my job to weather the ups and downs. And we can't let you two miss your dinner," she says. "But thank you for the offer, Katniss."

Effie arranges us in formation for our entrance. First the prep teams, then her, the stylists, Haymitch. Peeta and I, of course, bring up the rear.

Somewhere below, musicians begin to play. As the first wave of our little procession begins down the steps, Peeta and I join hands.

"Haymitch says I was wrong to yell at you. You were only operating under his instructions," says Peeta. "And it isn't as if I haven't kept things from you in the past."

I remember the shock of hearing Peeta confess his love for me in front of all of Panem. Haymitch had known about that and not told me. "I think I broke a few things myself after that interview."

"Just an urn," he says.

“And your hands. There’s no point to it anymore, though, is there? Not being straight with each other?” I say.

“No point,” says Peeta. We stand at the top of the stairs, giving Haymitch a fifteen-step lead as Effie directed. “Was that really the only time you kissed Gale?”

I’m so startled I answer. “Yes.” With all that has happened today, has that question actually been preying on him?

“That’s fifteen. Let’s do it,” he says.

A light hits us, and I put on the most dazzling smile I can.

We descend the steps and are sucked into what becomes an indistinguishable round of dinners, ceremonies, and train rides. Each day it’s the same. Wake up. Get dressed. Ride through cheering crowds. Listen to a speech in our honor. Give a thank-you speech in return, but only the one the Capitol gave us, never any personal additions now. Sometimes a brief tour: a glimpse of the sea in one district, towering forests in another, ugly factories, fields of wheat, stinking refineries. Dress in evening clothes. Attend dinner. Train.

During ceremonies, we are solemn and respectful but always linked together, by our hands, our arms. At dinners, we are borderline delirious in our love for each other. We kiss, we dance, we get caught trying to sneak away to be alone. On the train, we are quietly miserable as we try to assess what effect we might be having.

Even without our personal speeches to trigger dissent—needless to say the ones we gave in District 11 were edited out before the event was broadcast—you can feel something in the air, the rolling boil of a pot about to run over. Not everywhere. Some crowds have the weary-cattle feel that I know District 12 usually projects at the victors’ ceremonies. But in others—particularly 8, 4, and 3—there is genuine elation in the faces of the people at the sight of us, and under the elation, fury. When they chant my name, it is more of a cry for vengeance than a cheer. When the Peacekeepers move in to quiet an unruly crowd, it presses back instead of retreating. And I know that there’s nothing I could ever do to change this. No show of love, however believable, will turn this tide. If my holding out those berries was an act of temporary insanity, then these people will embrace insanity, too.

Cinna begins to take in my clothes around the waist. The prep team frets over the circles under my eyes. Effie starts giving me pills to sleep, but they

don't work. Not well enough. I drift off only to be roused by nightmares that have increased in number and intensity. Peeta, who spends much of the night roaming the train, hears me screaming as I struggle to break out of the haze of drugs that merely prolong the horrible dreams. He manages to wake me and calm me down. Then he climbs into bed to hold me until I fall back to sleep. After that, I refuse the pills. But every night I let him into my bed. We manage the darkness as we did in the arena, wrapped in each other's arms, guarding against dangers that can descend at any moment. Nothing else happens, but our arrangement quickly becomes a subject of gossip on the train.

When Effie brings it up to me, I think, *Good. Maybe it will get back to President Snow.* I tell her we'll make an effort to be more discreet, but we don't.

The back-to-back appearances in 2 and 1 are their own special kind of awful. Cato and Clove, the tributes from District 2, might have both made it home if Peeta and I hadn't. I personally killed the girl, Glimmer, and the boy from District 1. As I try to avoid looking at his family, I learn that his name was Marvel. How did I never know that? I suppose that before the Games I didn't pay attention, and afterward I didn't want to know.

By the time we reach the Capitol, we are desperate. We make endless appearances to adoring crowds. There is no danger of an uprising here among the privileged, among those whose names are never placed in the reaping balls, whose children never die for the supposed crimes committed generations ago. We don't need to convince anybody in the Capitol of our love but hold to the slim hope that we can still reach some of those we failed to convince in the districts. Whatever we do seems too little, too late.

Back in our old quarters in the Training Center, I'm the one who suggests the public marriage proposal. Peeta agrees to do it but then disappears to his room for a long time. Haymitch tells me to leave him alone.

"I thought he wanted it, anyway," I say.

"Not like this," Haymitch says. "He wanted it to be real."

I go back to my room and lie under the covers, trying not to think of Gale and thinking of nothing else.

That night, on the stage before the Training Center, we bubble our way through a list of questions. Caesar Flickerman, in his twinkling midnight blue suit, his hair, eyelids, and lips still dyed powder blue, flawlessly guides us through the interview. When he asks us about the future, Peeta gets down on

one knee, pours out his heart, and begs me to marry him. I, of course, accept. Caesar is beside himself, the Capitol audience is hysterical, shots of crowds around Panem show a country besotted with happiness.

President Snow himself makes a surprise visit to congratulate us. He clasps Peeta's hand and gives him an approving slap on the shoulder. He embraces me, enfolding me in the smell of blood and roses, and plants a puffy kiss on my cheek. When he pulls back, his fingers digging into my arms, his face smiling into mine, I dare to raise my eyebrows. They ask what my lips can't. *Did I do it? Was it enough? Was giving everything over to you, keeping up the game, promising to marry Peeta enough?*

In answer, he gives an almost imperceptible shake of his head.

6

In that one slight motion, I see the end of hope, the beginning of the destruction of everything I hold dear in the world. I can't guess what form my punishment will take, how wide the net will be cast, but when it is finished, there will most likely be nothing left. So you would think that at this moment, I would be in utter despair. Here's what's strange. The main thing I feel is a sense of relief. That I can give up this game. That the question of whether I can succeed in this venture has been answered, even if that answer is a resounding no. That if desperate times call for desperate measures, then I am free to act as desperately as I wish.

Only not here, not quite yet. It's essential to get back to District 12, because the main part of any plan will include my mother and sister, Gale and his family. And Peeta, if I can get him to come with us. I add Haymitch to the list. These are the people I must take with me when I escape into the wild. How I will convince them, where we will go in the dead of winter, what it will take to evade capture are unanswered questions. But at least now I know what I must do.

So instead of crumpling to the ground and weeping, I find myself standing up straighter and with more confidence than I have in weeks. My smile, while somewhat insane, is not forced. And when President Snow silences the audience and says, "What do you think about us throwing them a wedding right here in the Capitol?" I pull off girl-almost-catatonic-with-joy without a hitch.

Caesar Flickerman asks if the president has a date in mind.

"Oh, before we set a date, we better clear it with Katniss's mother," says the president. The audience gives a big laugh and the president puts his arm around me. "Maybe if the whole country puts its mind to it, we can get you married before you're thirty."

"You'll probably have to pass a new law," I say with a giggle.

"If that's what it takes," says the president with conspiratorial good humor.

Oh, the fun we two have together.

The party, held in the banquet room of President Snow's mansion, has no equal. The forty-foot ceiling has been transformed into the night sky, and the stars look exactly as they do at home. I suppose they look the same from the Capitol, but who would know? There's always too much light from the city to see the stars here. About halfway between the floor and the ceiling, musicians float on what look like fluffy white clouds, but I can't see what holds them aloft. Traditional dining tables have been replaced by innumerable stuffed sofas and chairs, some surrounding fireplaces, others beside fragrant flower gardens or ponds filled with exotic fish, so that people can eat and drink and do whatever they please in the utmost comfort. There's a large tiled area in the center of the room that serves as everything from a dance floor, to a stage for the performers who come and go, to another spot to mingle with the flamboyantly dressed guests.

But the real star of the evening is the food. Tables laden with delicacies line the walls. Everything you can think of, and things you have never dreamed of, lie in wait. Whole roasted cows and pigs and goats still turning on spits. Huge platters of fowl stuffed with savory fruits and nuts. Ocean creatures drizzled in sauces or begging to be dipped in spicy concoctions. Countless cheeses, breads, vegetables, sweets, waterfalls of wine, and streams of spirits that flicker with flames.

My appetite has returned with my desire to fight back. After weeks of feeling too worried to eat, I'm famished.

"I want to taste everything in the room," I tell Peeta.

I can see him trying to read my expression, to figure out my transformation. Since he doesn't know that President Snow thinks I have failed, he can only assume that I think we have succeeded. Perhaps even that I have some genuine happiness at our engagement. His eyes reflect his puzzlement but only briefly, because we're on camera. "Then you'd better pace yourself," he says.

"Okay, no more than one bite of each dish," I say. My resolve is almost immediately broken at the first table, which has twenty or so soups, when I encounter a creamy pumpkin brew sprinkled with slivered nuts and tiny black seeds. "I could just eat this all night!" I exclaim. But I don't. I weaken again at a clear green broth that I can only describe as tasting like springtime, and again when I try a frothy pink soup dotted with raspberries.

Faces appear, names are exchanged, pictures taken, kisses brushed on cheeks. Apparently my mockingjay pin has spawned a new fashion sensation, because several people come up to show me their accessories. My bird has been replicated on belt buckles, embroidered into silk lapels, even tattooed in intimate places. Everyone wants to wear the winner's token. I can only imagine how nuts that makes President Snow. But what can he do? The Games were such a hit here, where the berries were only a symbol of a desperate girl trying to save her lover.

Peeta and I make no effort to find company but are constantly sought out. We are what no one wants to miss at the party. I act delighted, but I have zero interest in these Capitol people. They are only distractions from the food.

Every table presents new temptations, and even on my restricted one-taste-per-dish regimen, I begin filling up quickly. I pick up a small roasted bird, bite into it, and my tongue floods with orange sauce. Delicious. But I make Peeta eat the remainder because I want to keep tasting things, and the idea of throwing away food, as I see so many people doing so casually, is abhorrent to me. After about ten tables I'm stuffed, and we've only sampled a small number of the dishes available.

Just then my prep team descends on us. They're nearly incoherent between the alcohol they've consumed and their ecstasy at being at such a grand affair.

"Why aren't you eating?" asks Octavia.

"I have been, but I can't hold another bite," I say. They all laugh as if that's the silliest thing they've ever heard.

"No one lets that stop them!" says Flavius. They lead us over to a table that holds tiny stemmed wineglasses filled with clear liquid. "Drink this!"

Peeta picks one up to take a sip and they lose it.

"Not here!" shrieks Octavia.

"You have to do it in there," says Venia, pointing to doors that lead to the toilets. "Or you'll get it all over the floor!"

Peeta looks at the glass again and puts it together. "You mean this will make me puke?"

My prep team laughs hysterically. "Of course, so you can keep eating," says Octavia. "I've been in there twice already. Everyone does it, or else how would you have any fun at a feast?"

I'm speechless, staring at the pretty little glasses and all they imply. Peeta sets his back on the table with such precision you'd think it might detonate. "Come on, Katniss, let's dance."

Music filters down from the clouds as he leads me away from the team, the table, and out onto the floor. We know only a few dances at home, the kind that go with fiddle and flute music and require a good deal of space. But Effie has shown us some that are popular in the Capitol. The music's slow and dreamlike, so Peeta pulls me into his arms and we move in a circle with practically no steps at all. You could do this dance on a pie plate. We're quiet for a while. Then Peeta speaks in a strained voice.

"You go along, thinking you can deal with it, thinking maybe they're not so bad, and then you—" He cuts himself off.

All I can think of is the emaciated bodies of the children on our kitchen table as my mother prescribes what the parents can't give. More food. Now that we're rich, she'll send some home with them. But often in the old days, there was nothing to give and the child was past saving, anyway. And here in the Capitol they're vomiting for the pleasure of filling their bellies again and again. Not from some illness of body or mind, not from spoiled food. It's what everyone does at a party. Expected. Part of the fun.

One day when I dropped by to give Hazelle the game, Vick was home sick with a bad cough. Being part of Gale's family, the kid has to eat better than ninety percent of the rest of District 12. But he still spent about fifteen minutes talking about how they'd opened a can of corn syrup from Parcel Day and each had a spoonful on bread and were going to maybe have more later in the week. How Hazelle had said he could have a bit in a cup of tea to soothe his cough, but he wouldn't feel right unless the others had some, too. If it's like that at Gale's, what's it like in the other houses?

"Peeta, they bring us here to fight to the death for their entertainment," I say. "Really, this is nothing by comparison."

"I know. I know that. It's just sometimes I can't stand it anymore. To the point where...I'm not sure what I'll do." He pauses, then whispers, "Maybe we were wrong, Katniss."

"About what?" I ask.

"About trying to subdue things in the districts," he says.

My head turns swiftly from side to side, but no one seems to have heard. The camera crew got sidetracked at a table of shellfish, and the couples

dancing around us are either too drunk or too self-involved to notice.

“Sorry,” he says. He should be. This is no place to be voicing such thoughts.

“Save it for home,” I tell him.

Just then Portia appears with a large man who looks vaguely familiar. She introduces him as Plutarch Heavensbee, the new Head Gamemaker. Plutarch asks Peeta if he can steal me for a dance. Peeta’s recovered his camera face and good-naturedly passes me over, warning the man not to get too attached.

I don’t want to dance with Plutarch Heavensbee. I don’t want to feel his hands, one resting against mine, one on my hip. I’m not used to being touched, except by Peeta or my family, and I rank Gamemakers somewhere below maggots in terms of creatures I want in contact with my skin. But he seems to sense this and holds me almost at arm’s length as we turn on the floor.

We chitchat about the party, about the entertainment, about the food, and then he makes a joke about avoiding punch since training. I don’t get it, and then I realize he’s the man who tripped backward into the punch bowl when I shot an arrow at the Gamemakers during the training session. Well, not really. I was shooting an apple out of their roast pig’s mouth. But I made them jump.

“Oh, you’re one who—” I laugh, remembering him splashing back into the punch bowl.

“Yes. And you’ll be pleased to know I’ve never recovered,” says Plutarch.

I want to point out that twenty-two dead tributes will never recover from the Games he helped create, either. But I only say, “Good. So, you’re the Head Gamemaker this year? That must be a big honor.”

“Between you and me, there weren’t many takers for the job,” he says. “So much responsibility as to how the Games turn out.”

Yeah, the last guy’s dead, I think. He must know about Seneca Crane, but he doesn’t look the least bit concerned. “Are you planning the Quarter Quell Games already?” I say.

“Oh, yes. Well, they’ve been in the works for years, of course. Arenas aren’t built in a day. But the, shall we say, flavor of the Games is being determined now. Believe it or not, I’ve got a strategy meeting tonight,” he says.

Plutarch steps back and pulls out a gold watch on a chain from a vest pocket. He flips open the lid, sees the time, and frowns. "I'll have to be going soon." He turns the watch so I can see the face. "It starts at midnight."

"That seems late for—" I say, but then something distracts me. Plutarch has run his thumb across the crystal face of the watch and for just a moment an image appears, glowing as if lit by candlelight. It's another mockingjay. Exactly like the pin on my dress. Only this one disappears. He snaps the watch closed.

"That's very pretty," I say.

"Oh, it's more than pretty. It's one of a kind," he says. "If anyone asks about me, say I've gone home to bed. The meetings are supposed to be kept secret. But I thought it'd be safe to tell you."

"Yes. Your secret's safe with me," I say.

As we shake hands, he gives a small bow, a common gesture here in the Capitol. "Well, I'll see you next summer at the Games, Katniss. Best wishes on your engagement, and good luck with your mother."

"I'll need it," I say.

Plutarch disappears and I wander through the crowd, looking for Peeta, as strangers congratulate me. On my engagement, on my victory at the Games, on my choice of lipstick. I respond, but really I'm thinking about Plutarch showing off his pretty, one-of-a-kind watch to me. There was something strange about it. Almost clandestine. But why? Maybe he thinks someone else will steal his idea of putting a disappearing mockingjay on a watch face. Yes, he probably paid a fortune for it and now he can't show it to anyone because he's afraid someone will make a cheap, knockoff version. Only in the Capitol.

I find Peeta admiring a table of elaborately decorated cakes. Bakers have come in from the kitchen especially to talk frosting with him, and you can see them tripping over one another to answer his questions. At his request, they assemble an assortment of little cakes for him to take back to District 12, where he can examine their work in quiet.

"Effie said we have to be on the train at one. I wonder what time it is," he says, glancing around.

"Almost midnight," I reply. I pluck a chocolate flower from a cake with my fingers and nibble on it, so beyond worrying about manners.

“Time to say thank you and farewell!” trills Effie at my elbow. It’s one of those moments when I just love her compulsive punctuality. We collect Cinna and Portia, and she escorts us around to say good-bye to important people, then herds us to the door.

“Shouldn’t we thank President Snow?” asks Peeta. “It’s his house.”

“Oh, he’s not a big one for parties. Too busy,” says Effie. “I’ve already arranged for the necessary notes and gifts to be sent to him tomorrow. There you are!” Effie gives a little wave to two Capitol attendants who have an inebriated Haymitch propped up between them.

We travel through the streets of the Capitol in a car with darkened windows. Behind us, another car brings the prep teams. The throngs of people celebrating are so thick it’s slow going. But Effie has this all down to a science, and at exactly one o’clock we are back on the train and it’s pulling out of the station.

Haymitch is deposited in his room. Cinna orders tea and we all take seats around the table while Effie rattles her schedule papers and reminds us we’re still on tour. “There’s the Harvest Festival in District Twelve to think about. So I suggest we drink our tea and head straight to bed.” No one argues.

When I open my eyes, it’s early afternoon. My head rests on Peeta’s arm. I don’t remember him coming in last night. I turn, being careful not to disturb him, but he’s already awake.

“No nightmares,” he says.

“What?” I ask.

“You didn’t have any nightmares last night,” he says.

He’s right. For the first time in ages I’ve slept through the night. “I had a dream, though,” I say, thinking back. “I was following a mockingjay through the woods. For a long time. It was Rue, really. I mean, when it sang, it had her voice.”

“Where did she take you?” he says, brushing my hair off my forehead.

“I don’t know. We never arrived,” I say. “But I felt happy.”

“Well, you slept like you were happy,” he says.

“Peeta, how come I never know when you’re having a nightmare?” I say.

“I don’t know. I don’t think I cry out or thrash around or anything. I just come to, paralyzed with terror,” he says.

“You should wake me,” I say, thinking about how I can interrupt his sleep two or three times on a bad night. About how long it can take to calm me

down.

“It’s not necessary. My nightmares are usually about losing you,” he says. “I’m okay once I realize you’re here.”

Ugh. Peeta makes comments like this in such an offhand way, and it’s like being hit in the gut. He’s only answering my question honestly. He’s not pressing me to reply in kind, to make any declaration of love. But I still feel awful, as if I’ve been using him in some terrible way. Have I? I don’t know. I only know that for the first time, I feel immoral about him being here in my bed. Which is ironic since we’re officially engaged now.

“Be worse when we’re home and I’m sleeping alone again,” he says.

That’s right, we’re almost home.

The agenda for District 12 includes a dinner at Mayor Undersee’s house tonight and a victory rally in the square during the Harvest Festival tomorrow. We always celebrate the Harvest Festival on the final day of the Victory Tour, but usually it means a meal at home or with a few friends if you can afford it. This year it will be a public affair, and since the Capitol will be throwing it, everyone in the whole district will have full bellies.

Most of our prepping will take place at the mayor’s house, since we’re back to being covered in furs for outdoor appearances. We’re only at the train station briefly, to smile and wave as we pile into our car. We don’t even get to see our families until the dinner tonight.

I’m glad it will be at the mayor’s house instead of at the Justice Building, where the memorial for my father was held, where they took me after the reaping for those wrenching good-byes to my family. The Justice Building is too full of sadness.

But I like Mayor Undersee’s house, especially now that his daughter, Madge, and I are friends. We always were, in a way. It became official when she came to say good-bye to me before I left for the Games. When she gave me the mockingjay pin for luck. After I got home, we started spending time together. It turns out Madge has plenty of empty hours to fill, too. It was a little awkward at first because we didn’t know what to do. Other girls our age, I’ve heard them talking about boys, or other girls, or clothes. Madge and I aren’t gossipy and clothes bore me to tears. But after a few false starts, I realized she was dying to go into the woods, so I’ve taken her a couple of times and showed her how to shoot. She’s trying to teach me the piano, but mostly I like to listen to her play. Sometimes we eat at each other’s houses.

Madge likes mine better. Her parents seem nice but I don't think she sees a whole lot of them. Her father has District 12 to run and her mother gets fierce headaches that force her to stay in bed for days.

"Maybe you should take her to the Capitol," I said during one of them. We weren't playing the piano that day, because even two floors away the sound caused her mother pain. "They can fix her up, I bet."

"Yes. But you don't go to the Capitol unless they invite you," said Madge unhappily. Even the mayor's privileges are limited.

When we reach the mayor's house, I only have time to give Madge a quick hug before Effie hustles me off to the third floor to get ready. After I'm prepped and dressed in a full-length silver gown, I've still got an hour to kill before the dinner, so I slip off to find her.

Madge's bedroom is on the second floor along with several guest rooms and her father's study. I stick my head in the study to say hello to the mayor but it's empty. The television's droning on, and I stop to watch shots of Peeta and me at the Capitol party last night. Dancing, eating, kissing. This will be playing in every household in Panem right now. The audience must be sick to death of the star-crossed lovers from District 12. I know I am.

I'm leaving the room when a beeping noise catches my attention. I turn back to see the screen of the television go black. Then the words "UPDATE ON DISTRICT 8" start flashing. Instinctively I know this is not for my eyes but something intended only for the mayor. I should go. Quickly. Instead I find myself stepping closer to the television.

An announcer I've never seen before appears. It's a woman with graying hair and a hoarse, authoritative voice. She warns that conditions are worsening and a Level 3 alert has been called. Additional forces are being sent into District 8, and all textile production has ceased.

They cut away from the woman to the main square in District 8. I recognize it because I was there only last week. There are still banners with my face waving from the rooftops. Below them, there's a mob scene. The square's packed with screaming people, their faces hidden with rags and homemade masks, throwing bricks. Buildings burn. Peacekeepers shoot into the crowd, killing at random.

I've never seen anything like it, but I can only be witnessing one thing. This is what President Snow calls an uprising.

7

A leather bag filled with food and a flask of hot tea. A pair of fur-lined gloves that Cinna left behind. Three twigs, broken from the naked trees, lying in the snow, pointing in the direction I will travel. This is what I leave for Gale at our usual meeting place on the first Sunday after the Harvest Festival.

I have continued on through the cold, misty woods, breaking a path that will be unfamiliar to Gale but is simple for my feet to find. It leads to the lake. I no longer trust that our regular rendezvous spot offers privacy, and I'll need that and more to spill my guts to Gale today. But will he even come? If he doesn't, I'll have no choice but to risk going to his house in the dead of night. There are things he has to know...things I need him to help me figure out...

Once the implications of what I was seeing on Mayor Undersee's television hit me, I made for the door and started down the hall. Just in time, too, because the mayor came up the steps moments later. I gave him a wave.

"Looking for Madge?" he said in a friendly tone.

"Yes. I want to show her my dress," I said.

"Well, you know where to find her." Just then, another round of beeping came from his study. His face turned grave. "Excuse me," he said. He went into his study and closed the door tightly.

I waited in the hall until I had composed myself. Reminded myself I must act naturally. Then I found Madge in her room, sitting at her dressing table, brushing out her wavy blond hair before a mirror. She was in the same pretty white dress she'd worn on reaping day. She saw my reflection behind her and smiled. "Look at you. Like you came right off the streets of the Capitol."

I stepped in closer. My fingers touched the mockingjay. "Even my pin now. Mockingjays are all the rage in the Capitol, thanks to you. Are you sure you don't want it back?" I asked.

"Don't be silly, it was a gift," said Madge. She tied back her hair in a festive gold ribbon.

"Where did you get it, anyway?" I asked.

“It was my aunt’s,” she said. “But I think it’s been in the family a long time.”

“It’s a funny choice, a mockingjay,” I said. “I mean, because of what happened in the rebellion. With the jabberjays backfiring on the Capitol and all.”

The jabberjays were mutations, genetically enhanced male birds created by the Capitol as weapons to spy on rebels in the districts. They could remember and repeat long passages of human speech, so they were sent into rebel areas to capture our words and return them to the Capitol. The rebels caught on and turned them against the Capitol by sending them home loaded with lies. When this was discovered, the jabberjays were left to die. In a few years, they became extinct in the wild, but not before they had mated with female mockingbirds, creating an entirely new species.

“But mockingjays were never a weapon,” said Madge. “They’re just songbirds. Right?”

“Yeah, I guess so,” I said. But it’s not true. A mockingbird is just a songbird. A mockingjay is a creature the Capitol never intended to exist. They hadn’t counted on the highly controlled jabberjay having the brains to adapt to the wild, to pass on its genetic code, to thrive in a new form. They hadn’t anticipated its will to live.

Now, as I trudge through the snow, I see the mockingjays hopping about on branches as they pick up on other birds’ melodies, replicate them, and then transform them into something new. As always, they remind me of Rue. I think of the dream I had the last night on the train, where I followed her in mockingjay form. I wish I could have stayed asleep just a bit longer and found out where she was trying to take me.

It’s a hike to the lake, no question. If he decides to follow me at all, Gale’s going to be put out by this excessive use of energy that could be better spent in hunting. He was conspicuously absent from the dinner at the mayor’s house, although the rest of his family came. Hazelle said he was home sick, which was an obvious lie. I couldn’t find him at the Harvest Festival, either. Vick told me he was out hunting. That was probably true.

After a couple of hours, I reach an old house near the edge of the lake. Maybe “house” is too big a word for it. It’s only one room, about twelve feet square. My father thought that a long time ago there were a lot of buildings—you can still see some of the foundations—and people came to them to play

and fish in the lake. This house outlasted the others because it's made of concrete. Floor, roof, ceiling. Only one of four glass windows remains, wavy and yellowed by time. There's no plumbing and no electricity, but the fireplace still works and there's a woodpile in the corner that my father and I collected years ago. I start a small fire, counting on the mist to obscure any telltale smoke. While the fire catches, I sweep out the snow that has accumulated under the empty windows, using a twig broom my father made me when I was about eight and I played house here. Then I sit on the tiny concrete hearth, thawing out by the fire and waiting for Gale.

It's a surprisingly short time before he appears. A bow slung over his shoulder, a dead wild turkey he must have encountered along the way hanging from his belt. He stands in the doorway as if considering whether or not to enter. He holds the unopened leather bag of food, the flask, Cinna's gloves. Gifts he will not accept because of his anger at me. I know exactly how he feels. Didn't I do the same thing to my mother?

I look in his eyes. His temper can't quite mask the hurt, the sense of betrayal he feels at my engagement to Peeta. This will be my last chance, this meeting today, to not lose Gale forever. I could take hours trying to explain, and even then have him refuse me. Instead I go straight to the heart of my defense.

"President Snow personally threatened to have you killed," I say.

Gale raises his eyebrows slightly, but there's no real show of fear or astonishment. "Anyone else?"

"Well, he didn't actually give me a copy of the list. But it's a good guess it includes both our families," I say.

It's enough to bring him to the fire. He crouches before the hearth and warms himself. "Unless what?"

"Unless nothing, now," I say. Obviously this requires more of an explanation, but I have no idea where to start, so I just sit there staring gloomily into the fire.

After about a minute of this, Gale breaks the silence. "Well, thanks for the heads-up."

I turn to him, ready to snap, but I catch the glint in his eye. I hate myself for smiling. This is not a funny moment, but I guess it's a lot to drop on someone. We're all going to be obliterated no matter what. "I do have a plan, you know."

“Yeah, I bet it’s a stunner,” he says. He tosses the gloves on my lap. “Here. I don’t want your fiancé’s old gloves.”

“He’s not my fiancé. That’s just part of the act. And these aren’t his gloves. They were Cinna’s,” I say.

“Give them back, then,” he says. He pulls on the gloves, flexes his fingers, and nods in approval. “At least I’ll die in comfort.” “That’s optimistic. Of course, you don’t know what’s happened,” I say.

“Let’s have it,” he says.

I decide to begin with the night Peeta and I were crowned victors of the Hunger Games, and Haymitch warned me of the Capitol’s fury. I tell him about the uneasiness that dogged me even once I was back home, President Snow’s visit to my house, the murders in District 11, the tension in the crowds, the last-ditch effort of the engagement, the president’s indication that it hadn’t been enough, my certainty that I’ll have to pay.

Gale never interrupts. While I talk, he tucks the gloves in his pocket and occupies himself with turning the food in the leather bag into a meal for us. Toasting bread and cheese, coring apples, placing chestnuts in the fire to roast. I watch his hands, his beautiful, capable fingers. Scarred, as mine were before the Capitol erased all marks from my skin, but strong and deft. Hands that have the power to mine coal but the precision to set a delicate snare. Hands I trust.

I pause to take a drink of tea from the flask before I tell him about my homecoming.

“Well, you really made a mess of things,” he says.

“I’m not even done,” I tell him.

“I’ve heard enough for the moment. Let’s skip ahead to this plan of yours,” he says.

I take a deep breath. “We run away.”

“What?” he asks. This has actually caught him off guard.

“We take to the woods and make a run for it,” I say. His face is impossible to read. Will he laugh at me, dismiss this as foolishness? I rise in agitation, preparing for an argument. “You said yourself you thought that we could do it! That morning of the reaping. You said—”

He steps in and I feel myself lifted off the ground. The room spins, and I have to lock my arms around Gale’s neck to brace myself. He’s laughing, happy.

“Hey!” I protest, but I’m laughing, too.

Gale sets me down but doesn’t release his hold on me. “Okay, let’s run away,” he says.

“Really? You don’t think I’m mad? You’ll go with me?” Some of the crushing weight begins to lift as it transfers to Gale’s shoulders.

“I *do* think you’re mad and I’ll *still* go with you,” he says. He means it. Not only means it but welcomes it. “We can do it. I know we can. Let’s get out of here and never come back!”

“You’re sure?” I say. “Because it’s going to be hard, with the kids and all. I don’t want to get five miles into the woods and have you—”

“I’m sure. I’m completely, entirely, one hundred percent sure.” He tilts his forehead down to rest against mine and pulls me closer. His skin, his whole being, radiates heat from being so near the fire, and I close my eyes, soaking in his warmth. I breathe in the smell of snow-dampened leather and smoke and apples, the smell of all those wintry days we shared before the Games. I don’t try to move away. Why should I, anyway? His voice drops to a whisper. “I love you.”

That’s why.

I never see these things coming. They happen too fast. One second you’re proposing an escape plan and the next...you’re expected to deal with something like this. I come up with what must be the worst possible response. “I know.”

It sounds terrible. Like I assume he couldn’t help loving me but that I don’t feel anything in return. Gale starts to draw away, but I grab hold of him. “I know! And you...you know what you are to me.” It’s not enough. He breaks my grip. “Gale, I can’t think about anyone that way now. All I can think about, every day, every waking minute since they drew Prim’s name at the reaping, is how afraid I am. And there doesn’t seem to be room for anything else. If we could get somewhere safe, maybe I could be different. I don’t know.”

I can see him swallowing his disappointment. “So, we’ll go. We’ll find out.” He turns back to the fire, where the chestnuts are beginning to burn. He flips them out onto the hearth. “My mother’s going to take some convincing.”

I guess he’s still going, anyway. But the happiness has fled, leaving an all-too-familiar strain in its place. “Mine, too. I’ll just have to make her see

reason. Take her for a long walk. Make sure she understands we won't survive the alternative."

"She'll understand. I watched a lot of the Games with her and Prim. She won't say no to you," says Gale.

"I hope not." The temperature in the house seems to have dropped twenty degrees in a matter of seconds. "Haymitch will be the real challenge."

"Haymitch?" Gale abandons the chestnuts. "You're not asking him to come with us?"

"I have to, Gale. I can't leave him and Peeta because they'd—" His scowl cuts me off. "What?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize how large our party was," he snaps at me.

"They'd torture them to death, trying to find out where I was," I say.

"What about Peeta's family? They'll never come. In fact, they probably couldn't wait to inform on us. Which I'm sure he's smart enough to realize. What if he decides to stay?" he asks.

I try to sound indifferent, but my voice cracks. "Then he stays."

"You'd leave him behind?" Gale asks.

"To save Prim and my mother, yes," I answer. "I mean, no! I'll get him to come."

"And me, would you leave me?" Gale's expression is rock hard now. "Just if, for instance, I can't convince my mother to drag three young kids into the wilderness in winter."

"Hazelle won't refuse. She'll see sense," I say.

"Suppose she doesn't, Katniss. What then?" he demands.

"Then you have to force her, Gale. Do you think I'm making this stuff up?" My voice is rising in anger as well.

"No. I don't know. Maybe the president's just manipulating you. I mean, he's throwing your wedding. You saw how the Capitol crowd reacted. I don't think he can afford to kill you. Or Peeta. How's he going to get out of that one?" says Gale.

"Well, with an uprising in District Eight, I doubt he's spending much time choosing my wedding cake!" I shout.

The instant the words are out of my mouth I want to reclaim them. Their effect on Gale is immediate—the flush on his cheeks, the brightness of his gray eyes. "There's an uprising in Eight?" he says in a hushed voice.

I try to backpedal. To defuse him, as I tried to defuse the districts. “I don’t know if it’s really an uprising. There’s unrest. People in the streets—” I say.

Gale grabs my shoulders. “What did you see?”

“Nothing! In person. I just heard something.” As usual, it’s too little, too late. I give up and tell him. “I saw something on the mayor’s television. I wasn’t supposed to. There was a crowd, and fires, and the Peacekeepers were gunning people down but they were fighting back...” I bite my lip and struggle to continue describing the scene. Instead I say aloud the words that have been eating me up inside. “And it’s my fault, Gale. Because of what I did in the arena. If I had just killed myself with those berries, none of this would’ve happened. Peeta could have come home and lived, and everyone else would have been safe, too.”

“Safe to do what?” he says in a gentler tone. “Starve? Work like slaves? Send their kids to the reaping? You haven’t hurt people—you’ve given them an opportunity. They just have to be brave enough to take it. There’s already been talk in the mines. People who want to fight. Don’t you see? It’s happening! It’s finally happening! If there’s an uprising in District Eight, why not here? Why not everywhere? This could be it, the thing we’ve been—”

“Stop it! You don’t know what you’re saying. The Peacekeepers outside of Twelve, they’re not like Darius, or even Cray! The lives of district people—they mean less than nothing to them!” I say.

“That’s why we have to join the fight!” he answers harshly.

“No! We have to leave here before they kill us and a lot of other people, too!” I’m yelling again, but I can’t understand why he’s doing this. Why doesn’t he see what’s so undeniable?

Gale pushes me roughly away from him. “You leave, then. I’d never go in a million years.”

“You were happy enough to go before. I don’t see how an uprising in District Eight does anything but make it more important that we leave. You’re just mad about—” No, I can’t throw Peeta in his face. “What about your family?”

“What about the other families, Katniss? The ones who can’t run away? Don’t you see? It can’t be about just saving *us* anymore. Not if the rebellion’s begun!” Gale shakes his head, not hiding his disgust with me. “You could do

so much.” He throws Cinna’s gloves at my feet. “I changed my mind. I don’t want anything they made in the Capitol.” And he’s gone.

I look down at the gloves. Anything they made in the Capitol? Was that directed at me? Does he think I am now just another product of the Capitol and therefore something untouchable? The unfairness of it all fills me with rage. But it’s mixed up with fear over what kind of crazy thing he might do next.

I sink down next to the fire, desperate for comfort, to work out my next move. I calm myself by thinking that rebellions don’t happen in a day. Gale can’t talk to the miners until tomorrow. If I can get to Hazelle before then, she might straighten him out. But I can’t go now. If he’s there, he’ll lock me out. Maybe tonight, after everyone else is asleep...Hazelle often works late into the night finishing up laundry. I could go then, tap at the window, tell her the situation so she’ll keep Gale from doing anything foolish.

My conversation with President Snow in the study comes back to me.

“My advisors were concerned you would be difficult, but you’re not planning on being difficult at all, are you?”

“No.”

“That’s what I told them. I said any girl who goes to such lengths to preserve her life isn’t going to be interested in throwing it away with both hands.”

I think of how hard Hazelle has worked to keep that family alive. Surely she’ll be on my side in this matter. Or won’t she?

It must be getting on toward noon now and the days are so short. No point in being in the woods after dark if you don’t have to. I stamp out the remains of my little fire, clear up the scraps of food, and tuck Cinna’s gloves in my belt. I guess I’ll hang on to them for a while. In case Gale has a change of heart. I think of the look on his face when he flung them to the ground. How repelled he was by them, by me...

I trudge through the woods and reach my old house while there’s still light. My conversation with Gale was an obvious setback, but I’m still determined to carry on with my plan to escape District 12. I decide to find Peeta next. In a strange way, since he’s seen some of what I’ve seen on the tour, he may be an easier sell than Gale was. I run into him as he’s leaving the Victor’s Village.

“Been hunting?” he asks. You can see he doesn’t think it’s a good idea.

“Not really. Going to town?” I ask.

“Yes. I’m supposed to eat dinner with my family,” he says.

“Well, I can at least walk you in.” The road from the Victor’s Village to the square gets little use. It’s a safe enough place to talk. But I can’t seem to get the words out. Proposing it to Gale was such a disaster. I gnaw on my chapped lips. The square gets closer with every step. I may not have an opportunity again soon. I take a deep breath and let the words rush out. “Peeta, if I asked you to run away from the district with me, would you?”

Peeta takes my arm, bringing me to a stop. He doesn’t need to check my face to see if I’m serious. “Depends on why you’re asking.”

“President Snow wasn’t convinced by me. There’s an uprising in District Eight. We have to get out,” I say.

“By ‘we’ do you mean just you and me? No. Who else would be going?” he asks.

“My family. Yours, if they want to come. Haymitch, maybe,” I say.

“What about Gale?” he says.

“I don’t know. He might have other plans,” I say.

Peeta shakes his head and gives me a rueful smile. “I bet he does. Sure, Katniss, I’ll go.”

I feel a slight twinge of hope. “You will?”

“Yeah. But I don’t think for a minute you will,” he says.

I jerk my arm away. “Then you don’t know me. Be ready. It could be any time.” I take off walking and he follows a pace or two behind.

“Katniss,” Peeta says. I don’t slow down. If he thinks it’s a bad idea, I don’t want to know, because it’s the only one I have. “Katniss, hold up.” I kick a dirty, frozen chunk of snow off the path and let him catch up. The coal dust makes everything look especially ugly. “I really will go, if you want me to. I just think we better talk it through with Haymitch. Make sure we won’t be making things worse for everyone.” He raises his head. “What’s that?”

I lift my chin. I’ve been so consumed with my own worries, I haven’t noticed the strange noise coming from the square. A whistling, the sound of an impact, the intake of breath from a crowd.

“Come on,” Peeta says, his face suddenly hard. I don’t know why. I can’t place the sound, even guess at the situation. But it means something bad to him.

When we reach the square, it's clear something's happening, but the crowd's too thick to see. Peeta steps up on a crate against the wall of the sweetshop and offers me a hand while he scans the square. I'm halfway up when he suddenly blocks my way. "Get down. Get out of here!" He's whispering, but his voice is harsh with insistence.

"What?" I say, trying to force my way back up.

"Go home, Katniss! I'll be there in a minute, I swear!" he says.

Whatever it is, it's terrible. I yank away from his hand and begin to push my way through the crowd. People see me, recognize my face, and then look panicked. Hands shove me back. Voices hiss.

"Get out of here, girl."

"Only make it worse."

"What do you want to do? Get him killed?"

But at this point, my heart is beating so fast and fierce I hardly hear them. I only know that whatever waits in the middle of the square is meant for me. When I finally break through to the cleared space, I see I am right. And Peeta was right. And those voices were right, too.

Gale's wrists are bound to a wooden post. The wild turkey he shot earlier hangs above him, the nail driven through its neck. His jacket's been cast aside on the ground, his shirt torn away. He slumps unconscious on his knees, held up only by the ropes at his wrists. What used to be his back is a raw, bloody slab of meat.

Standing behind him is a man I've never seen, but I recognize his uniform. It's the one designated for our Head Peacekeeper. This isn't old Cray, though. This is a tall, muscular man with sharp creases in his pants.

The pieces of the picture do not quite come together until I see his arm raise the whip.

8

“No!” I cry, and spring forward. It’s too late to stop the arm from descending, and I instinctively know I won’t have the power to block it. Instead I throw myself directly between the whip and Gale. I’ve flung out my arms to protect as much of his broken body as possible, so there’s nothing to deflect the lash. I take the full force of it across the left side of my face.

The pain is blinding and instantaneous. Jagged flashes of light cross my vision and I fall to my knees. One hand cups my cheek while the other keeps me from tipping over. I can already feel the welt rising up, the swelling closing my eye. The stones beneath me are wet with Gale’s blood, the air heavy with its scent. “Stop it! You’ll kill him!” I shriek.

I get a glimpse of my assailant’s face. Hard, with deep lines, a cruel mouth. Gray hair shaved almost to nonexistence, eyes so black they seem all pupils, a long, straight nose reddened by the freezing air. The powerful arm lifts again, his sights set on me. My hand flies to my shoulder, hungry for an arrow, but, of course, my weapons are stashed in the woods. I grit my teeth in anticipation of the next lash.

“Hold it!” a voice barks. Haymitch appears and trips over a Peacekeeper lying on the ground. It’s Darius. A huge purple lump pushes through the red hair on his forehead. He’s knocked out but still breathing. What happened? Did he try to come to Gale’s aid before I got here?

Haymitch ignores him and pulls me to my feet roughly. “Oh, excellent.” His hand locks under my chin, lifting it. “She’s got a photo shoot next week modeling wedding dresses. What am I supposed to tell her stylist?”

I see a flicker of recognition in the eyes of the man with the whip. Bundled against the cold, my face free of makeup, my braid tucked carelessly under my coat, it wouldn’t be easy to identify me as the victor of the last Hunger Games. Especially with half my face swelling up. But Haymitch has been showing up on television for years, and he’d be difficult to forget.

The man rests the whip on his hip. “She interrupted the punishment of a confessed criminal.”

Everything about this man, his commanding voice, his odd accent, warns of an unknown and dangerous threat. Where has he come from? District 11? 3? From the Capitol itself?

"I don't care if she blew up the blasted Justice Building! Look at her cheek! Think that will be camera ready in a week?" Haymitch snarls.

The man's voice is still cold, but I can detect a slight edge of doubt. "That's not my problem."

"No? Well, it's about to be, my friend. The first call I make when I get home is to the Capitol," says Haymitch. "Find out who authorized you to mess up my victor's pretty little face!"

"He was poaching. What business is it of hers, anyway?" says the man.

"He's her cousin." Peeta's got my other arm now, but gently. "And she's my fiancée. So if you want to get to him, expect to go through both of us."

Maybe we're it. The only three people in the district who could make a stand like this. Although it's sure to be temporary. There will be repercussions. But at the moment, all I care about is keeping Gale alive. The new Head Peacekeeper glances over at his backup squad. With relief, I see they're familiar faces, old friends from the Hob. You can tell by their expressions that they're not enjoying the show.

One, a woman named Purnia who eats regularly at Greasy Sae's, steps forward stiffly. "I believe, for a first offense, the required number of lashes has been dispensed, sir. Unless your sentence is death, which we would carry out by firing squad."

"Is that the standard protocol here?" asks the Head Peacekeeper.

"Yes, sir," Purnia says, and several others nod in agreement. I'm sure none of them actually know because, in the Hob, the standard protocol for someone showing up with a wild turkey is for everybody to bid on the drumsticks.

"Very well. Get your cousin out of here, then, girl. And if he comes to, remind him that the next time he poaches off the Capitol's land, I'll assemble that firing squad personally." The Head Peacekeeper wipes his hand along the length of the whip, splattering us with blood. Then he coils it into quick, neat loops and walks off.

Most of the other Peacekeepers fall in an awkward formation behind him. A small group stays behind and hoists Darius's body up by the arms and legs.

I catch Purnia's eye and mouth the word "Thanks" before she goes. She doesn't respond, but I'm sure she understood.

"Gale." I turn, my hands fumbling at the knots binding his wrists. Someone passes forward a knife and Peeta cuts the ropes. Gale collapses to the ground.

"Better get him to your mother," says Haymitch.

There's no stretcher, but the old woman at the clothing stall sells us the board that serves as her countertop. "Just don't tell where you got it," she says, packing up the rest of her goods quickly. Most of the square has emptied, fear getting the better of compassion. But after what just happened, I can't blame anyone.

By the time we've laid Gale facedown on the board, there's only a handful of people left to carry him. Haymitch, Peeta, and a couple of miners who work on the same crew as Gale lift him up.

Leevy, a girl who lives a few houses down from mine in the Seam, takes my arm. My mother kept her little brother alive last year when he caught the measles. "Need help getting back?" Her gray eyes are scared but determined.

"No, but can you get Hazelle? Send her over?" I ask.

"Yeah," says Leevy, turning on her heel.

"Leevy!" I say. "Don't let her bring the kids."

"No. I'll stay with them myself," she says.

"Thanks." I grab Gale's jacket and hurry after the others.

"Get some snow on that," Haymitch orders over his shoulder. I scoop up a handful of snow and press it against my cheek, numbing a bit of the pain. My left eye's tearing heavily now, and in the dimming light it's all I can do to follow the boots in front of me.

As we walk I hear Bristel and Thom, Gale's crewmates, piece together the story of what happened. Gale must've gone to Cray's house, as he's done a hundred times, knowing Cray always pays well for a wild turkey. Instead he found the new Head Peacekeeper, a man they heard someone call Romulus Thread. No one knows what happened to Cray. He was buying white liquor in the Hob just this morning, apparently still in command of the district, but now he's nowhere to be found. Thread put Gale under immediate arrest and, of course, since he was standing there holding a dead turkey, there was little Gale could say in his own defense. Word of his predicament spread quickly. He was brought to the square, forced to plead guilty to his crime, and

sentenced to a whipping to be carried out immediately. By the time I showed up, he'd been lashed at least forty times. He passed out around thirty.

"Lucky he only had the turkey on him," says Bristel. "If he'd had his usual haul, would've been much worse."

"He told Thread he found it wandering around the Seam. Said it got over the fence and he'd stabbed it with a stick. Still a crime. But if they'd known he'd been in the woods with weapons, they'd have killed him for sure," says Thom.

"What about Darius?" Peeta asks.

"After about twenty lashes, he stepped in, saying that was enough. Only he didn't do it smart and official, like Purnia did. He grabbed Thread's arm and Thread hit him in the head with the butt of the whip. Nothing good waiting for him," says Bristel.

"Doesn't sound like much good for any of us," says Haymitch.

Snow begins, thick and wet, making visibility even more difficult. I stumble up the walk to my house behind the others, using my ears more than my eyes to guide me. A golden light colors the snow as the door opens. My mother, who was no doubt waiting for me after a long day of unexplained absence, takes in the scene.

"New Head," Haymitch says, and she gives him a curt nod as if no other explanation is needed.

I'm filled with awe, as I always am, as I watch her transform from a woman who calls me to kill a spider to a woman immune to fear. When a sick or dying person is brought to her...this is the only time I think my mother knows who she is. In moments, the long kitchen table has been cleared, a sterile white cloth spread across it, and Gale hoisted onto it. My mother pours water from a kettle into a basin while ordering Prim to pull a series of her remedies from the medicine cabinet. Dried herbs and tinctures and store-bought bottles. I watch her hands, the long, tapered fingers crumbling this, adding drops of that, into the basin. Soaking a cloth in the hot liquid as she gives Prim instructions to prepare a second brew.

My mother glances my way. "Did it cut your eye?"

"No, it's just swelled shut," I say.

"Get more snow on it," she instructs. But I am clearly not a priority.

"Can you save him?" I ask my mother. She says nothing as she wrings out the cloth and holds it in the air to cool somewhat.

“Don’t worry,” says Haymitch. “Used to be a lot of whipping before Cray. She’s the one we took them to.”

I can’t remember a time before Cray, a time when there was a Head Peacekeeper who used the whip freely. But my mother must have been around my age and still working at the apothecary shop with her parents. Even back then, she must have had healer’s hands.

Ever so gently, she begins to clean the mutilated flesh on Gale’s back. I feel sick to my stomach, useless, the remaining snow dripping from my glove into a puddle on the floor. Peeta puts me in a chair and holds a cloth filled with fresh snow to my cheek.

Haymitch tells Bristel and Thom to get home, and I see him press coins into their hands before they leave. “Don’t know what will happen with your crew,” he says. They nod and accept the money.

Hazelle arrives, breathless and flushed, fresh snow in her hair. Wordlessly, she sits on a stool next to the table, takes Gale’s hand, and holds it against her lips. My mother doesn’t acknowledge even her. She’s gone into that special zone that includes only herself and the patient and occasionally Prim. The rest of us can wait.

Even in her expert hands, it takes a long time to clean the wounds, arrange what shredded skin can be saved, apply a salve and a light bandage. As the blood clears, I can see where every stroke of the lash landed and feel it resonate in the single cut on my face. I multiply my own pain once, twice, forty times and can only hope that Gale remains unconscious. Of course, that’s too much to ask for. As the final bandages are being placed, a moan escapes his lips. Hazelle strokes his hair and whispers something while my mother and Prim go through their meager store of painkillers, the kind usually accessible only to doctors. They are hard to come by, expensive, and always in demand. My mother has to save the strongest for the worst pain, but what is the worst pain? To me, it’s always the pain that is present. If I were in charge, those painkillers would be gone in a day because I have so little ability to watch suffering. My mother tries to save them for those who are actually in the process of dying, to ease them out of the world.

Since Gale is regaining consciousness, they decide on an herbal concoction he can take by mouth. “That won’t be enough,” I say. They stare at me. “That won’t be enough, I know how it feels. That will barely knock out a headache.”

“We’ll combine it with sleep syrup, Katniss, and he’ll manage it. The herbs are more for the inflammation—” my mother begins calmly.

“Just give him the medicine!” I scream at her. “Give it to him! Who are you, anyway, to decide how much pain he can stand!”

Gale begins stirring at my voice, trying to reach me. The movement causes fresh blood to stain his bandages and an agonized sound to come from his mouth.

“Take her out,” says my mother. Haymitch and Peeta literally carry me from the room while I shout obscenities at her. They pin me down on a bed in one of the extra bedrooms until I stop fighting.

While I lie there, sobbing, tears trying to squeeze out of the slit of my eye, I hear Peeta whisper to Haymitch about President Snow, about the uprising in District 8. “She wants us all to run,” he says, but if Haymitch has an opinion on this, he doesn’t offer it.

After a while, my mother comes in and treats my face. Then she holds my hand, stroking my arm, while Haymitch fills her in on what happened with Gale.

“So it’s starting again?” she says. “Like before?”

“By the looks of it,” he answers. “Who’d have thought we’d ever be sorry to see old Cray go?”

Cray would have been disliked, anyway, because of the uniform he wore, but it was his habit of luring starving young women into his bed for money that made him an object of loathing in the district. In really bad times, the hungriest would gather at his door at nightfall, vying for the chance to earn a few coins to feed their families by selling their bodies. Had I been older when my father died, I might have been among them. Instead I learned to hunt.

I don’t know exactly what my mother means by things starting again, but I’m too angry and hurting to ask. It’s registered, though, the idea of worse times returning, because when the doorbell rings, I shoot straight out of bed. Who could it be at this hour of the night? There’s only one answer. Peacekeepers.

“They can’t have him,” I say.

“Might be you they’re after,” Haymitch reminds me.

“Or you,” I say.

“Not my house,” Haymitch points out. “But I’ll get the door.”

“No, I’ll get it,” says my mother quietly.

We all go, though, following her down the hallway to the insistent ring of the bell. When she opens it, there's not a squad of Peacekeepers but a single, snow-caked figure. Madge. She holds out a small, damp cardboard box to me.

"Use these for your friend," she says. I take off the lid of the box, revealing half a dozen vials of clear liquid. "They're my mother's. She said I could take them. Use them, please." She runs back into the storm before we can stop her.

"Crazy girl," Haymitch mutters as we follow my mother into the kitchen.

Whatever my mother had given Gale, I was right, it isn't enough. His teeth are gritted and his flesh shines with sweat. My mother fills a syringe with the clear liquid from one of the vials and shoots it into his arm. Almost immediately, his face begins to relax.

"What is that stuff?" asks Peeta.

"It's from the Capitol. It's called morphling," my mother answers.

"I didn't even know Madge knew Gale," says Peeta.

"We used to sell her strawberries," I say almost angrily. What am I angry about, though? Not that she has brought the medicine, surely.

"She must have quite a taste for them," says Haymitch.

That's what nettles me. It's the implication that there's something going on between Gale and Madge. And I don't like it.

"She's my friend" is all I say.

Now that Gale has drifted away on the painkiller, everyone seems to deflate. Prim makes us each eat some stew and bread. A room is offered to Hazelle, but she has to go home to the other kids. Haymitch and Peeta are both willing to stay, but my mother sends them home to bed as well. She knows it's pointless to try this with me and leaves me to tend Gale while she and Prim rest.

Alone in the kitchen with Gale, I sit on Hazelle's stool, holding his hand. After a while, my fingers find his face. I touch parts of him I have never had cause to touch before. His heavy, dark eyebrows, the curve of his cheek, the line of his nose, the hollow at the base of his neck. I trace the outline of stubble on his jaw and finally work my way to his lips. Soft and full, slightly chapped. His breath warms my chilled skin.

Does everyone look younger asleep? Because right now he could be the boy I ran into in the woods years ago, the one who accused me of stealing

from his traps. What a pair we were—fatherless, frightened, but fiercely committed, too, to keeping our families alive. Desperate, yet no longer alone after that day, because we'd found each other. I think of a hundred moments in the woods, lazy afternoons fishing, the day I taught him to swim, that time I twisted my knee and he carried me home. Mutually counting on each other, watching each other's backs, forcing each other to be brave.

For the first time, I reverse our positions in my head. I imagine watching Gale volunteering to save Rory in the reaping, having him torn from my life, becoming some strange girl's lover to stay alive, and then coming home with her. Living next to her. Promising to marry her.

The hatred I feel for him, for the phantom girl, for everything, is so real and immediate that it chokes me. Gale is mine. I am his. Anything else is unthinkable. Why did it take him being whipped within an inch of his life to see it?

Because I'm selfish. I'm a coward. I'm the kind of girl who, when she might actually be of use, would run to stay alive and leave those who couldn't follow to suffer and die. This is the girl Gale met in the woods today.

No wonder I won the Games. No decent person ever does.

You saved Peeta, I think weakly.

But now I question even that. I knew good and well that my life back in District 12 would be unlivable if I let that boy die.

I rest my head forward on the edge of the table, overcome with loathing for myself. Wishing I had died in the arena. Wishing Seneca Crane had blown me to bits the way President Snow said he should have when I held out the berries.

The berries. I realize the answer to who I am lies in that handful of poisonous fruit. If I held them out to save Peeta because I knew I would be shunned if I came back without him, then I am despicable. If I held them out because I loved him, I am still self-centered, although forgivable. But if I held them out to defy the Capitol, I am someone of worth. The trouble is, I don't know exactly what was going on inside me at that moment.

Could it be the people in the districts are right? That it was an act of rebellion, even if it was an unconscious one? Because, deep down, I must know it isn't enough to keep myself, or my family, or my friends alive by

running away. Even if I could. It wouldn't fix anything. It wouldn't stop people from being hurt the way Gale was today.

Life in District 12 isn't really so different from life in the arena. At some point, you have to stop running and turn around and face whoever wants you dead. The hard thing is finding the courage to do it. Well, it's not hard for Gale. He was born a rebel. I'm the one making an escape plan.

"I'm so sorry," I whisper. I lean forward and kiss him.

His eyelashes flutter and he looks at me through a haze of opiates. "Hey, Catnip."

"Hey, Gale," I say.

"Thought you'd be gone by now," he says.

My choices are simple. I can die like quarry in the woods or I can die here beside Gale. "I'm not going anywhere. I'm going to stay right here and cause all kinds of trouble."

"Me, too," Gale says. He just manages a smile before the drugs pull him back under.

9

Someone gives my shoulder a shake and I sit up. I've fallen asleep with my face on the table. The white cloth has left creases on my good cheek. The other, the one that took the lash from Thread, throbs painfully. Gale's dead to the world, but his fingers are locked around mine. I smell fresh bread and turn my stiff neck to find Peeta looking down at me with such a sad expression. I get the sense that he's been watching us awhile.

"Go on up to bed, Katniss. I'll look after him now," he says.

"Peeta. About what I said yesterday, about running—" I begin.

"I know," he says. "There's nothing to explain."

I see the loaves of bread on the counter in the pale, snowy morning light. The blue shadows under his eyes. I wonder if he slept at all. Couldn't have been long. I think of his agreeing to go with me yesterday, his stepping up beside me to protect Gale, his willingness to throw his lot in with mine entirely when I give him so little in return. No matter what I do, I'm hurting someone. "Peeta—"

"Just go to bed, okay?" he says.

I feel my way up the stairs, crawl under the covers, and fall asleep at once. At some point, Clove, the girl from District 2, enters my dreams. She chases me, pins me to the ground, and pulls out a knife to cut my face. It digs deeply into my cheek, opening a wide gash. Then Clove begins to transform, her face elongating into a snout, dark fur sprouting from her skin, her fingernails growing into long claws, but her eyes remain unchanged. She becomes the mutation form of herself, the wolflike creation of the Capitol that terrorized us the last night in the arena. Tossing back her head, she lets out a long, eerie howl that is picked up by other mutts nearby. Clove begins to lap the blood flowing from my wound, each lick sending a new wave of pain through my face. I give a strangled cry and wake with a start, sweating and shivering at once. Cradling my damaged cheek in my hand, I remind myself that it was not Clove but Thread who gave me this wound. I wish that Peeta were here to hold me, until I remember I'm not supposed to wish that

anymore. I have chosen Gale and the rebellion, and a future with Peeta is the Capitol's design, not mine.

The swelling around my eye has gone down and I can open it a bit. I push aside the curtains and see the snowstorm has strengthened to a full-out blizzard. There's nothing but whiteness and the howling wind that sounds remarkably like the muttations.

I welcome the blizzard, with its ferocious winds and deep, drifting snow. This may be enough to keep the real wolves, also known as the Peacekeepers, from my door. A few days to think. To work out a plan. With Gale and Peeta and Haymitch all at hand. This blizzard is a gift.

Before I go down to face this new life, though, I take some time making myself acknowledge what it will mean. Less than a day ago, I was prepared to head into the wilderness with my loved ones in midwinter, with the very real possibility of the Capitol pursuing us. A precarious venture at best. But now I am committing to something even more risky. Fighting the Capitol assures their swift retaliation. I must accept that at any moment I can be arrested. There will be a knock on the door, like the one last night, a band of Peacekeepers to haul me away. There might be torture. Mutilation. A bullet through my skull in the town square, if I'm fortunate enough to go that quickly. The Capitol has no end of creative ways to kill people. I imagine these things and I'm terrified, but let's face it: They've been lurking in the back of my brain, anyway. I've been a tribute in the Games. Been threatened by the president. Taken a lash across my face. I'm already a target.

Now comes the harder part. I have to face the fact that my family and friends might share this fate. Prim. I need only to think of Prim and all my resolve disintegrates. It's my job to protect her. I pull the blanket up over my head, and my breathing is so rapid I use up all the oxygen and begin to choke for air. I can't let the Capitol hurt Prim.

And then it hits me. They already have. They have killed her father in those wretched mines. They have sat by as she almost starved to death. They have chosen her as a tribute, then made her watch her sister fight to the death in the Games. She has been hurt far worse than I had at the age of twelve. And even that pales in comparison with Rue's life.

I shove off the blanket and suck in the cold air that seeps through the windowpanes.

Prim...Rue...aren't they the very reason I have to try to fight? Because what has been done to them is so wrong, so beyond justification, so evil that there is no choice? Because no one has the right to treat them as they have been treated?

Yes. This is the thing to remember when fear threatens to swallow me up. What I am about to do, whatever any of us are forced to endure, it is for them. It's too late to help Rue, but maybe not too late for those five little faces that looked up at me from the square in District 11. Not too late for Rory and Vick and Posy. Not too late for Prim.

Gale is right. If people have the courage, this could be an opportunity. He's also right that, since I have set it in motion, I could do so much. Although I have no idea what exactly that should be. But deciding not to run away is a crucial first step.

I take a shower, and this morning my brain is not assembling lists of supplies for the wild, but trying to figure out how they organized that uprising in District 8. So many, so clearly acting in defiance of the Capitol. Was it even planned, or something that simply erupted out of years of hatred and resentment? How could we do that here? Would the people of District 12 join in or lock their doors? Yesterday the square emptied so quickly after Gale's whipping. But isn't that because we all feel so impotent and have no idea what to do? We need someone to direct us and reassure us this is possible. And I don't think I'm that person. I may have been a catalyst for rebellion, but a leader should be someone with conviction, and I'm barely a convert myself. Someone with unflinching courage, and I'm still working hard at even finding mine. Someone with clear and persuasive words, and I'm so easily tongue-tied.

Words. I think of words and I think of Peeta. How people embrace everything he says. He could move a crowd to action, I bet, if he chose to. Would find the things to say. But I'm sure the idea has never crossed his mind.

Downstairs, I find my mother and Prim tending to a subdued Gale. The medicine must be wearing off, by the look on his face. I brace myself for another fight but try to keep my voice calm. "Can't you give him another shot?"

"I will, if it's needed. We thought we'd try the snow coat first," says my mother. She has removed his bandages. You can practically see the heat

radiating off his back. She lays a clean cloth across his angry flesh and nods to Prim.

Prim comes over, stirring what appears to be a large bowl of snow. But it's tinted a light green and gives off a sweet, clean scent. Snow coat. She carefully begins to ladle the stuff onto the cloth. I can almost hear the sizzle of Gale's tormented skin meeting the snow mixture. His eyes flutter open, perplexed, and then he lets out a sound of relief.

"It's lucky we have snow," says my mother.

I think of what it must be like to recover from a whipping in midsummer, with the searing heat and the tepid water from the tap. "What did you do in warm months?" I ask.

A crease appears between my mother's eyebrows as she frowns. "Tried to keep the flies away."

My stomach turns at the thought. She fills a handkerchief with the snow-coat mixture and I hold it to the weal on my cheek. Instantly the pain withdraws. It's the coldness of the snow, yes, but whatever mix of herbal juices my mother has added numbs as well. "Oh. That's wonderful. Why didn't you put this on him last night?"

"I needed the wound to set first," she says.

I don't know what that means exactly, but as long as it works, who am I to question her? She knows what she's doing, my mother. I feel a pang of remorse about yesterday, the awful things I yelled at her as Peeta and Haymitch dragged me from the kitchen. "I'm sorry. About screaming at you yesterday."

"I've heard worse," she says. "You've seen how people are, when someone they love is in pain."

Someone they love. The words numb my tongue as if it's been packed in snow coat. Of course, I love Gale. But what kind of love does she mean? What do *I* mean when I say I love Gale? I don't know. I did kiss him last night, in a moment when my emotions were running so high. But I'm sure he doesn't remember it. Does he? I hope not. If he does, everything will just get more complicated and I really can't think about kissing when I've got a rebellion to incite. I give my head a little shake to clear it. "Where's Peeta?" I say.

"He went home when we heard you stirring. Didn't want to leave his house unattended during the storm," says my mother.

“Did he get back all right?” I ask. In a blizzard, you can get lost in a matter of yards and wander off course into oblivion.

“Why don’t you give him a call and check?” she says.

I go into the study, a room I’ve pretty much avoided since my meeting with President Snow, and dial Peeta’s number. After a few rings he answers.

“Hey. I just wanted to make sure you got home,” I say.

“Katniss, I live three houses away from you,” he says.

“I know, but with the weather and all,” I say.

“Well, I’m fine. Thank you for checking.” There’s a long pause. “How’s Gale?”

“All right. My mother and Prim are giving him snow coat now,” I say.

“And your face?” he asks.

“I’ve got some, too,” I say. “Have you seen Haymitch today?”

“I checked in on him. Dead drunk. But I built up his fire and left him some bread,” he says.

“I wanted to talk to—to both of you.” I don’t dare add more, here on my phone, which is surely tapped.

“Probably have to wait until after the weather calms down,” he says. “Nothing much will happen before that, anyway.”

“No, nothing much,” I agree.

It takes two days for the storm to blow itself out, leaving us with drifts higher than my head. Another day before the path is cleared from the Victor’s Village to the square. During this time I help tend to Gale, apply snow coat to my cheek, try to remember everything I can about the uprising in District 8, in case it will help us. The swelling in my face goes down, leaving me with an itchy, healing wound and a very black eye. But still, the first chance I get, I call Peeta to see if he wants to go into town with me.

We rouse Haymitch and drag him along with us. He complains, but not as much as usual. We all know we need to discuss what happened and it can’t be anywhere as dangerous as our homes in the Victor’s Village. In fact, we wait until the village is well behind us to even speak. I spend the time studying the ten-foot walls of snow piled up on either side of the narrow path that has been cleared, wondering if they will collapse in on us.

Finally Haymitch breaks the silence. “So we’re all heading off into the great unknown, are we?” he asks me.

“No,” I say. “Not anymore.”

“Worked through the flaws in that plan, did you, sweetheart?” he asks. “Any new ideas?”

“I want to start an uprising,” I say.

Haymitch just laughs. It’s not even a mean laugh, which is more troubling. It shows he can’t even take me seriously. “Well, I want a drink. You let me know how that works out for you, though,” he says.

“Then what’s your plan?” I spit back at him.

“My plan is to make sure everything is just perfect for your wedding,” says Haymitch. “I called and rescheduled the photo shoot without giving too many details.”

“You don’t even have a phone,” I say.

“Effie had that fixed,” he says. “Do you know she asked me if I’d like to give you away? I told her the sooner the better.”

“Haymitch.” I can hear the pleading creeping into my voice.

“Katniss.” He mimics my tone. “It won’t work.”

We shut up as a team of men with shovels passes us, headed out to the Victor’s Village. Maybe they can do something about those ten-foot walls. And by the time they’re out of earshot, the square is too close. We step into it and all come to a stop simultaneously.

Nothing much will happen during the blizzard. That’s what Peeta and I had agreed. But we couldn’t have been more wrong. The square has been transformed. A huge banner with the seal of Panem hangs off the roof of the Justice Building. Peacekeepers, in pristine white uniforms, march on the cleanly swept cobblestones. Along the rooftops, more of them occupy nests of machine guns. Most unnerving is a line of new constructions—an official whipping post, several stockades, and a gallows—set up in the center of the square.

“Thread’s a quick worker,” says Haymitch.

Some streets away from the square, I see a blaze flare up. None of us has to say it. That can only be the Hob going up in smoke. I think of Greasy Sae, Ripper, all my friends who make their living there.

“Haymitch, you don’t think everyone was still in—” I can’t finish the sentence.

“Nah, they’re smarter than that. You’d be, too, if you’d been around longer,” he says. “Well, I better go see how much rubbing alcohol the apothecary can spare.”

He trudges off across the square and I look at Peeta. "What's he want that for?" Then I realize the answer. "We can't let him drink it. He'll kill himself, or at the very least go blind. I've got some white liquor put away at home."

"Me, too. Maybe that will hold him until Ripper finds a way to be back in business," says Peeta. "I need to check on my family."

"I have to go see Hazelle." I'm worried now. I thought she'd be on our doorstep the moment the snow was cleared. But there's been no sign of her.

"I'll go, too. Drop by the bakery on my way home," he says.

"Thanks." I'm suddenly very scared at what I might find.

The streets are almost deserted, which would not be so unusual at this time of day if people were at the mines, kids at school. But they're not. I see faces peeking at us out of doorways, through cracks in shutters.

An uprising, I think. What an idiot I am. There's an inherent flaw in the plan that both Gale and I were too blind to see. An uprising requires breaking the law, thwarting authority. We've done that our whole lives, or our families have. Poaching, trading on the black market, mocking the Capitol in the woods. But for most people in District 12, a trip to buy something at the Hob would be too risky. And I expect them to assemble in the square with bricks and torches? Even the sight of Peeta and me is enough to make people pull their children away from the windows and draw the curtains tightly.

We find Hazelle in her house, nursing a very sick Posy. I recognize the measles spots. "I couldn't leave her," she says. "I knew Gale'd be in the best possible hands."

"Of course," I say. "He's much better. My mother says he'll be back in the mines in a couple of weeks."

"May not be open until then, anyway," says Hazelle. "Word is they're closed until further notice." She gives a nervous glance at her empty washtub.

"You closed down, too?" I ask.

"Not officially," says Hazelle. "But everyone's afraid to use me now."

"Maybe it's the snow," says Peeta.

"No, Rory made a quick round this morning. Nothing to wash, apparently," she says.

Rory wraps his arms around Hazelle. "We'll be all right."

I take a handful of money from my pocket and lay it on the table. "My mother will send something for Posy."

When we're outside, I turn to Peeta. "You go on back. I want to walk by the Hob."

"I'll go with you," he says.

"No. I've dragged you into enough trouble," I tell him.

"And avoiding a stroll by the Hob...that's going to fix things for me?" He smiles and takes my hand. Together we wind through the streets of the Seam until we reach the burning building. They haven't even bothered to leave Peacekeepers around it. They know no one would try to save it.

The heat from the flames melts the surrounding snow and a black trickle runs across my shoes. "It's all that coal dust, from the old days," I say. It was in every crack and crevice. Ground into the floorboards. It's amazing the place didn't go up before. "I want to check on Greasy Sae."

"Not today, Katniss. I don't think we'd be helping anyone by dropping in on them," he says.

We go back to the square. I buy some cakes from Peeta's father while they exchange small talk about the weather. No one mentions the ugly tools of torture just yards from the front door. The last thing I notice as we leave the square is that I do not recognize even one of the Peacekeepers' faces.

As the days pass, things go from bad to worse. The mines stay shut for two weeks, and by that time half of District 12 is starving. The number of kids signing up for tesserae soars, but they often don't receive their grain. Food shortages begin, and even those with money come away from stores empty-handed. When the mines reopen, wages are cut, hours extended, miners sent into blatantly dangerous work sites. The eagerly awaited food promised for Parcel Day arrives spoiled and defiled by rodents. The installations in the square see plenty of action as people are dragged in and punished for offenses so long overlooked we've forgotten they are illegal.

Gale goes home with no more talk of rebellion between us. But I can't help thinking that everything he sees will only strengthen his resolve to fight back. The hardships in the mines, the tortured bodies in the square, the hunger on the faces of his family. Rory has signed up for tesserae, something Gale can't even speak about, but it's still not enough with the inconsistent availability and the ever-increasing price of food.

The only bright spot is, I get Haymitch to hire Hazelle as a housekeeper, resulting in some extra money for her and greatly increasing Haymitch's standard of living. It's weird going into his house, finding it fresh and clean,

food warming on the stove. He hardly notices because he's fighting a whole different battle. Peeta and I tried to ration what white liquor we had, but it's almost run out, and the last time I saw Ripper, she was in the stocks.

I feel like a pariah when I walk through the streets. Everyone avoids me in public now. But there's no shortage of company at home. A steady supply of ill and injured is deposited in our kitchen before my mother, who has long since stopped charging for her services. Her stocks of remedies are running so low, though, that soon all she'll have to treat the patients with is snow.

The woods, of course, are forbidden. Absolutely. No question. Even Gale doesn't challenge this now. But one morning, I do. And it isn't the house full of the sick and dying, the bleeding backs, the gaunt-faced children, the marching boots, or the omnipresent misery that drives me under the fence. It's the arrival of a crate of wedding dresses one night with a note from Effie saying that President Snow approved these himself.

The wedding. Is he really planning to go through with it? What, in his twisted brain, will that achieve? Is it for the benefit of those in the Capitol? A wedding was promised, a wedding will be given. And then he'll kill us? As a lesson to the districts? I don't know. I can't make sense of it. I toss and turn in bed until I can't stand it anymore. I have to get out of here. At least for a few hours.

My hands dig around in my closet until I find the insulated winter gear Cinna made for me for recreational use on the Victory Tour. Waterproof boots, a snowsuit that covers me from head to toe, thermal gloves. I love my old hunting stuff, but the trek I have in mind today is more suited to this high-tech clothing. I tiptoe downstairs, load my game bag with food, and sneak out of the house. Slinking along side streets and back alleys, I make my way to the weak spot in the fence closest to Rooba the butcher's. Since many workers cross this way to get to the mines, the snow's pockmarked with footprints. Mine will not be noticed. With all his security upgrades, Thread has paid little attention to the fence, perhaps feeling harsh weather and wild animals are enough to keep everyone safely inside. Even so, once I'm under the chain link, I cover my tracks until the trees conceal them for me.

Dawn is just breaking as I retrieve a set of bow and arrows and begin to force a path through the drifted snow in the woods. I'm determined, for some reason, to get to the lake. Maybe to say good-bye to the place, to my father and the happy times we spent there, because I know I'll probably never

return. Maybe just so I can draw a complete breath again. Part of me doesn't really care if they catch me, if I can see it one more time.

The trip takes twice as long as usual. Cinna's clothes hold in the heat all right, and I arrive soaked with sweat under the snowsuit while my face is numb with cold. The glare of the winter sun off the snow has played games with my vision, and I am so exhausted and wrapped up in my own hopeless thoughts that I don't notice the signs. The thin stream of smoke from the chimney, the indentations of recent footprints, the smell of steaming pine needles. I am literally a few yards from the door of the cement house when I pull up short. And that's not because of the smoke or the prints or the smell. That's because of the unmistakable click of a weapon behind me.

Second nature. Instinct. I turn, drawing back the arrow, although I know already that the odds are not in my favor. I see the white Peacekeeper uniform, the pointed chin, the light brown iris where my arrow will find a home. But the weapon is dropping to the ground and the unarmed woman is holding something out to me in her gloved hand.

"Stop!" she cries.

I waver, unable to process this turn in events. Perhaps they have orders to bring me in alive so they can torture me into incriminating every person I ever knew. *Yeah, good luck with that*, I think. My fingers have all but decided to release the arrow when I see the object in the glove. It's a small white circle of flat bread. More of a cracker, really. Gray and soggy around the edges. But an image is clearly stamped in the center of it.

It's my mockingjay.

PART II

“THE QUELL”

10

It makes no sense. My bird baked into bread. Unlike the stylish renderings I saw in the Capitol, this is definitely not a fashion statement. “What is it? What does that mean?” I ask harshly, still prepared to kill.

“It means we’re on your side,” says a tremulous voice behind me.

I didn’t see her when I came up. She must have been in the house. I don’t take my eyes off my current target. Probably the newcomer is armed, but I’m betting she won’t risk letting me hear the click that would mean my death was imminent, knowing I would instantly kill her companion. “Come around where I can see you,” I order.

“She can’t, she’s—” begins the woman with the cracker.

“Come around!” I shout. There’s a step and a dragging sound. I can hear the effort the movement requires. Another woman, or maybe I should call her a girl since she looks about my age, limps into view. She’s dressed in an illfitting Peacekeeper’s uniform complete with the white fur cloak, but it’s several sizes too large for her slight frame. She carries no visible weapon. Her hands are occupied with steadying a rough crutch made from a broken branch. The toe of her right boot can’t clear the snow, hence the dragging.

I examine the girl’s face, which is bright red from the cold. Her teeth are crooked and there’s a strawberry birthmark over one of her chocolate brown eyes. This is no Peacekeeper. No citizen of the Capitol, either.

“Who are you?” I ask warily but less belligerently.

“My name’s Twill,” says the woman. She’s older. Maybe thirty-five or so. “And this is Bonnie. We’ve run away from District Eight.”

District 8! Then they must know about the uprising!

“Where’d you get the uniforms?” I ask.

“I stole them from the factory,” says Bonnie. “We make them there. Only I thought this one would be for...for someone else. That’s why it fits so poorly.”

“The gun came from a dead Peacekeeper,” says Twill, following my eyes.

“That cracker in your hand. With the bird. What’s that about?” I ask.

“Don’t you know, Katniss?” Bonnie appears genuinely surprised.

They recognize me. Of course they recognize me. My face is uncovered and I’m standing here outside of District 12 pointing an arrow at them. Who else would I be? “I know it matches the pin I wore in the arena.”

“She doesn’t know,” says Bonnie softly. “Maybe not about any of it.”

Suddenly I feel the need to appear on top of things. “I know you had an uprising in Eight.”

“Yes, that’s why we had to get out,” says Twill.

“Well, you’re good and out now. What are you going to do?” I ask.

“We’re headed for District Thirteen,” Twill replies.

“Thirteen?” I say. “There’s no Thirteen. It got blown off the map.”

“Seventy-five years ago,” says Twill.

Bonnie shifts on her crutch and winces.

“What’s wrong with your leg?” I ask.

“I twisted my ankle. My boots are too big,” says Bonnie.

I bite my lip. My instinct tells me they’re telling the truth. And behind that truth is a whole lot of information I’d like to get. I step forward and retrieve Twill’s gun before lowering my bow, though. Then I hesitate a moment, thinking of another day in this woods, when Gale and I watched a hovercraft appear out of thin air and capture two escapees from the Capitol. The boy was speared and killed. The redheaded girl, I found out when I went to the Capitol, was mutilated and turned into a mute servant called an Avox. “Anyone after you?”

“We don’t think so. We think they believe we were killed in a factory explosion,” says Twill. “Only a fluke that we weren’t.”

“All right, let’s go inside,” I say, nodding at the cement house. I follow them in, carrying the gun.

Bonnie makes straight for the hearth and lowers herself onto a Peacekeeper’s cloak that has been spread before it. She holds her hands to the feeble flame that burns on one end of a charred log. Her skin is so pale as to be translucent and I can see the fire glow through her flesh. Twill tries to arrange the cloak, which must have been her own, around the shivering girl.

A tin gallon can has been cut in half, the lip ragged and dangerous. It sits in the ashes, filled with a handful of pine needles steaming in water.

“Making tea?” I ask.

“We’re not sure, really. I remember seeing someone do this with pine needles on the Hunger Games a few years back. At least, I think it was pine needles,” says Twill with a frown.

I remember District 8, an ugly urban place stinking of industrial fumes, the people housed in run-down tenements. Barely a blade of grass in sight. No opportunity, ever, to learn the ways of nature. It’s a miracle these two have made it this far.

“Out of food?” I ask.

Bonnie nods. “We took what we could, but food’s been so scarce. That’s been gone for a while.” The quaver in her voice melts my remaining defenses. She is just a malnourished, injured girl fleeing the Capitol.

“Well, then this is your lucky day,” I say, dropping my game bag on the floor. People are starving all over the district and we still have more than enough. So I’ve been spreading things around a little. I have my own priorities: Gale’s family, Greasy Sae, some of the other Hob traders who were shut down. My mother has other people, patients mostly, who she wants to help. This morning I purposely overstuffed my game bag with food, knowing my mother would see the depleted pantry and assume I was making my rounds to the hungry. I was actually buying time to go to the lake without her worrying. I intended to deliver the food this evening on my return, but now I can see that won’t be happening.

From the bag I pull two fresh buns with a layer of cheese baked into the top. We always seem to have a supply of these since Peeta found out they were my favorite. I toss one to Twill but cross over and place the other on Bonnie’s lap since her hand-eye coordination seems a little questionable at the moment and I don’t want the thing ending up in the fire.

“Oh,” says Bonnie. “Oh, is this all for me?”

Something inside me twists as I remember another voice. Rue. In the arena. When I gave her the leg of groosling. “*Oh, I’ve never had a whole leg to myself before.*” The disbelief of the chronically hungry.

“Yeah, eat up,” I say. Bonnie holds the bun as if she can’t quite believe it’s real and then sinks her teeth into it again and again, unable to stop. “It’s better if you chew it.” She nods, trying to slow down, but I know how hard it is when you’re that hollow. “I think your tea’s done.” I scoot the tin can from the ashes. Twill finds two tin cups in her pack and I dip out the tea, setting it on the floor to cool. They huddle together, eating, blowing on their tea, and

taking tiny, scalding sips as I build up the fire. I wait until they are sucking the grease from their fingers to ask, "So, what's your story?" And they tell me.

Ever since the Hunger Games, the discontent in District 8 had been growing. It was always there, of course, to some degree. But what differed was that talk was no longer sufficient, and the idea of taking action went from a wish to a reality. The textile factories that service Panem are loud with machinery, and the din also allowed word to pass safely, a pair of lips close to an ear, words unnoticed, unchecked. Twill taught at school, Bonnie was one of her pupils, and when the final bell had rung, both of them spent a four-hour shift at the factory that specialized in the Peacekeeper uniforms. It took months for Bonnie, who worked in the chilly inspection dock, to secure the two uniforms, a boot here, a pair of pants there. They were intended for Twill and her husband because it was understood that, once the uprising began, it would be crucial to get word of it out beyond District 8 if it were to spread and be successful.

The day Peeta and I came through and made our Victory Tour appearance was actually a rehearsal of sorts. People in the crowd positioned themselves according to their teams, next to the buildings they would target when the rebellion broke out. That was the plan: to take over the centers of power in the city like the Justice Building, the Peacekeepers' Headquarters, and the Communication Center in the square. And at other locations in the district: the railroad, the granary, the power station, and the armory.

The night of my engagement, the night Peeta fell to his knees and proclaimed his undying love for me in front of the cameras in the Capitol, was the night the uprising began. It was an ideal cover. Our Victory Tour interview with Caesar Flickerman was mandatory viewing. It gave the people of District 8 a reason to be out on the streets after dark, gathering either in the square or in various community centers around the city to watch. Ordinarily such activity would have been too suspicious. Instead everyone was in place by the appointed hour, eight o'clock, when the masks went on and all hell broke loose.

Taken by surprise and overwhelmed by sheer numbers, the Peacekeepers were initially overcome by the crowds. The Communication Center, the granary, and the power station were all secured. As the Peacekeepers fell, weapons were appropriated for the rebels. There was hope that this had not

been an act of madness, that in some way, if they could get the word out to other districts, an actual overthrow of the government in the Capitol might be possible.

But then the ax fell. Peacekeepers began to arrive by the thousands. Hovercraft bombed the rebel strongholds into ashes. In the utter chaos that followed, it was all people could do to make it back to their homes alive. It took less than forty-eight hours to subdue the city. Then, for a week, there was a lockdown. No food, no coal, everyone forbidden to leave their homes. The only time the television showed anything but static was when the suspected instigators were hanged in the square. Then one night, as the whole district was on the brink of starvation, came the order to return to business as usual.

That meant school for Twill and Bonnie. A street made impassable by the bombs caused them to be late for their factory shift, so they were still a hundred yards away when it exploded, killing everyone inside—including Twill's husband and Bonnie's entire family.

"Someone must have told the Capitol that the idea for the uprising had started there," Twill tells me faintly.

The two fled back to Twill's, where the Peacekeeper suits were still waiting. They scraped together what provisions they could, stealing freely from neighbors they now knew to be dead, and made it to the railroad station. In a warehouse near the tracks, they changed into the Peacekeeper outfits and, disguised, were able to make it onto a boxcar full of fabric on a train headed to District 6. They fled the train at a fuel stop along the way and traveled on foot. Concealed by woods, but using the tracks for guidance, they made it to the outskirts of District 12 two days ago, where they were forced to stop when Bonnie twisted her ankle.

"I understand why you're running, but what do you expect to find in District Thirteen?" I ask.

Bonnie and Twill exchange a nervous glance. "We're not sure exactly," Twill says.

"It's nothing but rubble," I say. "We've all seen the footage."

"That's just it. They've been using the same footage for as long as anyone in District Eight can remember," says Twill.

"Really?" I try to think back, to call up the images of 13 I've seen on television.

“You know how they always show the Justice Building?” Twill continues. I nod. I’ve seen it a thousand times. “If you look very carefully, you’ll see it. Up in the far right-hand corner.”

“See what?” I ask.

Twill holds out her cracker with the bird again. “A mockingjay. Just a glimpse of it as it flies by. The same one every time.”

“Back home, we think they keep reusing the old footage because the Capitol can’t show what’s really there now,” says Bonnie.

I give a grunt of disbelief. “You’re going to District Thirteen based on that? A shot of a bird? You think you’re going to find some new city with people strolling around in it? And that’s just fine with the Capitol?”

“No,” Twill says earnestly. “We think the people moved underground when everything on the surface was destroyed. We think they’ve managed to survive. And we think the Capitol leaves them alone because, before the Dark Days, District Thirteen’s principal industry was nuclear development.”

“They were graphite miners,” I say. But then I hesitate, because that’s information I got from the Capitol.

“They had a few small mines, yes. But not enough to justify a population of that size. That, I guess, is the only thing we know for sure,” says Twill.

My heart’s beating too quickly. What if they’re right? Could it be true? Could there be somewhere to run besides the wilderness? Somewhere safe? If a community exists in District 13, would it be better to go there, where I might be able to accomplish something, instead of waiting here for my death? But then...if there are people in District 13, with powerful weapons...

“Why haven’t they helped us?” I say angrily. “If it’s true, why do they leave us to live like this? With the hunger and the killings and the Games?” And suddenly I hate this imaginary underground city of District 13 and those who sit by, watching us die. They’re no better than the Capitol.

“We don’t know,” Bonnie whispers. “Right now, we’re just holding on to the hope that they exist.”

That snaps me to my senses. These are delusions. District 13 doesn’t exist because the Capitol would never let it exist. They’re probably mistaken about the footage. Mockingjays are about as rare as rocks. And about as tough. If they could survive the initial bombing of 13, they’re probably doing better than ever now.

Bonnie has no home. Her family is dead. Returning to District 8 or assimilating into another district would be impossible. Of course the idea of an independent, thriving District 13 draws her. I can't bring myself to tell her she's chasing a dream as insubstantial as a wisp of smoke. Perhaps she and Twill can carve out a life somehow in the woods. I doubt it, but they're so pitiful I have to try to help.

First I give them all the food in my pack, grain and dried beans mostly, but there's enough to hold them for a while if they're careful. Then I take Twill out in the woods and try to explain the basics of hunting. She's got a weapon that if necessary can convert solar energy into deadly rays of power, so that could last indefinitely. When she manages to kill her first squirrel, the poor thing is mostly a charred mess because it took a direct hit to the body. But I show her how to skin and clean it. With some practice, she'll figure it out. I cut a new crutch for Bonnie. Back at the house, I peel off an extra layer of socks for the girl, telling her to stuff them in the toes of her boots to walk, then wear them on her feet at night. Finally I teach them how to build a proper fire.

They beg me for details of the situation in District 12 and I tell them about life under Thread. I can see they think this is important information that they'll be bringing to those who run District 13, and I play along so as not to destroy their hopes. But when the light signals late afternoon, I'm out of time to humor them.

"I have to go now," I say.

They pour out thanks and embrace me.

Tears spill from Bonnie's eyes. "I can't believe we actually got to meet you. You're practically all anyone's talked about since—"

"I know. I know. Since I pulled out those berries," I say tiredly.

I hardly notice the walk home even though a wet snow begins to fall. My mind is spinning with new information about the uprising in District 8 and the unlikely but tantalizing possibility of District 13.

Listening to Bonnie and Twill confirmed one thing: President Snow has been playing me for a fool. All the kisses and endearments in the world couldn't have derailed the momentum building up in District 8. Yes, my holding out the berries had been the spark, but I had no way to control the fire. He must have known that. So why visit my home, why order me to persuade the crowd of my love for Peeta? It was obviously a ploy to distract

me and keep me from doing anything else inflammatory in the districts. And to entertain the people in the Capitol, of course. I suppose the wedding is just a necessary extension of that.

I'm nearing the fence when a mockingjay lights on a branch and trills at me. At the sight of it I realize I never got a full explanation of the bird on the cracker and what it signifies.

"It means we're on your side." That's what Bonnie said. I have people on my side? What side? Am I unwittingly the face of the hoped-for rebellion? Has the mockingjay on my pin become a symbol of resistance? If so, my side's not doing too well. You only have to look at what happened in 8 to know that.

I stash my weapons in the hollow log nearest my old home in the Seam and head for the fence. I'm crouched on one knee, preparing to enter the Meadow, but I'm still so preoccupied with the day's events that it takes a sudden screech of an owl to bring me to my senses.

In the fading light, the chain links look as innocuous as usual. But what makes me jerk back my hand is the sound, like the buzz of a tree full of tracker jacker nests, indicating the fence is alive with electricity.

11

My feet back up automatically and I blend into the trees. I cover my mouth with my glove to disperse the white of my breath in the icy air. Adrenaline courses through me, wiping all the concerns of the day from my mind as I focus on the immediate threat before me. What is going on? Has Thread turned on the fence as an additional security precaution? Or does he somehow know I've escaped his net today? Is he determined to strand me outside District 12 until he can apprehend and arrest me? Drag me to the square to be locked in the stockade or whipped or hanged?

Calm down, I order myself. It's not as if this is the first time I've been caught outside of the district by an electrified fence. It's happened a few times over the years, but Gale was always with me. The two of us would just pick a comfortable tree to hang out in until the power shut off, which it always did eventually. If I was running late, Prim even got in the habit of going to the Meadow to check if the fence was charged, to spare my mother worry.

But today my family would never imagine I'd be in the woods. I've even taken steps to mislead them. So if I don't show up, worry they will. And there's a part of me that's worried, too, because I'm not sure it's just a coincidence, the power coming on the very day I return to the woods. I thought no one saw me sneak under the fence, but who knows? There are always eyes for hire. Someone reported Gale kissing me in that very spot. Still, that was in daylight and before I was more careful about my behavior. Could there be surveillance cameras? I've wondered about this before. Is this the way President Snow knows about the kiss? It was dark when I went under and my face was bundled in a scarf. But the list of suspects likely to be trespassing into the woods is probably very short.

My eyes peer through the trees, past the fence, into the Meadow. All I can see is the wet snow illuminated here and there by the light from the windows on the edge of the Seam. No Peacekeepers in sight, no signs I am being hunted. Whether Thread knows I left the district today or not, I realize my

course of action must be the same: to get back inside the fence unseen and pretend I never left.

Any contact with the chain link or the coils of barbed wire that guard the top would mean instant electrocution. I don't think I can burrow under the fence without risking detection, and the ground's frozen hard, anyway. That leaves only one choice. Somehow I'm going to have to go over it.

I begin to skirt along the tree line, searching for a tree with a branch high and long enough to fit my needs. After about a mile, I come upon an old maple that might do. The trunk is too wide and icy to shinny up, though, and there are no low branches. I climb a neighboring tree and leap precariously into the maple, almost losing my hold on the slick bark. But I manage to get a grip and slowly inch my way out on a limb that hangs above the barbed wire.

As I look down, I remember why Gale and I always waited in the woods rather than try to tackle the fence. Being high enough to avoid getting fried means you've got to be at least twenty feet in the air. I guess my branch must be twenty-five. That's a dangerously long drop, even for someone who's had years of practice in trees. But what choice do I have? I could look for another branch, but it's almost dark now. The falling snow will obscure any moonlight. Here, at least, I can see I've got a snowbank to cushion my landing. Even if I could find another, which is doubtful, who knows what I'd be jumping into? I throw my empty game bag around my neck and slowly lower myself until I'm hanging by my hands. For a moment, I gather my courage. Then I release my fingers.

There's the sensation of falling, then I hit the ground with a jolt that goes right up my spine. A second later, my rear end slams the ground. I lie in the snow, trying to assess the damage. Without standing, I can tell by the pain in my left heel and my tailbone that I'm injured. The only question is how badly. I'm hoping for bruises, but when I force myself onto my feet, I suspect I've broken something as well. I can walk, though, so I get moving, trying to hide my limp as best I can.

My mother and Prim can't know I was in the woods. I need to work up some sort of alibi, no matter how thin. Some of the shops in the square are still open, so I go in one and purchase white cloth for bandages. We're running low, anyway. In another, I buy a bag of sweets for Prim. I stick one of the candies in my mouth, feeling the peppermint melt on my tongue, and realize it's the first thing I've eaten all day. I meant to make a meal at the

lake, but once I saw Twill and Bonnie's condition, it seemed wrong to take a single mouthful from them.

By the time I reach my house, my left heel will bear no weight at all. I decide to tell my mother I was trying to mend a leak in the roof of our old house and slid off. As for the missing food, I'll just be vague about who I handed it out to. I drag myself in the door, all ready to collapse in front of the fire. But instead I get another shock.

Two Peacekeepers, a man and a woman, are standing in the doorway to our kitchen. The woman remains impassive, but I catch the flicker of surprise on the man's face. I am unanticipated. They know I was in the woods and should be trapped there now.

"Hello," I say in a neutral voice.

My mother appears behind them, but keeps her distance. "Here she is, just in time for dinner," she says a little too brightly. I'm very late for dinner.

I consider removing my boots as I normally would but doubt I can manage it without revealing my injuries. Instead I just pull off my wet hood and shake the snow from my hair. "Can I help you with something?" I ask the Peacekeepers.

"Head Peacekeeper Thread sent us with a message for you," says the woman.

"They've been waiting for hours," my mother adds.

They've been waiting for me to fail to return. To confirm I got electrocuted by the fence or trapped in the woods so they could take my family in for questioning.

"Must be an important message," I say.

"May we ask where you've been, Miss Everdeen?" the woman asks.

"Easier to ask where I *haven't* been," I say with a sound of exasperation. I cross into the kitchen, forcing myself to use my foot normally even though every step is excruciating. I pass between the Peacekeepers and make it to the table all right. I fling my bag down and turn to Prim, who's standing stiffly by the hearth. Haymitch and Peeta are there as well, sitting in a pair of matching rockers, playing a game of chess. Were they here by chance or "invited" by the Peacekeepers? Either way, I'm glad to see them.

"So where haven't you been?" says Haymitch in a bored voice.

"Well, I haven't been talking to the Goat Man about getting Prim's goat pregnant, because someone gave me completely inaccurate information as to

where he lives,” I say to Prim emphatically.

“No, I didn’t,” says Prim. “I told you exactly.”

“You said he lives beside the west entrance to the mine,” I say.

“The east entrance,” Prim corrects me.

“You distinctly said the west, because then I said, ‘Next to the slag heap?’ and you said, ‘Yeah,’” I say.

“The slag heap next to the *east* entrance,” says Prim patiently.

“No. When did you say that?” I demand.

“Last night,” Haymitch chimes in.

“It was definitely the east,” adds Peeta. He looks at Haymitch and they laugh. I glare at Peeta and he tries to look contrite. “I’m sorry, but it’s what I’ve been saying. You don’t listen when people talk to you.”

“Bet people told you he didn’t live there today and you didn’t listen again,” says Haymitch.

“Shut up, Haymitch,” I say, clearly indicating he’s right.

Haymitch and Peeta crack up and Prim allows herself a smile.

“Fine. Somebody else can arrange to get the stupid goat knocked up,” I say, which makes them laugh more. And I think, *This is why they’ve made it this far, Haymitch and Peeta. Nothing throws them.*

I look at the Peacekeepers. The man’s smiling but the woman is unconvinced. “What’s in the bag?” she asks sharply.

I know she’s hoping for game or wild plants. Something that clearly condemns me. I dump the contents on the table. “See for yourself.”

“Oh, good,” says my mother, examining the cloth. “We’re running low on bandages.”

Peeta comes to the table and opens the candy bag. “Ooh, peppermints,” he says, popping one in his mouth.

“They’re mine.” I take a swipe for the bag. He tosses it to Haymitch, who stuffs a fistful of sweets in his mouth before passing the bag to a giggling Prim. “None of you deserves candy!” I say.

“What, because we’re right?” Peeta wraps his arms around me. I give a small yelp of pain as my tailbone objects. I try to turn it into a sound of indignation, but I can see in his eyes that he knows I’m hurt. “Okay, Prim said west. I distinctly heard west. And we’re all idiots. How’s that?”

“Better,” I say, and accept his kiss. Then I look at the Peacekeepers as if I’m suddenly remembering they’re there. “You have a message for me?”

“From Head Peacekeeper Thread,” says the woman. “He wanted you to know that the fence surrounding District Twelve will now have electricity twenty-four hours a day.”

“Didn’t it already?” I ask, a little too innocently.

“He thought you might be interested in passing this information on to your cousin,” says the woman.

“Thank you. I’ll tell him. I’m sure we’ll all sleep a little more soundly now that security has addressed that lapse.” I’m pushing things, I know it, but the comment gives me a sense of satisfaction.

The woman’s jaw tightens. None of this has gone as planned, but she has no further orders. She gives me a curt nod and leaves, the man trailing in her wake. When my mother has locked the door behind them, I slump against the table.

“What is it?” says Peeta, holding me steadily.

“Oh, I banged up my left foot. The heel. And my tailbone’s had a bad day, too.” He helps me over to one of the rockers and I lower myself onto the padded cushion.

My mother eases off my boots. “What happened?”

“I slipped and fell,” I say. Four pairs of eyes look at me with disbelief. “On some ice.” But we all know the house must be bugged and it’s not safe to talk openly. Not here, not now.

Having stripped off my sock, my mother’s fingers probe the bones in my left heel and I wince. “There might be a break,” she says. She checks the other foot. “This one seems all right.” She judges my tailbone to be badly bruised.

Prim’s dispatched to get my pajamas and robe. When I’m changed, my mother makes a snow pack for my left heel and props it up on a hassock. I eat three bowls of stew and half a loaf of bread while the others dine at the table. I stare at the fire, thinking of Bonnie and Twill, hoping that the heavy, wet snow has erased my tracks.

Prim comes and sits on the floor next to me, leaning her head against my knee. We suck on peppermints as I brush her soft blond hair back behind her ear. “How was school?” I ask.

“All right. We learned about coal by-products,” she says. We stare at the fire for a while. “Are you going to try on your wedding dresses?”

“Not tonight. Tomorrow probably,” I say.

“Wait until I get home, okay?” she says.

“Sure.” *If they don’t arrest me first.*

My mother gives me a cup of chamomile tea with a dose of sleep syrup, and my eyelids begin to droop immediately. She wraps my bad foot, and Peeta volunteers to get me to bed. I start out by leaning on his shoulder, but I’m so wobbly he just scoops me up and carries me upstairs. He tucks me in and says good night but I catch his hand and hold him there. A side effect of the sleep syrup is that it makes people less inhibited, like white liquor, and I know I have to control my tongue. But I don’t want him to go. In fact, I want him to climb in with me, to be there when the nightmares hit tonight. For some reason that I can’t quite form, I know I’m not allowed to ask that.

“Don’t go yet. Not until I fall asleep,” I say.

Peeta sits on the side of the bed, warming my hand in both of his. “Almost thought you’d changed your mind today. When you were late for dinner.”

I’m foggy but I can guess what he means. With the fence going on and me showing up late and the Peacekeepers waiting, he thought I’d made a run for it, maybe with Gale.

“No, I’d have told you,” I say. I pull his hand up and lean my cheek against the back of it, taking in the faint scent of cinnamon and dill from the breads he must have baked today. I want to tell him about Twill and Bonnie and the uprising and the fantasy of District 13, but it’s not safe to and I can feel myself slipping away, so I just get out one more sentence. “Stay with me.”

As the tendrils of sleep syrup pull me down, I hear him whisper a word back, but I don’t quite catch it.

My mother lets me sleep until noon, then rouses me to examine my heel. I’m ordered to a week of bed rest and I don’t object because I feel so lousy. Not just my heel and my tailbone. My whole body aches with exhaustion. So I let my mother doctor me and feed me breakfast in bed and tuck another quilt around me. Then I just lie there, staring out my window at the winter sky, pondering how on earth this will all turn out. I think a lot about Bonnie and Twill, and the pile of white wedding dresses downstairs, and if Thread will figure out how I got back in and arrest me. It’s funny, because he could just arrest me, anyway, based on past crimes, but maybe he has to have something really irrefutable to do it, now that I’m a victor. And I wonder if President

Snow's in contact with Thread. I think it's unlikely he ever acknowledged that old Cray existed, but now that I'm such a nationwide problem, is he carefully instructing Thread what to do? Or is Thread acting on his own? At any rate, I'm sure they'd both agree on keeping me locked up here inside the district with that fence. Even if I could figure out some way to escape—maybe get a rope up to that maple tree branch and climb out—there'd be no escaping with my family and friends now. I told Gale I would stay and fight, anyway.

For the next few days, I jump every time there's a knock on the door. No Peacekeepers show up to arrest me, though, so eventually I begin to relax. I'm further reassured when Peeta casually tells me the power is off in sections of the fence because crews are out securing the base of the chain link to the ground. Thread must believe I somehow got under the thing, even with that deadly current running through it. It's a break for the district, having the Peacekeepers busy doing something besides abusing people.

Peeta comes by every day to bring me cheese buns and begins to help me work on the family book. It's an old thing, made of parchment and leather. Some herbalist on my mother's side of the family started it ages ago. The book's composed of page after page of ink drawings of plants with descriptions of their medical uses. My father added a section on edible plants that was my guidebook to keeping us alive after his death. For a long time, I've wanted to record my own knowledge in it. Things I learned from experience or from Gale, and then the information I picked up when I was training for the Games. I didn't because I'm no artist and it's so crucial that the pictures are drawn in exact detail. That's where Peeta comes in. Some of the plants he knows already, others we have dried samples of, and others I have to describe. He makes sketches on scrap paper until I'm satisfied they're right, then I let him draw them in the book. After that, I carefully print all I know about the plant.

It's quiet, absorbing work that helps take my mind off my troubles. I like to watch his hands as he works, making a blank page bloom with strokes of ink, adding touches of color to our previously black and yellowish book. His face takes on a special look when he concentrates. His usual easy expression is replaced by something more intense and removed that suggests an entire world locked away inside him. I've seen flashes of this before: in the arena, or when he speaks to a crowd, or that time he shoved the Peacekeepers' guns

away from me in District 11. I don't know quite what to make of it. I also become a little fixated on his eyelashes, which ordinarily you don't notice much because they're so blond. But up close, in the sunlight slanting in from the window, they're a light golden color and so long I don't see how they keep from getting all tangled up when he blinks.

One afternoon Peeta stops shading a blossom and looks up so suddenly that I start, as though I were caught spying on him, which in a strange way maybe I was. But he only says, "You know, I think this is the first time we've ever done anything normal together."

"Yeah," I agree. Our whole relationship has been tainted by the Games. Normal was never a part of it. "Nice for a change."

Each afternoon he carries me downstairs for a change of scenery and I unnerve everyone by turning on the television. Usually we only watch when it's mandatory, because the mixture of propaganda and displays of the Capitol's power—including clips from seventy-four years of Hunger Games—is so odious. But now I'm looking for something special. The mockingjay that Bonnie and Twill are basing all their hopes on. I know it's probably foolishness, but if it is, I want to rule it out. And erase the idea of a thriving District 13 from my mind for good.

My first sighting is in a news story referencing the Dark Days. I see the smoldering remains of the Justice Building in District 13 and just catch the black-and-white underside of a mockingjay's wing as it flies across the upper right-hand corner. That doesn't prove anything, really. It's just an old shot that goes with an old tale.

However, several days later, something else grabs my attention. The main newscaster is reading a piece about a shortage of graphite affecting the manufacturing of items in District 3. They cut to what is supposed to be live footage of a female reporter, encased in a protective suit, standing in front of the ruins of the Justice Building in 13. Through her mask, she reports that unfortunately a study has just today determined that the mines of District 13 are still too toxic to approach. End of story. But just before they cut back to the main newscaster, I see the unmistakable flash of that same mockingjay's wing.

The reporter has simply been incorporated into the old footage. She's not in District 13 at all. Which begs the question, *What is?*

12

Staying quietly in bed is harder after that. I want to be doing something, finding out more about District 13 or helping in the cause to bring down the Capitol. Instead I sit around stuffing myself with cheese buns and watching Peeta sketch. Haymitch stops by occasionally to bring me news from town, which is always bad. More people being punished or dropping from starvation.

Winter has begun to withdraw by the time my foot is deemed usable. My mother gives me exercises to do and lets me walk on my own a bit. I go to sleep one night, determined to go into town the next morning, but I awake to find Venia, Octavia, and Flavius grinning down at me.

“Surprise!” they squeal. “We’re here early!”

After I took that lash in the face, Haymitch got their visit pushed back several months so I could heal up. I wasn’t expecting them for another three weeks. But I try to act delighted that my bridal photo shoot is here at last. My mother hung up all the dresses, so they’re ready to go, but to be honest, I haven’t even tried one on.

After the usual histrionics about the deteriorated state of my beauty, they get right down to business. Their biggest concern is my face, although I think my mother did a pretty remarkable job healing it. There’s just a pale pink strip across my cheekbone. The whipping’s not common knowledge, so I tell them I slipped on the ice and cut it. And then I realize that’s my same excuse for hurting my foot, which is going to make walking in high heels a problem. But Flavius, Octavia, and Venia aren’t the suspicious types, so I’m safe there.

Since I only have to look hairless for a few hours instead of several weeks, I get to be shaved instead of waxed. I still have to soak in a tub of something, but it isn’t vile, and we’re on to my hair and makeup before I know it. The team, as usual, is full of news, which I usually do my best to tune out. But then Octavia makes a comment that catches my attention. It’s a passing remark, really, about how she couldn’t get shrimp for a party, but it tugs at me.

“Why couldn’t you get shrimp? Is it out of season?” I ask.

“Oh, Katniss, we haven’t been able to get any seafood for weeks!” says Octavia. “You know, because the weather’s been so bad in District Four.”

My mind starts buzzing. No seafood. For weeks. From District 4. The barely concealed rage in the crowd during the Victory Tour. And suddenly I am absolutely sure that District 4 has revolted.

I begin to question them casually about what other hardships this winter has brought them. They are not used to want, so any little disruption in supply makes an impact on them. By the time I’m ready to be dressed, their complaints about the difficulty of getting different products—from crabmeat to music chips to ribbons—has given me a sense of which districts might actually be rebelling. Seafood from District 4. Electronic gadgets from District 3. And, of course, fabrics from District 8. The thought of such widespread rebellion has me quivering with fear and excitement.

I want to ask them more, but Cinna appears to give me a hug and check my makeup. His attention goes right to the scar on my cheek. Somehow I don’t think he believes the slipping-on-the-ice story, but he doesn’t question it. He simply adjusts the powder on my face, and what little you can see of the lash mark vanishes.

Downstairs, the living room has been cleared and lit for the photo shoot. Effie’s having a fine time ordering everybody around, keeping us all on schedule. It’s probably a good thing, because there are six gowns and each one requires its own headpiece, shoes, jewelry, hair, makeup, setting, and lighting. Creamy lace and pink roses and ringlets. Ivory satin and gold tattoos and greenery. A sheath of diamonds and jeweled veil and moonlight. Heavy white silk and sleeves that fall from my wrist to the floor, and pearls. The moment one shot has been approved, we move right into preparing for the next. I feel like dough, being kneaded and reshaped again and again. My mother manages to feed me bits of food and sips of tea while they work on me, but by the time the shoot is over, I’m starving and exhausted. I’m hoping to spend some time with Cinna now, but Effie whisks everybody out the door and I have to make do with the promise of a phone call.

Evening has fallen and my foot hurts from all the crazy shoes, so I abandon any thoughts of going into town. Instead I go upstairs and wash away the layers of makeup and conditioners and dyes and then go down to dry my hair by the fire. Prim, who came home from school in time to see the last two dresses, chatters on about them with my mother. They both seem overly

happy about the photo shoot. When I fall into bed, I realize it's because they think it means I'm safe. That the Capitol has overlooked my interference with the whipping since no one is going to go to such trouble and expense for someone they plan on killing, anyway. Right.

In my nightmare, I'm dressed in the silk bridal gown, but it's torn and muddy. The long sleeves keep getting caught on thorns and branches as I run through the woods. The pack of muttation tributes draws closer and closer until it overcomes me with hot breath and dripping fangs and I scream myself awake.

It's too close to dawn to bother trying to get back to sleep. Besides, today I really have to get out and talk to someone. Gale will be unreachable in the mines. But I need Haymitch or Peeta or somebody to share the burden of all that has happened to me since I went to the lake. Fleeing outlaws, electrified fences, an independent District 13, shortages in the Capitol. Everything.

I eat breakfast with my mother and Prim and head out in search of a confidant. The air's warm with hopeful hints of spring in it. Spring would be a good time for an uprising, I think. Everyone feels less vulnerable once winter passes. Peeta's not home. I guess he's already gone into town. I'm surprised to see Haymitch moving around his kitchen so early, though. I walk into his house without knocking. I can hear Hazelle upstairs, sweeping the floors of the now-spotless house. Haymitch isn't flat-out drunk, but he doesn't look too steady, either. I guess the rumors about Ripper being back in business are true. I'm thinking maybe I better let him just go to bed, when he suggests a walk to town.

Haymitch and I can speak in a kind of shorthand now. In a few minutes I've updated him and he's told me about rumors of uprisings in Districts 7 and 11 as well. If my hunches are right, this would mean almost half the districts have at least attempted to rebel.

"Do you still think it won't work here?" I ask.

"Not yet. Those other districts, they're much larger. Even if half the people cower in their homes, the rebels stand a chance. Here in Twelve, it's got to be all of us or nothing," he says.

I hadn't thought of that. How we lack strength of numbers. "But maybe at some point?" I insist.

"Maybe. But we're small, we're weak, and we don't develop nuclear weapons," says Haymitch with a touch of sarcasm. He didn't get too excited

over my District 13 story.

“What do you think they’ll do, Haymitch? To the districts that are rebelling?” I ask.

“Well, you’ve heard what they did in Eight. You’ve seen what they did here, and that was without provocation,” says Haymitch. “If things really do get out of hand, I think they’d have no problem killing off another district, same as they did Thirteen. Make an example of it, you know?”

“So you think Thirteen was really destroyed? I mean, Bonnie and Twill were right about the footage of the mockingjay,” I say.

“Okay, but what does that prove? Nothing, really. There are plenty of reasons they could be using old footage. Probably it looks more impressive. And it’s a lot simpler, isn’t it? To just press a few buttons in the editing room than to fly all the way out there and film it?” he says. “The idea that Thirteen has somehow rebounded *and* the Capitol is ignoring it? That sounds like the kind of rumor desperate people cling to.”

“I know. I was just hoping,” I say.

“Exactly. Because you’re desperate,” says Haymitch.

I don’t argue because, of course, he’s right.

Prim comes home from school bubbling over with excitement. The teachers announced there was mandatory programming tonight. “I think it’s going to be your photo shoot!”

“It can’t be, Prim. They only did the pictures yesterday,” I tell her.

“Well, that’s what somebody heard,” she says.

I’m hoping she’s wrong. I haven’t had time to prepare Gale for any of this. Since the whipping, I only see him when he comes to the house for my mother to check how he’s healing. He’s often scheduled seven days a week in the mine. In the few minutes of privacy we’ve had, with me walking him back to town, I gather that the rumblings of an uprising in 12 have been subdued by Thread’s crackdown. He knows I’m not going to run. But he must also know that if we don’t revolt in 12, I’m destined to be Peeta’s bride. Seeing me lounging around in gorgeous gowns on his television...what can he do with that?

When we gather around the television at seven-thirty, I discover that Prim is right. Sure enough, there’s Caesar Flickerman, speaking before a standing-room-only crowd in front of the Training Center, talking to an appreciative crowd about my upcoming nuptials. He introduces Cinna, who became an

overnight star with his costumes for me in the Games, and after a minute of good-natured chitchat, we're directed to turn our attention to a giant screen.

I see now how they could photograph me yesterday and present the special tonight. Initially, Cinna designed two dozen wedding gowns. Since then, there's been the process of narrowing down the designs, creating the dresses, and choosing the accessories. Apparently, in the Capitol, there were opportunities to vote for your favorites at each stage. This is all culminating with shots of me in the final six dresses, which I'm sure took no time at all to insert in the show. Each shot is met with a huge reaction from the crowd. People screaming and cheering for their favorites, booing the ones they don't like. Having voted, and probably bet on the winner, people are very invested in my wedding gown. It's bizarre to watch when I think how I never even bothered to try one on before the cameras arrived. Caesar announces that interested parties must cast their final vote by noon on the following day.

"Let's get Katniss Everdeen to her wedding in style!" he hollers to the crowd. I'm about to shut off the television, but then Caesar is telling us to stay tuned for the other big event of the evening. "That's right, this year will be the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Hunger Games, and that means it's time for our third Quarter Quell!"

"What will they do?" asks Prim. "It isn't for months yet."

We turn to our mother, whose expression is solemn and distant, as if she's remembering something. "It must be the reading of the card."

The anthem plays, and my throat tightens with revulsion as President Snow takes the stage. He's followed by a young boy dressed in a white suit, holding a simple wooden box. The anthem ends, and President Snow begins to speak, to remind us all of the Dark Days from which the Hunger Games were born. When the laws for the Games were laid out, they dictated that every twenty-five years the anniversary would be marked by a Quarter Quell. It would call for a glorified version of the Games to make fresh the memory of those killed by the districts' rebellion.

These words could not be more pointed, since I suspect several districts are rebelling right now.

President Snow goes on to tell us what happened in the previous Quarter Quells. "On the twenty-fifth anniversary, as a reminder to the rebels that their children were dying because of their choice to initiate violence, every

district was made to hold an election and vote on the tributes who would represent it.”

I wonder how that would have felt. Picking the kids who had to go. It is worse, I think, to be turned over by your own neighbors than have your name drawn from the reaping ball.

“On the fiftieth anniversary,” the president continues, “as a reminder that two rebels died for each Capitol citizen, every district was required to send twice as many tributes.”

I imagine facing a field of forty-seven instead of twenty-three. Worse odds, less hope, and ultimately more dead kids. That was the year Haymitch won...

“I had a friend who went that year,” says my mother quietly. “Maysilee Donner. Her parents owned the sweetshop. They gave me her songbird after. A canary.”

Prim and I exchange a look. It’s the first we’ve ever heard of Maysilee Donner. Maybe because my mother knew we would want to know how she died.

“And now we honor our third Quarter Quell,” says the president. The little boy in white steps forward, holding out the box as he opens the lid. We can see the tidy, upright rows of yellowed envelopes. Whoever devised the Quarter Quell system had prepared for centuries of Hunger Games. The president removes an envelope clearly marked with a 75. He runs his finger under the flap and pulls out a small square of paper. Without hesitation, he reads, “On the seventy-fifth anniversary, as a reminder to the rebels that even the strongest among them cannot overcome the power of the Capitol, the male and female tributes will be reaped from their existing pool of victors.”

My mother gives a faint shriek and Prim buries her face in her hands, but I feel more like the people I see in the crowd on television. Slightly baffled. What does it mean? Existing pool of victors?

Then I get it, what it means. At least, for me. District 12 only has three existing victors to choose from. Two male. One female...

I am going back into the arena.

13

My body reacts before my mind does and I'm running out the door, across the lawns of the Victor's Village, into the dark beyond. Moisture from the sodden ground soaks my socks and I'm aware of the sharp bite of the wind, but I don't stop. Where? Where to go? The woods, of course. I'm at the fence before the hum makes me remember how very trapped I am. I back away, panting, turn on my heel, and take off again.

The next thing I know I'm on my hands and knees in the cellar of one of the empty houses in the Victor's Village. Faint shafts of moonlight come in through the window wells above my head. I'm cold and wet and winded, but my escape attempt has done nothing to subdue the hysteria rising up inside me. It will drown me unless it's released. I ball up the front of my shirt, stuff it into my mouth, and begin to scream. How long this continues, I don't know. But when I stop, my voice is almost gone.

I curl up on my side and stare at the patches of moonlight on the cement floor. Back in the arena. Back in the place of nightmares. That's where I am going. I have to admit I didn't see it coming. I saw a multitude of other things. Being publicly humiliated, tortured, and executed. Fleeing through the wilderness, pursued by Peacekeepers and hovercraft. Marriage to Peeta with our children forced into the arena. But never that I myself would have to be a player in the Games again. Why? Because there's no precedent for it. Victors are out of the reaping for life. That's the deal if you win. Until now.

There's some kind of sheeting, the kind they put down when they paint. I pull it over me like a blanket. In the distance, someone is calling my name. But at the moment, I excuse myself from thinking about even those I love most. I think only of me. And what lies ahead.

The sheeting's stiff but holds warmth. My muscles relax, my heart rate slows. I see the wooden box in the little boy's hands, President Snow drawing out the yellowed envelope. Is it possible that this was really the Quarter Quell written down seventy-five years ago? It seems unlikely. It's just too perfect an answer for the troubles that face the Capitol today. Getting rid of me and subduing the districts all in one neat little package.

I hear President Snow's voice in my head. *"On the seventy-fifth anniversary, as a reminder to the rebels that even the strongest among them cannot overcome the power of the Capitol, the male and female tributes will be reaped from their existing pool of victors."*

Yes, victors are our strongest. They're the ones who survived the arena and slipped the noose of poverty that strangles the rest of us. They, or should I say we, are the very embodiment of hope where there is no hope. And now twenty-three of us will be killed to show how even that hope was an illusion.

I'm glad I won only last year. Otherwise I'd know all the other victors, not just because I see them on television but because they're guests at every Games. Even if they're not mentoring like Haymitch always has to, most return to the Capitol each year for the event. I think a lot of them are friends. Whereas the only friend I'll have to worry about killing will be either Peeta or Haymitch. *Peeta or Haymitch!*

I sit straight up, throwing off the sheeting. What just went through my mind? There's no situation in which I would ever kill Peeta or Haymitch. But one of them will be in the arena with me, and that's a fact. They may have even decided between them who it will be. Whoever is picked first, the other will have the option of volunteering to take his place. I already know what will happen. Peeta will ask Haymitch to let him go into the arena with me no matter what. For my sake. To protect me.

I stumble around the cellar, looking for an exit. How did I even get into this place? I feel my way up the steps to the kitchen and see the glass window in the door has been shattered. Must be why my hand seems to be bleeding. I hurry back into the night and head straight to Haymitch's house. He's sitting alone at the kitchen table, a half-emptied bottle of white liquor in one fist, his knife in the other. Drunk as a skunk.

"Ah, there she is. All tuckered out. Finally did the math, did you, sweetheart? Worked out you won't be going in alone? And now you're here to ask me...what?" he says.

I don't answer. The window's wide open and the wind cuts through me just as if I were outside.

"I'll admit, it was easier for the boy. He was here before I could snap the seal on a bottle. Begging me for another chance to go in. But what can you say?" He mimics my voice. "'Take his place, Haymitch, because all things being equal, I'd rather Peeta had a crack at the rest of his life than you?'"

I bite my lip because once he's said it, I'm afraid that's what I do want. For Peeta to live, even if it means Haymitch's death. No, I don't. He's dreadful, of course, but Haymitch is my family now. *What did I come for?* I think. *What could I possibly want here?*

"I came for a drink," I say.

Haymitch bursts out laughing and slams the bottle on the table before me. I run my sleeve across the top and take a couple gulps before I come up choking. It takes a few minutes to compose myself, and even then my eyes and nose are still streaming. But inside me, the liquor feels like fire and I like it.

"Maybe it should be you," I say matter-of-factly as I pull up a chair. "You hate life, anyway."

"Very true," says Haymitch. "And since last time I tried to keep *you* alive...seems like I'm obligated to save the boy this time."

"That's another good point," I say, wiping my nose and tipping up the bottle again.

"Peeta's argument is that since I chose you, I now owe him. Anything he wants. And what he wants is the chance to go in again to protect you," says Haymitch.

I knew it. In this way, Peeta's not hard to predict. While I was wallowing around on the floor of that cellar, thinking only of myself, he was here, thinking only of me. Shame isn't a strong enough word for what I feel.

"You could live a hundred lifetimes and not deserve him, you know," Haymitch says.

"Yeah, yeah," I say brusquely. "No question, he's the superior one in this trio. So, what are you going to do?"

"I don't know." Haymitch sighs. "Go back in with you maybe, if I can. If my name's drawn at the reaping, it won't matter. He'll just volunteer to take my place."

We sit for a while in silence. "It'd be bad for you in the arena, wouldn't it? Knowing all the others?" I ask.

"Oh, I think we can count on it being unbearable wherever I am." He nods at the bottle. "Can I have that back now?"

"No," I say, wrapping my arms around it. Haymitch pulls another bottle out from under the table and gives the top a twist. But I realize I am not just here for a drink. There's something else I want from Haymitch. "Okay, I

figured out what I'm asking," I say. "If it is Peeta and me in the Games, this time we try to keep *him* alive."

Something flickers across his bloodshot eyes. Pain.

"Like you said, it's going to be bad no matter how you slice it. And whatever Peeta wants, it's his turn to be saved. We both owe him that." My voice takes on a pleading tone. "Besides, the Capitol hates me so much, I'm as good as dead now. He still might have a chance. Please, Haymitch. Say you'll help me."

He frowns at his bottle, weighing my words. "All right," he says finally.

"Thanks," I say. I should go see Peeta now, but I don't want to. My head's spinning from the drink, and I'm so wiped out, who knows what he could get me to agree to? No, now I have to go home to face my mother and Prim.

As I stagger up the steps to my house, the front door opens and Gale pulls me into his arms. "I was wrong. We should have gone when you said," he whispers.

"No," I say. I'm having trouble focusing, and liquor keeps sloshing out of my bottle and down the back of Gale's jacket, but he doesn't seem to care.

"It's not too late," he says.

Over his shoulder, I see my mother and Prim clutching each other in the doorway. We run. They die. And now I've got Peeta to protect. End of discussion. "Yeah, it is." My knees give way and he's holding me up. As the alcohol overcomes my mind, I hear the glass bottle shatter on the floor. This seems appropriate since I have obviously lost my grip on everything.

When I wake up, I barely get to the toilet before the white liquor makes its reappearance. It burns just as much coming up as it did going down, and tastes twice as bad. I'm trembling and sweaty when I finish vomiting, but at least most of the stuff is out of my system. Enough made it into my bloodstream, though, to result in a pounding headache, parched mouth, and boiling stomach.

I turn on the shower and stand under the warm rain for a minute before I realize I'm still in my underclothes. My mother must have just stripped off my filthy outer ones and tucked me in bed. I throw the wet undergarments into the sink and pour shampoo on my head. My hands sting, and that's when I notice the stitches, small and even, across one palm and up the side of the other hand. Vaguely I remember breaking that glass window last night. I scrub myself from head to toe, only stopping to throw up again right in the shower.

It's mostly just bile and goes down the drain with the sweet-smelling bubbles.

Finally clean, I pull on my robe and head back to bed, ignoring my dripping hair. I climb under the blankets, sure this is what it must feel like to be poisoned. The footsteps on the stairs renew my panic from last night. I'm not ready to see my mother and Prim. I have to pull myself together to be calm and reassuring, the way I was when we said our good-byes the day of the last reaping. I have to be strong. I struggle into an upright position, push my wet hair off my throbbing temples, and brace myself for this meeting. They appear in the doorway, holding tea and toast, their faces filled with concern. I open my mouth, planning to start off with some kind of joke, and burst into tears.

So much for being strong.

My mother sits on the side of the bed and Prim crawls right up next to me and they hold me, making quiet soothing sounds, until I am mostly cried out. Then Prim gets a towel and dries my hair, combing out the knots, while my mother coaxes tea and toast into me. They dress me in warm pajamas and layer more blankets on me and I drift off again.

I can tell by the light it's late afternoon when I come round again. There's a glass of water on my bedside table and I gulp it down thirstily. My stomach and head still feel rocky, but much better than they did earlier. I rise, dress, and braid back my hair. Before I go down, I pause at the top of the stairs, feeling slightly embarrassed about the way I've handled the news of the Quarter Quell. My erratic flight, drinking with Haymitch, weeping. Given the circumstances, I guess I deserve one day of indulgence. I'm glad the cameras weren't here for it, though.

Downstairs, my mother and Prim embrace me again, but they're not overly emotional. I know they're holding things in to make it easier on me. Looking at Prim's face, it's hard to imagine she's the same frail little girl I left behind on reaping day nine months ago. The combination of that ordeal and all that has followed—the cruelty in the district, the parade of sick and wounded that she often treats by herself now if my mother's hands are too full—these things have aged her years. She's grown quite a bit, too; we're practically the same height now, but that isn't what makes her seem so much older.

My mother ladles out a mug of broth for me, and I ask for a second mug to take to Haymitch. Then I walk across the lawn to his house. He's only just waking up and accepts the mug without comment. We sit there, almost peacefully, sipping our broth and watching the sun set through his living room window. I hear someone walking around upstairs and I assume it's Hazelle, but a few minutes later Peeta comes down and tosses a cardboard box of empty liquor bottles on the table with finality.

"There, it's done," he says.

It's taking all of Haymitch's resources to focus his eyes on the bottles, so I speak up. "What's done?"

"I've poured all the liquor down the drain," says Peeta.

This seems to jolt Haymitch out of his stupor, and he paws through the box in disbelief. "You what?"

"I tossed the lot," says Peeta.

"He'll just buy more," I say.

"No, he won't," says Peeta. "I tracked down Ripper this morning and told her I'd turn her in the second she sold to either of you. I paid her off, too, just for good measure, but I don't think she's eager to be back in the Peacekeepers' custody."

Haymitch takes a swipe with his knife but Peeta deflects it so easily it's pathetic. Anger rises up in me. "What business is it of yours what he does?"

"It's completely my business. However it falls out, two of us are going to be in the arena again with the other as mentor. We can't afford any drunkards on this team. Especially not you, Katniss," says Peeta to me.

"What?" I sputter indignantly. It would be more convincing if I weren't still so hungover. "Last night's the only time I've ever even been drunk."

"Yeah, and look at the shape you're in," says Peeta.

I don't know what I expected from my first meeting with Peeta after the announcement. A few hugs and kisses. A little comfort maybe. Not this. I turn to Haymitch. "Don't worry, I'll get you more liquor."

"Then I'll turn you both in. Let you sober up in the stocks," says Peeta.

"What's the point to this?" asks Haymitch.

"The point is that two of us are coming home from the Capitol. One mentor and one victor," says Peeta. "Effie's sending me recordings of all the living victors. We're going to watch their Games and learn everything we can about how they fight. We're going to put on weight and get strong. We're

going to start acting like Careers. And one of us is going to be victor again whether you two like it or not!" He sweeps out of the room, slamming the front door.

Haymitch and I wince at the bang.

"I don't like self-righteous people," I say.

"What's to like?" says Haymitch, who begins sucking the dregs out of the empty bottles.

"You and me. That's who he plans on coming home," I say.

"Well, then the joke's on him," says Haymitch.

But after a few days, we agree to act like Careers, because this is the best way to get Peeta ready as well. Every night we watch the old recaps of the Games that the remaining victors won. I realize we never met any of them on the Victory Tour, which seems odd in retrospect. When I bring it up, Haymitch says the last thing President Snow would've wanted was to show Peeta and me—especially me—bonding with other victors in potentially rebellious districts. Victors have a special status, and if they appeared to be supporting my defiance of the Capitol, it would've been dangerous politically. Adjusting for age, I realize some of our opponents may be elderly, which is both sad and reassuring. Peeta takes copious notes, Haymitch volunteers information about the victors' personalities, and slowly we begin to know our competition.

Every morning we do exercises to strengthen our bodies. We run and lift things and stretch our muscles. Every afternoon we work on combat skills, throwing knives, fighting hand to hand; I even teach them to climb trees. Officially, tributes aren't supposed to train, but no one tries to stop us. Even in regular years, the tributes from Districts 1, 2, and 4 show up able to wield spears and swords. This is nothing by comparison.

After all the years of abuse, Haymitch's body resists improvement. He's still remarkably strong, but the shortest run winds him. And you'd think a guy who sleeps every night with a knife might actually be able to hit the side of a house with one, but his hands shake so badly it takes weeks for him to achieve even that.

Peeta and I excel under the new regimen, though. It gives me something to do. It gives us all something to do besides accept defeat. My mother puts us on a special diet to gain weight. Prim treats our sore muscles. Madge sneaks us her father's Capitol newspapers. Predictions on who will be victor of the

victors show us among the favorites. Even Gale steps into the picture on Sundays, although he's got no love for Peeta or Haymitch, and teaches us all he knows about snares. It's weird for me, being in conversations with both Peeta and Gale, but they seem to have set aside whatever issues they have about me.

One night, as I'm walking Gale back into town, he even admits, "It'd be better if he were easier to hate."

"Tell me about it," I say. "If I could've just hated him in the arena, we all wouldn't be in this mess now. He'd be dead, and I'd be a happy little victor all by myself."

"And where would we be, Katniss?" asks Gale.

I pause, not knowing what to say. Where *would* I be with my pretend cousin who wouldn't be my cousin if it weren't for Peeta? Would he have still kissed me and would I have kissed him back had I been free to do so? Would I have let myself open up to him, lulled by the security of money and food and the illusion of safety being a victor could bring under different circumstances? But there would still always be the reaping looming over us, over our children. No matter what I wanted...

"Hunting. Like every Sunday," I say. I know he didn't mean the question literally, but this is as much as I can honestly give. Gale knows I chose him over Peeta when I didn't make a run for it. To me, there's no point in talking about things that might have been. Even if I had killed Peeta in the arena, I still wouldn't have wanted to marry anyone. I only got engaged to save people's lives, and that completely backfired.

I'm afraid, anyway, that any kind of emotional scene with Gale might cause him to do something drastic. Like start that uprising in the mines. And as Haymitch says, District 12 isn't ready for that. If anything, they're less ready than before the Quarter Quell announcement, because the following morning another hundred Peacekeepers arrived on the train.

Since I don't plan on making it back alive a second time, the sooner Gale lets me go, the better. I do plan on saying one or two things to him after the reaping, when we're allowed an hour for good-byes. To let Gale know how essential he's been to me all these years. How much better my life has been for knowing him. For loving him, even if it's only in the limited way that I can manage.

But I never get the chance.

The day of the reaping's hot and sultry. The population of District 12 waits, sweating and silent, in the square with machine guns trained on them. I stand alone in a small roped-off area with Peeta and Haymitch in a similar pen to the right of me. The reaping takes only a minute. Effie, shining in a wig of metallic gold, lacks her usual verve. She has to claw around the girls' reaping ball for quite a while to snag the one piece of paper that everyone already knows has my name on it. Then she catches Haymitch's name. He barely has time to shoot me an unhappy look before Peeta has volunteered to take his place.

We are immediately marched into the Justice Building to find Head Peacekeeper Thread waiting for us. "New procedure," he says with a smile. We're ushered out the back door, into a car, and taken to the train station. There are no cameras on the platform, no crowd to send us on our way. Haymitch and Effie appear, escorted by guards. Peacekeepers hurry us all onto the train and slam the door. The wheels begin to turn.

And I'm left staring out the window, watching District 12 disappear, with all my good-byes still hanging on my lips.

14

I remain at the window long after the woods have swallowed up the last glimpse of my home. This time I don't have even the slightest hope of return. Before my first Games, I promised Prim I would do everything I could to win, and now I've sworn to myself to do all I can to keep Peeta alive. I will never reverse this journey again.

I'd actually figured out what I wanted my last words to my loved ones to be. How best to close and lock the doors and leave them sad but safely behind. And now the Capitol has stolen that as well.

"We'll write letters, Katniss," says Peeta from behind me. "It will be better, anyway. Give them a piece of us to hold on to. Haymitch will deliver them for us if...they need to be delivered."

I nod and go straight to my room. I sit on the bed, knowing I will never write those letters. They will be like the speech I tried to write to honor Rue and Thresh in District 11. Things seemed clear in my head and even when I talked before the crowd, but the words never came out of the pen right. Besides, they were meant to go with embraces and kisses and a stroke of Prim's hair, a caress of Gale's face, a squeeze of Madge's hand. They cannot be delivered with a wooden box containing my cold, stiff body.

Too heartsick to cry, all I want is to curl up on the bed and sleep until we arrive in the Capitol tomorrow morning. But I have a mission. No, it's more than a mission. It's my dying wish. *Keep Peeta alive*. And as unlikely as it seems that I can achieve it in the face of the Capitol's anger, it's important that I be at the top of my game. This won't happen if I'm mourning for everyone I love back home. *Let them go*, I tell myself. *Say good-bye and forget them*. I do my best, thinking of them one by one, releasing them like birds from the protective cages inside me, locking the doors against their return.

By the time Effie knocks on my door to call me to dinner, I'm empty. But the lightness isn't entirely unwelcome.

The meal's subdued. So subdued, in fact, that there are long periods of silence relieved only by the removal of old dishes and presentation of new

ones. A cold soup of pureed vegetables. Fish cakes with creamy lime paste. Those little birds filled with orange sauce, with wild rice and watercress. Chocolate custard dotted with cherries.

Peeta and Effie make occasional attempts at conversation that quickly die out.

“I love your new hair, Effie,” Peeta says.

“Thank you. I had it especially done to match Katniss’s pin. I was thinking we might get you a golden ankle band and maybe find Haymitch a gold bracelet or something so we could all look like a team,” says Effie.

Evidently, Effie doesn’t know that my mockingjay pin is now a symbol used by the rebels. At least in District 8. In the Capitol, the mockingjay is still a fun reminder of an especially exciting Hunger Games. What else could it be? Real rebels don’t put a secret symbol on something as durable as jewelry. They put it on a wafer of bread that can be eaten in a second if necessary.

“I think that’s a great idea,” says Peeta. “How about it, Haymitch?”

“Yeah, whatever,” says Haymitch. He’s not drinking but I can tell he’d like to be. Effie had them take her own wine away when she saw the effort he was making, but he’s in a miserable state. If he were the tribute, he would have owed Peeta nothing and could be as drunk as he liked. Now it’s going to take all he’s got to keep Peeta alive in an arena full of his old friends, and he’ll probably fail.

“Maybe we could get you a wig, too,” I say in an attempt at lightness. He just shoots me a look that says to leave him alone, and we all eat our custard in silence.

“Shall we watch the recap of the reappings?” says Effie, dabbing at the corners of her mouth with a white linen napkin.

Peeta goes off to retrieve his notebook on the remaining living victors, and we gather in the compartment with the television to see who our competition will be in the arena. We are all in place as the anthem begins to play and the annual recap of the reaping ceremonies in the twelve districts begins.

In the history of the Games, there have been seventy-five victors. Fifty-nine are still alive. I recognize many of their faces, either from seeing them as tributes or mentors at previous Games or from our recent viewing of the victors’ tapes. Some are so old or wasted by illness, drugs, or drink that I

can't place them. As one would expect, the pools of Career tributes from Districts 1, 2, and 4 are the largest. But every district has managed to scrape up at least one female and one male victor.

The reapings go by quickly. Peeta studiously puts stars by the names of the chosen tributes in his notebook. Haymitch watches, his face devoid of emotion, as friends of his step up to take the stage. Effie makes hushed, distressed comments like "Oh, not Cecelia" or "Well, Chaff never could stay out of a fight," and sighs frequently.

For my part, I try to make some mental record of the other tributes, but like last year, only a few really stick in my head. There's the classically beautiful brother and sister from District 1 who were victors in consecutive years when I was little. Brutus, a volunteer from District 2, who must be at least forty and apparently can't wait to get back in the arena. Finnick, the handsome bronze-haired guy from District 4 who was crowned ten years ago at the age of fourteen. A hysterical young woman with flowing brown hair is also called from 4, but she's quickly replaced by a volunteer, an eighty-year-old woman who needs a cane to walk to the stage. Then there's Johanna Mason, the only living female victor from 7, who won a few years back by pretending she was a weakling. The woman from 8 who Effie calls Cecelia, who looks about thirty, has to detach herself from the three kids who run up to cling to her. Chaff, a man from 11 who I know to be one of Haymitch's particular friends, is also in.

I'm called. Then Haymitch. And Peeta volunteers. One of the announcers actually gets teary because it seems the odds will never be in our favor, we star-crossed lovers of District 12. Then she pulls herself together to say she bets that "these will be the best Games ever!"

Haymitch leaves the compartment without a word, and Effie, after making a few unconnected comments about this tribute or that, bids us good night. I just sit there watching Peeta rip out the pages of the victors who were not picked.

"Why don't you get some sleep?" he says.

Because I can't handle the nightmares. Not without you, I think. They are sure to be dreadful tonight. But I can hardly ask Peeta to come sleep with me. We've barely touched since that night Gale was whipped. "What are you going to do?" I ask.

“Just review my notes awhile. Get a clear picture of what we’re up against. But I’ll go over it with you in the morning. Go to bed, Katniss,” he says.

So I go to bed and, sure enough, within a few hours I awake from a nightmare where that old woman from District 4 transforms into a large rodent and gnaws on my face. I know I was screaming, but no one comes. Not Peeta, not even one of the Capitol attendants. I pull on a robe to try to calm the gooseflesh crawling over my body. Staying in my compartment is impossible, so I decide to go find someone to make me tea or hot chocolate or anything. Maybe Haymitch is still up. Surely he isn’t asleep.

I order warm milk, the most calming thing I can think of, from an attendant. Hearing voices from the television room, I go in and find Peeta. Beside him on the couch is the box Effie sent of tapes of the old Hunger Games. I recognize the episode in which Brutus became victor.

Peeta rises and flips off the tape when he sees me. “Couldn’t sleep?”

“Not for long,” I say. I pull the robe more securely around me as I remember the old woman transforming into the rodent.

“Want to talk about it?” he asks. Sometimes that can help, but I just shake my head, feeling weak that people I haven’t even fought yet already haunt me.

When Peeta holds out his arms, I walk straight into them. It’s the first time since they announced the Quarter Quell that he’s offered me any sort of affection. He’s been more like a very demanding trainer, always pushing, always insisting Haymitch and I run faster, eat more, know our enemy better. Lover? Forget about that. He abandoned any pretense of even being my friend. I wrap my arms tightly around his neck before he can order me to do push-ups or something. Instead he pulls me in close and buries his face in my hair. Warmth radiates from the spot where his lips just touch my neck, slowly spreading through the rest of me. It feels so good, so impossibly good, that I know I will not be the first to let go.

And why should I? I have said good-bye to Gale. I’ll never see him again, that’s for certain. Nothing I do now can hurt him. He won’t see it or he’ll think I am acting for the cameras. That, at least, is one weight off my shoulders.

The arrival of the Capitol attendant with the warm milk is what breaks us apart. He sets a tray with a steaming ceramic jug and two mugs on a table. “I brought an extra cup,” he says.

“Thanks,” I say.

“And I added a touch of honey to the milk. For sweetness. And just a pinch of spice,” he adds. He looks at us like he wants to say more, then gives his head a slight shake and backs out of the room.

“What’s with him?” I say.

“I think he feels bad for us,” says Peeta.

“Right,” I say, pouring the milk.

“I mean it. I don’t think the people in the Capitol are going to be all that happy about our going back in,” says Peeta. “Or the other victors. They get attached to their champions.”

“I’m guessing they’ll get over it once the blood starts flowing,” I say flatly. Really, if there’s one thing I don’t have time for, it’s worrying about how the Quarter Quell will affect the mood in the Capitol. “So, you’re watching all the tapes again?”

“Not really. Just sort of skipping around to see people’s different fighting techniques,” says Peeta.

“Who’s next?” I ask.

“You pick,” says Peeta, holding out the box.

The tapes are marked with the year of the Games and the name of the victor. I dig around and suddenly find one in my hand that we have not watched. The year of the Games is fifty. That would make it the second Quarter Quell. And the name of the victor is Haymitch Abernathy.

“We never watched this one,” I say.

Peeta shakes his head. “No. I knew Haymitch didn’t want to. The same way we didn’t want to relive our own Games. And since we’re all on the same team, I didn’t think it mattered much.”

“Is the person who won in twenty-five in here?” I ask.

“I don’t think so. Whoever it was must be dead by now, and Effie only sent me victors we might have to face.” Peeta weighs Haymitch’s tape in his hand. “Why? You think we ought to watch it?”

“It’s the only Quell we have. We might pick up something valuable about how they work,” I say. But I feel weird. It seems like some major invasion of Haymitch’s privacy. I don’t know why it should, since the whole thing was public. But it does. I have to admit I’m also extremely curious. “We don’t have to tell Haymitch we saw it.”

“Okay,” Peeta agrees. He puts in the tape and I curl up next to him on the couch with my milk, which is really delicious with the honey and spices, and lose myself in the Fiftieth Hunger Games. After the anthem, they show President Snow drawing the envelope for the second Quarter Quell. He looks younger but just as repellent. He reads from the square of paper in the same onerous voice he used for ours, informing Panem that in honor of the Quarter Quell, there will be twice the number of tributes. The editors smash cut right into the reappings, where name after name after name is called.

By the time we get to District 12, I’m completely overwhelmed by the sheer number of kids going to certain death. There’s a woman, not Effie, calling the names in 12, but she still begins with “Ladies first!” She calls out the name of a girl who’s from the Seam, you can tell by the look of her, and then I hear the name “Maysilee Donner.”

“Oh!” I say. “She was my mother’s friend.” The camera finds her in the crowd, clinging to two other girls. All blond. All definitely merchants’ kids.

“I think that’s your mother hugging her,” says Peeta quietly. And he’s right. As Maysilee Donner bravely disengages herself and heads for the stage, I catch a glimpse of my mother at my age, and no one has exaggerated her beauty. Holding her hand and weeping is another girl who looks just like Maysilee. But a lot like someone else I know, too.

“Madge,” I say.

“That’s her mother. She and Maysilee were twins or something,” Peeta says. “My dad mentioned it once.”

I think of Madge’s mother. Mayor Undersee’s wife. Who spends half her life in bed immobilized with terrible pain, shutting out the world. I think of how I never realized that she and my mother shared this connection. Of Madge showing up in that snowstorm to bring the painkiller for Gale. Of my mockingjay pin and how it means something completely different now that I know that its former owner was Madge’s aunt, Maysilee Donner, a tribute who was murdered in the arena.

Haymitch’s name is called last of all. It’s more of a shock to see him than my mother. Young. Strong. Hard to admit, but he was something of a looker. His hair dark and curly, those gray Seam eyes bright and, even then, dangerous.

“Oh. Peeta, you don’t think he killed Maysilee, do you?” I burst out. I don’t know why, but I can’t stand the thought.

“With forty-eight players? I’d say the odds are against it,” says Peeta.

The chariot rides—in which the District 12 kids are dressed in awful coal miners’ outfits—and the interviews flash by. There’s little time to focus on anyone. But since Haymitch is going to be the victor, we get to see one full exchange between him and Caesar Flickerman, who looks exactly as he always does in his twinkling midnight blue suit. Only his dark green hair, eyelids, and lips are different.

“So, Haymitch, what do you think of the Games having one hundred percent more competitors than usual?” asks Caesar.

Haymitch shrugs. “I don’t see that it makes much difference. They’ll still be one hundred percent as stupid as usual, so I figure my odds will be roughly the same.”

The audience bursts out laughing and Haymitch gives them a half smile. Snarky. Arrogant. Indifferent.

“He didn’t have to reach far for that, did he?” I say.

Now it’s the morning the Games begin. We watch from the point of view of one of the tributes as she rises up through the tube from the Launch Room and into the arena. I can’t help but give a slight gasp. Disbelief is reflected on the faces of the players. Even Haymitch’s eyebrows lift in pleasure, although they almost immediately knit themselves back into a scowl.

It’s the most breathtaking place imaginable. The golden Cornucopia sits in the middle of a green meadow with patches of gorgeous flowers. The sky is azure blue with puffy white clouds. Bright songbirds flutter overhead. By the way some of the tributes are sniffing, it must smell fantastic. An aerial shot shows that the meadow stretches for miles. Far in the distance, in one direction, there seems to be a woods, in the other, a snowcapped mountain.

The beauty disorients many of the players, because when the gong sounds, most of them seem like they’re trying to wake from a dream. Not Haymitch, though. He’s at the Cornucopia, armed with weapons and a backpack of choice supplies. He heads for the woods before most of the others have stepped off their plates.

Eighteen tributes are killed in the bloodbath that first day. Others begin to die off and it becomes clear that almost everything in this pretty place—the luscious fruit dangling from the bushes, the water in the crystalline streams, even the scent of the flowers when inhaled too directly—is deadly poisonous. Only the rainwater and the food provided at the Cornucopia are

safe to consume. There's also a large, well-stocked Career pack of ten tributes scouring the mountain area for victims.

Haymitch has his own troubles over in the woods, where the fluffy golden squirrels turn out to be carnivorous and attack in packs, and the butterfly stings bring agony if not death. But he persists in moving forward, always keeping the distant mountain at his back.

Maysilee Donner turns out to be pretty resourceful herself, for a girl who leaves the Cornucopia with only a small backpack. Inside she finds a bowl, some dried beef, and a blowgun with two dozen darts. Making use of the readily available poisons, she soon turns the blowgun into a deadly weapon by dipping the darts in lethal substances and directing them into her opponents' flesh.

Four days in, the picturesque mountain erupts in a volcano that wipes out another dozen players, including all but five of the Career pack. With the mountain spewing liquid fire, and the meadow offering no means of concealment, the remaining thirteen tributes—including Haymitch and Maysilee—have no choice but to confine themselves to the woods.

Haymitch seems bent on continuing in the same direction, away from the now volcanic mountain, but a maze of tightly woven hedges forces him to circle back into the center of the woods, where he encounters three of the Careers and pulls his knife. They may be much bigger and stronger, but Haymitch has remarkable speed and has killed two when the third disarms him. That Career is about to slit his throat when a dart drops him to the ground.

Maysilee Donner steps out of the woods. "We'd live longer with two of us."

"Guess you just proved that," says Haymitch, rubbing his neck. "Allies?" Maysilee nods. And there they are, instantly drawn into one of those pacts you'd be hard-pressed to break if you ever expect to go home and face your district.

Just like Peeta and me, they do better together. Get more rest, work out a system to salvage more rainwater, fight as a team, and share the food from the dead tributes' packs. But Haymitch is still determined to keep moving on.

"Why?" Maysilee keeps asking, and he ignores her until she refuses to move any farther without an answer.

“Because it has to end somewhere, right?” says Haymitch. “The arena can’t go on forever.”

“What do you expect to find?” Maysilee asks.

“I don’t know. But maybe there’s something we can use,” he says.

When they finally do make it through that impossible hedge, using a blowtorch from one of the dead Careers’ packs, they find themselves on flat, dry earth that leads to a cliff. Far below, you can see jagged rocks.

“That’s all there is, Haymitch. Let’s go back,” says Maysilee.

“No, I’m staying here,” he says.

“All right. There’s only five of us left. May as well say good-bye now, anyway,” she says. “I don’t want it to come down to you and me.”

“Okay,” he agrees. That’s all. He doesn’t offer to shake her hand or even look at her. And she walks away.

Haymitch skirts along the edge of the cliff as if trying to figure something out. His foot dislodges a pebble and it falls into the abyss, apparently gone forever. But a minute later, as he sits to rest, the pebble shoots back up beside him. Haymitch stares at it, puzzled, and then his face takes on a strange intensity. He lobbs a rock the size of his fist over the cliff and waits. When it flies back out and right into his hand, he starts laughing.

That’s when we hear Maysilee begin to scream. The alliance is over and she broke it off, so no one could blame him for ignoring her. But Haymitch runs for her, anyway. He arrives only in time to watch the last of a flock of candy pink birds, equipped with long, thin beaks, skewer her through the neck. He holds her hand while she dies, and all I can think of is Rue and how I was too late to save her, too.

Later that day, another tribute is killed in combat and a third gets eaten by a pack of those fluffy squirrels, leaving Haymitch and a girl from District 1 to vie for the crown. She’s bigger than he is and just as fast, and when the inevitable fight comes, it’s bloody and awful and both have received what could well be fatal wounds, when Haymitch is finally disarmed. He staggers through the beautiful woods, holding his intestines in, while she stumbles after him, carrying the ax that should deliver his deathblow. Haymitch makes a beeline for his cliff and has just reached the edge when she throws the ax. He collapses on the ground and it flies into the abyss. Now weaponless as well, the girl just stands there, trying to staunch the flow of blood pouring from her empty eye socket. She’s thinking perhaps that she can outlast

Haymitch, who's starting to convulse on the ground. But what she doesn't know, and what he does, is that the ax will return. And when it flies back over the ledge, it buries itself in her head. The cannon sounds, her body is removed, and the trumpets blow to announce Haymitch's victory.

Peeta clicks off the tape and we sit there in silence for a while.

Finally Peeta says, "That force field at the bottom of the cliff, it was like the one on the roof of the Training Center. The one that throws you back if you try to jump off and commit suicide. Haymitch found a way to turn it into a weapon."

"Not just against the other tributes, but the Capitol, too," I say. "You know they didn't expect that to happen. It wasn't meant to be part of the arena. They never planned on anyone using it as a weapon. It made them look stupid that he figured it out. I bet they had a good time trying to spin that one. Bet that's why I don't remember seeing it on television. It's almost as bad as us and the berries!"

I can't help laughing, really laughing, for the first time in months. Peeta just shakes his head like I've lost my mind—and maybe I have, a little.

"Almost, but not quite," says Haymitch from behind us. I whip around, afraid he's going to be angry over us watching his tape, but he just smirks and takes a swig from a bottle of wine. So much for sobriety. I guess I should be upset he's drinking again, but I'm preoccupied with another feeling.

I've spent all these weeks getting to know who my competitors are, without even thinking about who my teammates are. Now a new kind of confidence is lighting up inside of me, because I think I finally know who Haymitch is. And I'm beginning to know who I am. And surely, two people who have caused the Capitol so much trouble can think of a way to get Peeta home alive.

Having been through prep with Flavius, Venia, and Octavia numerous times, it should just be an old routine to survive. But I haven't anticipated the emotional ordeal that awaits me. At some point during the prep, each of them bursts into tears at least twice, and Octavia pretty much keeps up a running whimper throughout the morning. It turns out they really have become attached to me, and the idea of my returning to the arena has undone them. Combine that with the fact that by losing me they'll be losing their ticket to all kinds of big social events, particularly my wedding, and the whole thing becomes unbearable. The idea of being strong for someone else having never entered their heads, I find myself in the position of having to console them. Since I'm the person going in to be slaughtered, this is somewhat annoying.

It's interesting, though, when I think of what Peeta said about the attendant on the train being unhappy about the victors having to fight again. About people in the Capitol not liking it. I still think all of that will be forgotten once the gong sounds, but it's something of a revelation that those in the Capitol feel anything at all about us. They certainly don't have a problem watching children murdered every year. But maybe they know too much about the victors, especially the ones who've been celebrities for ages, to forget we're human beings. It's more like watching your own friends die. More like the Games are for those of us in the districts.

By the time Cinna shows up, I am irritable and exhausted from comforting the prep team, especially because their constant tears are reminding me of the ones undoubtedly being shed at home. Standing there in my thin robe with my stinging skin and heart, I know I can't bear even one more look of regret. So the moment he walks in the door I snap, "I swear if you cry, I'll kill you here and now."

Cinna just smiles. "Had a damp morning?"

"You could wring me out," I reply.

Cinna puts his arm around my shoulder and leads me into lunch. "Don't worry. I always channel my emotions into my work. That way I don't hurt anyone but myself."

“I can’t go through that again,” I warn him.

“I know. I’ll talk to them,” says Cinna.

Lunch makes me feel a bit better. Pheasant with a selection of jewel-colored jellies, and tiny versions of real vegetables swimming in butter, and potatoes mashed with parsley. For dessert we dip chunks of fruit in a pot of melted chocolate, and Cinna has to order a second pot because I start just eating the stuff with a spoon.

“So, what are we wearing for the opening ceremonies?” I finally ask as I scrape the second pot clean. “Headlamps or fire?” I know the chariot ride will require Peeta and me to be dressed in something coal related.

“Something along that line,” he says.

When it’s time to get in costume for the opening ceremonies, my prep team shows up but Cinna sends them away, saying they’ve done such a spectacular job in the morning, there’s nothing left to do. They go off to recover, thankfully leaving me in Cinna’s hands. He puts up my hair first, in the braided style my mother introduced him to, then proceeds with my makeup. Last year he used little so that the audience would recognize me when I landed in the arena. But now my face is almost obscured by the dramatic highlights and dark shadows. High arching eyebrows, sharp cheekbones, smoldering eyes, deep purple lips. The costume looks deceptively simple at first, just a fitted black jumpsuit that covers me from the neck down. He places a half crown like the one I received as victor on my head, but it’s made of a heavy black metal, not gold. Then he adjusts the light in the room to mimic twilight and presses a button just inside the fabric on my wrist. I look down, fascinated, as my ensemble slowly comes to life, first with a soft golden light but gradually transforming to the orange-red of burning coal. I look as if I have been coated in glowing embers—no, that I *am* a glowing ember straight from our fireplace. The colors rise and fall, shift and blend, in exactly the way the coals do.

“How did you do this?” I say in wonder.

“Portia and I spent a lot of hours watching fires,” says Cinna. “Now look at yourself.”

He turns me toward a mirror so that I can take in the entire effect. I do not see a girl, or even a woman, but some unearthly being who looks like she might make her home in the volcano that destroyed so many in Haymitch’s Quell. The black crown, which now appears red-hot, casts strange shadows

on my dramatically made-up face. Katniss, the girl on fire, has left behind her flickering flames and bejeweled gowns and soft candlelight frocks. She is as deadly as fire itself.

“I think...this is just what I needed to face the others,” I say.

“Yes, I think your days of pink lipstick and ribbons are behind you,” says Cinna. He touches the button on my wrist again, extinguishing my light. “Let’s not run down your power pack. When you’re on the chariot this time, no waving, no smiling. I just want you to look straight ahead, as if the entire audience is beneath your notice.”

“Finally something I’ll be good at,” I say.

Cinna has a few more things to attend to, so I decide to head down to the ground floor of the Remake Center, which houses the huge gathering place for the tributes and their chariots before the opening ceremonies. I’m hoping to find Peeta and Haymitch, but they haven’t arrived yet. Unlike last year, when all the tributes were practically glued to their chariots, the scene is very social. The victors, both this year’s tributes and their mentors, are standing around in small groups, talking. Of course, they all know one another and I don’t know anyone, and I’m not really the sort of person to go around introducing myself. So I just stroke the neck of one of my horses and try not to be noticed.

It doesn’t work.

The crunching hits my ear before I even know he’s beside me, and when I turn my head, Finnick Odair’s famous sea green eyes are only inches from mine. He pops a sugar cube in his mouth and leans against my horse.

“Hello, Katniss,” he says, as if we’ve known each other for years, when in fact we’ve never met.

“Hello, Finnick,” I say, just as casually, although I’m feeling uncomfortable at his closeness, especially since he’s got so much bare skin exposed.

“Want a sugar cube?” he says, offering his hand, which is piled high. “They’re supposed to be for the horses, but who cares? They’ve got years to eat sugar, whereas you and I...well, if we see something sweet, we better grab it quick.”

Finnick Odair is something of a living legend in Panem. Since he won the Sixty-fifth Hunger Games when he was only fourteen, he’s still one of the youngest victors. Being from District 4, he was a Career, so the odds were

already in his favor, but what no trainer could claim to have given him was his extraordinary beauty. Tall, athletic, with golden skin and bronze-colored hair and those incredible eyes. While other tributes that year were hard-pressed to get a handful of grain or some matches for a gift, Finnick never wanted for anything, not food or medicine or weapons. It took about a week for his competitors to realize that he was the one to kill, but it was too late. He was already a good fighter with the spears and knives he had found in the Cornucopia. When he received a silver parachute with a trident—which may be the most expensive gift I’ve ever seen given in the arena—it was all over. District 4’s industry is fishing. He’d been on boats his whole life. The trident was a natural, deadly extension of his arm. He wove a net out of some kind of vine he found, used it to entangle his opponents so he could spear them with the trident, and within a matter of days the crown was his.

The citizens of the Capitol have been drooling over him ever since.

Because of his youth, they couldn’t really touch him for the first year or two. But ever since he turned sixteen, he’s spent his time at the Games being dogged by those desperately in love with him. No one retains his favor for long. He can go through four or five in his annual visit. Old or young, lovely or plain, rich or very rich, he’ll keep them company and take their extravagant gifts, but he never stays, and once he’s gone he never comes back.

I can’t argue that Finnick isn’t one of the most stunning, sensuous people on the planet. But I can honestly say he’s never been attractive to me. Maybe he’s too pretty, or maybe he’s too easy to get, or maybe it’s really that he’d just be too easy to lose.

“No, thanks,” I say to the sugar. “I’d love to borrow your outfit sometime, though.”

He’s draped in a golden net that’s strategically knotted at his groin so that he can’t technically be called naked, but he’s about as close as you can get. I’m sure his stylist thinks the more of Finnick the audience sees, the better.

“You’re absolutely terrifying me in that getup. What happened to the pretty little-girl dresses?” he asks. He wets his lips just ever so slightly with his tongue. Probably this drives most people crazy. But for some reason all I can think of is old Cray, salivating over some poor, starving young woman.

“I outgrew them,” I say.

Finnick takes the collar of my outfit and runs it between his fingers. "It's too bad about this Quell thing. You could have made out like a bandit in the Capitol. Jewels, money, anything you wanted."

"I don't like jewels, and I have more money than I need. What do you spend all yours on, anyway, Finnick?" I say.

"Oh, I haven't dealt in anything as common as money for years," says Finnick.

"Then how do they pay you for the pleasure of your company?" I ask.

"With secrets," he says softly. He tips his head in so his lips are almost in contact with mine. "What about you, girl on fire? Do you have any secrets worth my time?"

For some stupid reason, I blush, but I force myself to hold my ground. "No, I'm an open book," I whisper back. "Everybody seems to know my secrets before I know them myself."

He smiles. "Unfortunately, I think that's true." His eyes flicker off to the side. "Peeta is coming. Sorry you have to cancel your wedding. I know how devastating that must be for you." He tosses another sugar cube in his mouth and saunters off.

Peeta's beside me, dressed in an outfit identical to mine. "What did Finnick Odair want?" he asks.

I turn and put my lips close to Peeta's and drop my eyelids in imitation of Finnick. "He offered me sugar and wanted to know all my secrets," I say in my best seductive voice.

Peeta laughs. "Ugh. Not really."

"Really," I say. "I'll tell you more when my skin stops crawling."

"Do you think we'd have ended up like this if only one of us had won?" he asks, glancing around at the other victors. "Just another part of the freak show?"

"Sure. Especially you," I say.

"Oh. And why especially me?" he says with a smile.

"Because you have a weakness for beautiful things and I don't," I say with an air of superiority. "They would lure you into their Capitol ways and you'd be lost entirely."

"Having an eye for beauty isn't the same thing as a weakness," Peeta points out. "Except possibly when it comes to you." The music is beginning

and I see the wide doors opening for the first chariot, hear the roar of the crowd. “Shall we?” He holds out a hand to help me into the chariot.

I climb up and pull him up after me. “Hold still,” I say, and straighten his crown. “Have you seen your suit turned on? We’re going to be fabulous again.”

“Absolutely. But Portia says we’re to be very above it all. No waving or anything,” he says. “Where are they, anyway?”

“I don’t know.” I eye the procession of chariots. “Maybe we better go ahead and switch ourselves on.” We do, and as we begin to glow, I can see people pointing at us and chattering, and I know that, once again, we’ll be the talk of the opening ceremonies. We’re almost at the door. I crane my head around, but neither Portia nor Cinna, who were with us right up to the final second last year, are anywhere in sight. “Are we supposed to hold hands this year?” I ask.

“I guess they’ve left it up to us,” says Peeta.

I look up into those blue eyes that no amount of dramatic makeup can make truly deadly and remember how, just a year ago, I was prepared to kill him. Convinced he was trying to kill me. Now everything is reversed. I’m determined to keep him alive, knowing the cost will be my own life, but the part of me that is not so brave as I could wish is glad that it’s Peeta, not Haymitch, beside me. Our hands find each other without further discussion. Of course we will go into this as one.

The voice of the crowd rises into one universal scream as we roll into the fading evening light, but neither one of us reacts. I simply fix my eyes on a point far in the distance and pretend there is no audience, no hysteria. I can’t help catching glimpses of us on the huge screens along the route, and we are not just beautiful, we are dark and powerful. No, more. We star-crossed lovers from District 12, who suffered so much and enjoyed so little the rewards of our victory, do not seek the fans’ favor, grace them with our smiles, or catch their kisses. We are unforgiving.

And I love it. Getting to be myself at last.

As we curve around into the loop of the City Circle, I can see that a couple of the other stylists have tried to steal Cinna and Portia’s idea of illuminating their tributes. The electric-light-studded outfits from District 3, where they make electronics, at least make sense. But what are the livestock

keepers from District 10, who are dressed as cows, doing with flaming belts? Broiling themselves? Pathetic.

Peeta and I, on the other hand, are so mesmerizing with our ever-changing coal costumes that most of the other tributes are staring at us. We seem particularly riveting to the pair from District 6, who are known morphling addicts. Both bone thin, with sagging yellowish skin. They can't tear their overlarge eyes away, even when President Snow begins to speak from his balcony, welcoming us all to the Quell. The anthem plays, and as we make our final trip around the circle, am I wrong? Or do I see the president fixated on me as well?

Peeta and I wait until the doors of the Training Center have closed behind us to relax. Cinna and Portia are there, pleased with our performance, and Haymitch has made an appearance this year as well, only he's not at our chariot, he's over with the tributes of District 11. I see him nod in our direction and then they follow him over to greet us.

I know Chaff by sight because I've spent years watching him pass a bottle back and forth with Haymitch on television. He's dark skinned, about six feet tall, and one of his arms ends in a stump because he lost his hand in the Games he won thirty years ago. I'm sure they offered him some artificial replacement, like they did Peeta when they had to amputate his lower leg, but I guess he didn't take it.

The woman, Seeder, looks almost like she could be from the Seam, with her olive skin and straight black hair streaked with silver. Only her golden brown eyes mark her as from another district. She must be around sixty, but she still looks strong, and there's no sign she's turned to liquor or morphling or any other chemical form of escape over the years. Before either of us says a word, she embraces me. I know somehow it must be because of Rue and Thresh. Before I can stop myself, I whisper, "The families?"

"They're alive," she says back softly before letting me go.

Chaff throws his good arm around me and gives me a big kiss right on the mouth. I jerk back, startled, while he and Haymitch guffaw.

That's about all the time we get before the Capitol attendants are firmly directing us toward the elevators. I get the distinct feeling they're not comfortable with the camaraderie among the victors, who couldn't seem to care less. As I walk toward the elevators, my hand still linked with Peeta's,

someone else rustles up to my side. The girl pulls off a headdress of leafy branches and tosses it behind her without bothering to look where it falls.

Johanna Mason. From District 7. Lumber and paper, thus the tree. She won by very convincingly portraying herself as weak and helpless so that she would be ignored. Then she demonstrated a wicked ability to murder. She ruffles up her spiky hair and rolls her wide-set brown eyes. “Isn’t my costume awful? My stylist’s the biggest idiot in the Capitol. Our tributes have been trees for forty years under her. Wish I’d gotten Cinna. You look fantastic.”

Girl talk. That thing I’ve always been so bad at. Opinions on clothes, hair, makeup. So I lie. “Yeah, he’s been helping me design my own clothing line. You should see what he can do with velvet.” Velvet. The only fabric I could think of off the top of my head.

“I have. On your tour. That strapless number you wore in District Two? The deep blue one with the diamonds? So gorgeous I wanted to reach through the screen and tear it right off your back,” says Johanna.

I bet you did, I think. With a few inches of my flesh.

While we wait for the elevators, Johanna unzips the rest of her tree, letting it drop to the floor, and then kicks it away in disgust. Except for her forest green slippers, she doesn’t have on a stitch of clothing. “That’s better.”

We end up on the same elevator with her, and she spends the whole ride to the seventh floor chatting to Peeta about his paintings while the light of his still-glowing costume reflects off her bare breasts. When she leaves, I ignore him, but I just know he’s grinning. I toss aside his hand as the doors close behind Chaff and Seeder, leaving us alone, and he breaks out laughing.

“What?” I say, turning on him as we step out on our floor.

“It’s you, Katniss. Can’t you see?” he says.

“What’s me?” I say.

“Why they’re all acting like this. Finnick with his sugar cubes and Chaff kissing you and that whole thing with Johanna stripping down.” He tries to take on a more serious tone, unsuccessfully. “They’re playing with you because you’re so...you know.”

“No, I don’t know,” I say. And I really have no idea what he’s talking about.

“It’s like when you wouldn’t look at me naked in the arena even though I was half dead. You’re so...pure,” he says finally.

“I am not!” I say. “I’ve been practically ripping your clothes off every time there’s been a camera for the last year!”

“Yeah, but...I mean, for the Capitol, you’re pure,” he says, clearly trying to mollify me. “For me, you’re perfect. They’re just teasing you.”

“No, they’re laughing at me, and so are you!” I say.

“No.” Peeta shakes his head, but he’s still suppressing a smile. I’m seriously rethinking the question of who should get out of these Games alive when the other elevator opens.

Haymitch and Effie join us, looking pleased about something. Then Haymitch’s face grows hard.

What did I do now? I almost say, but I see he’s staring behind me at the entrance to the dining room.

Effie blinks in the same direction, then says brightly, “Looks like they’ve got you a matched set this year.”

I turn around and find the redheaded Avox girl who tended to me last year until the Games began. I think how nice it is to have a friend here. I notice that the young man beside her, another Avox, also has red hair. That must be what Effie meant by a matched set.

Then a chill runs through me. Because I know him, too. Not from the Capitol but from years of having easy conversations in the Hob, joking over Greasy Sae’s soup, and that last day watching him lie unconscious in the square while the life bled out of Gale.

Our new Avox is Darius.

16

Haymitch grips my wrist as if anticipating my next move, but I am as speechless as the Capitol's torturers have rendered Darius. Haymitch once told me they did something to Avoxes' tongues so they could never talk again. In my head I hear Darius's voice, playful and bright, ringing across the Hob to tease me. Not as my fellow victors make fun of me now, but because we genuinely liked each other. If Gale could see him...

I know any move I would make toward Darius, any act of recognition, would only result in punishment for him. So we just stare into each other's eyes. Darius, now a mute slave; me, now headed to death. What would we say, anyway? That we're sorry for the other's lot? That we ache for the other's pain? That we're glad we had the chance to know each other?

No, Darius shouldn't be glad he knew me. If I had been there to stop Thread, he wouldn't have stepped forward to save Gale. Wouldn't be an Avox. And more specifically, wouldn't be *my* Avox, because President Snow has so obviously had him placed here for my benefit.

I twist my wrist from Haymitch's grasp and head down to my old bedroom, locking the door behind me. I sit on the side of my bed, elbows on my knees, forehead on my fists, and watch my glowing suit in the darkness, imagining I am in my old home in District 12, huddled beside the fire. It slowly fades back to black as the power pack dies out.

When Effie eventually knocks on the door to summon me to dinner, I get up and take off my suit, fold it neatly, and set it on the table with my crown. In the bathroom, I wash the dark streaks of makeup from my face. I dress in a simple shirt and pants and go down the hall to the dining room.

I'm not aware of much at dinner except that Darius and the redheaded Avox girl are our servers. Effie, Haymitch, Cinna, Portia, and Peeta are all there, talking about the opening ceremonies, I suppose. But the only time I really feel present is when I purposely knock a dish of peas to the floor and, before anyone can stop me, crouch down to clean them up. Darius is right by me when I send the dish over, and we two are briefly side by side, obscured from view, as we scoop up the peas. For just one moment our hands meet. I

can feel his skin, rough under the buttery sauce from the dish. In the tight, desperate clench of our fingers are all the words we will never be able to say. Then Effie's clucking at me from behind about how "That isn't your job, Katniss!" and he lets go.

When we go in to watch the recap of the opening ceremonies, I wedge myself in between Cinna and Haymitch on the couch because I don't want to be next to Peeta. This awfulness with Darius belongs to me and Gale and maybe even Haymitch, but not to Peeta. He might've known Darius to nod hello, but Peeta wasn't Hob the way the rest of us were. Besides, I'm still angry with him for laughing at me along with the other victors, and the last thing I want is his sympathy and comfort. I haven't changed my mind about saving him in the arena, but I don't owe him more than that.

As I watch the procession to the City Circle, I think how it's bad enough that they dress us all up in costumes and parade us through the streets in chariots on a regular year. Kids in costumes are silly, but aging victors, it turns out, are pitiful. A few who are on the younger side, like Johanna and Finnick, or whose bodies haven't fallen into disrepair, like Seeder and Brutus, can still manage to maintain a little dignity. But the majority, who are in the clutches of drink or morphling or illness, look grotesque in their costumes, depicting cows and trees and loaves of bread. Last year we chattered away about each contestant, but tonight there's only the occasional comment. Small wonder the crowd goes wild when Peeta and I appear, looking so young and strong and beautiful in our brilliant costumes. The very image of what tributes should be.

As soon as it's over, I stand up and thank Cinna and Portia for their amazing work and head off to bed. Effie calls a reminder to meet early for breakfast to work out our training strategy, but even her voice sounds hollow. Poor Effie. She finally had a decent year in the Games with Peeta and me, and now it's all broken down into a mess that even she can't put a positive spin on. In Capitol terms, I'm guessing this counts as a true tragedy.

Soon after I go to bed, there's a quiet knock on my door, but I ignore it. I don't want Peeta tonight. Especially not with Darius around. It's almost as bad as if Gale were here. Gale. How am I supposed to let him go with Darius haunting the hallways?

Tongues figure prominently in my nightmares. First I watch frozen and helpless while gloved hands carry out the bloody dissection in Darius's

mouth. Then I'm at a party where everyone wears masks and someone with a flicking, wet tongue, who I suppose is Finnick, stalks me, but when he catches me and pulls off his mask, it's President Snow, and his puffy lips are dripping in bloody saliva. Finally I'm back in the arena, my own tongue as dry as sandpaper, while I try to reach a pool of water that recedes every time I'm about to touch it.

When I wake, I stumble to the bathroom and gulp water from the faucet until I can hold no more. I strip off my sweaty clothes and fall back into bed, naked, and somehow find sleep again.

I delay going down to breakfast as long as possible the next morning because I really don't want to discuss our training strategy. What's to discuss? Every victor already knows what everybody else can do. Or used to be able to do, anyway. So Peeta and I will continue to act in love and that's that. Somehow I'm just not up to talking about it, especially with Darius standing mutely by. I take a long shower, dress slowly in the outfit Cinna has left for training, and order food from the menu in my room by speaking into a mouthpiece. In a minute, sausage, eggs, potatoes, bread, juice, and hot chocolate appear. I eat my fill, trying to drag out the minutes until ten o'clock, when we have to go down to the Training Center. By nine-thirty, Haymitch is pounding on my door, obviously fed up with me, ordering me to the dining room NOW! Still, I brush my teeth before meandering down the hall, effectively killing another five minutes.

The dining room's empty except for Peeta and Haymitch, whose face is flushed with drink and anger. On his wrist he wears a solid-gold bangle with a pattern of flames—this must be his concession to Effie's matching-token plan—that he twists unhappily. It's a very handsome bangle, really, but the movement makes it seem like something confining, a shackle, rather than a piece of jewelry. "You're late," he snarls at me.

"Sorry. I slept in after the mutilated-tongue nightmares kept me up half the night." I mean to sound hostile, but my voice catches at the end of the sentence.

Haymitch gives me a scowl, then relents. "All right, never mind. Today, in training, you've got two jobs. One, stay in love."

"Obviously," I say.

"And two, make some friends," says Haymitch.

“No,” I say. “I don’t trust any of them, I can’t stand most of them, and I’d rather operate with just the two of us.”

“That’s what I said at first, but—” Peeta begins.

“But it won’t be enough,” Haymitch insists. “You’re going to need more allies this time around.”

“Why?” I ask.

“Because you’re at a distinct disadvantage. Your competitors have known each other for years. So who do you think they’re going to target first?” he says.

“Us. And nothing we’re going to do is going to override any old friendship,” I say. “So why bother?”

“Because you can fight. You’re popular with the crowd. That could still make you desirable allies. But only if you let the others know you’re willing to team up with them,” says Haymitch.

“You mean you want us in the Career pack this year?” I ask, unable to hide my distaste. Traditionally the tributes from Districts 1, 2, and 4 join forces, possibly taking in a few other exceptional fighters, and hunt down the weaker competitors.

“That’s been our strategy, hasn’t it? To train like Careers?” counters Haymitch. “And who makes up the Career pack is generally agreed upon before the Games begin. Peeta barely got in with them last year.”

I think of the loathing I felt when I discovered Peeta was with the Careers during the last Games. “So we’re to try to get in with Finnick and Brutus—is that what you’re saying?”

“Not necessarily. Everyone’s a victor. Make your own pack if you’d rather. Choose who you like. I’d suggest Chaff and Seeder. Although Finnick’s not to be ignored,” says Haymitch. “Find someone to team up with who might be of some use to you. Remember, you’re not in a ring full of trembling children anymore. These people are all experienced killers, no matter what shape they appear to be in.”

Maybe he’s right. Only who could I trust? Seeder maybe. But do I really want to make a pact with her, only to possibly have to kill her later? No. Still, I made a pact with Rue under the same circumstances. I tell Haymitch I’ll try, even though I think I’ll be pretty bad at the whole thing.

Effie shows up a bit early to take us down because last year, even though we were on time, we were the last two tributes to show up. But Haymitch

tells her he doesn't want her taking us down to the gym. None of the other victors will be showing up with a babysitter, and being the youngest, it's even more important we look self-reliant. So she has to satisfy herself with taking us to the elevator, fussing over our hair, and pushing the button for us.

It's such a short ride that there's no real time for conversation, but when Peeta takes my hand, I don't pull it away. I may have ignored him last night in private, but in training we must appear as an inseparable team.

Effie needn't have worried about us being the last to arrive. Only Brutus and the woman from District 2, Enobaria, are present. Enobaria looks to be about thirty and all I can remember about her is that, in hand-to-hand combat, she killed one tribute by ripping open his throat with her teeth. She became so famous for this act that, after she was a victor, she had her teeth cosmetically altered so each one ends in a sharp point like a fang and is inlaid with gold. She has no shortage of admirers in the Capitol.

By ten o'clock, only about half of the tributes have shown up. Atala, the woman who runs training, begins her spiel right on time, unfazed by the poor attendance. Maybe she expected it. I'm sort of relieved, because that means there are a dozen people I don't have to pretend to make friends with. Atala runs through the list of stations, which include both combat and survival skills, and releases us to train.

I tell Peeta I think we'd do best to split up, thus covering more territory. When he goes off to chuck spears with Brutus and Chaff, I head over to the knot-tying station. Hardly anyone ever bothers to visit it. I like the trainer and he remembers me fondly, maybe because I spent time with him last year. He's pleased when I show him I can still set the trap that leaves an enemy dangling by a leg from a tree. Clearly he took note of my snares in the arena last year and now sees me as an advanced pupil, so I ask him to review every kind of knot that might come in handy and a few that I'll probably never use. I'd be content to spend the morning alone with him, but after about an hour and a half, someone puts his arms around me from behind, his fingers easily finishing the complicated knot I've been sweating over. Of course it's Finnick, who seems to have spent his childhood doing nothing but wielding tridents and manipulating ropes into fancy knots for nets, I guess. I watch for a minute while he picks up a length of rope, makes a noose, and then pretends to hang himself for my amusement.

Rolling my eyes, I head over to another vacant station where tributes can learn to build fires. I already make excellent fires, but I'm still pretty dependent on matches for starting them. So the trainer has me work with flint, steel, and some charred cloth. This is much harder than it looks, and even working as intently as I can, it takes me about an hour to get a fire going. I look up with a triumphant smile only to find I have company.

The two tributes from District 3 are beside me, struggling to start a decent fire with matches. I think about leaving, but I really want to try using the flint again, and if I have to report back to Haymitch that I tried to make friends, these two might be a bearable choice. Both are small in stature with ashen skin and black hair. The woman, Wiress, is probably around my mother's age and speaks in a quiet, intelligent voice. But right away I notice she has a habit of dropping off her words in mid-sentence, as if she's forgotten you're there. Beetee, the man, is older and somewhat fidgety. He wears glasses but spends a lot of time looking under them. They're a little strange, but I'm pretty sure neither of them is going to try to make me uncomfortable by stripping naked. And they're from District 3. Maybe they can even confirm my suspicions of an uprising there.

I glance around the Training Center. Peeta is at the center of a ribald circle of knife throwers. The morphlings from District 6 are in the camouflage station, painting each other's faces with bright pink swirls. The male tribute from District 5 is vomiting wine on the sword-fighting floor. Finnick and the old woman from his district are using the archery station. Johanna Mason is naked again and oiling her skin down for a wrestling lesson. I decide to stay put.

Wiress and Beetee make decent company. They seem friendly enough but don't pry. We talk about our talents; they tell me they both invent things, which makes my supposed interest in fashion seem pretty weak. Wiress brings up some sort of stitching device she's working on.

"It senses the density of the fabric and selects the strength," she says, and then becomes absorbed in a bit of dry straw before she can go on.

"The strength of the thread," Beetee finishes explaining. "Automatically. It rules out human error." Then he talks about his recent success creating a musical chip that's tiny enough to be concealed in a flake of glitter but can hold hours of songs. I remember Octavia talking about this during the wedding shoot, and I see a possible chance to allude to the uprising.

“Oh, yeah. My prep team was all upset a few months ago, I think, because they couldn’t get hold of that,” I say casually. “I guess a lot of orders from District Three were getting backed up.”

Beetee examines me under his glasses. “Yes. Did you have any similar backups in coal production this year?” he asks.

“No. Well, we lost a couple of weeks when they brought in a new Head Peacekeeper and his crew, but nothing major,” I say. “To production, I mean. Two weeks sitting around your house doing nothing just means two weeks of being hungry for most people.”

I think they understand what I’m trying to say. That we’ve had no uprising. “Oh. That’s a shame,” says Wiress in a slightly disappointed voice. “I found your district very...” She trails off, distracted by something in her head.

“Interesting,” fills in Beetee. “We both did.”

I feel bad, knowing that their district must have suffered much worse than ours. I feel I have to defend my people. “Well, there aren’t very many of us in Twelve,” I say. “Not that you’d know it nowadays by the size of the Peacekeeping force. But I guess we’re interesting enough.”

As we move over to the shelter station, Wiress stops and gazes up at the stands where the Gamemakers are roaming around, eating and drinking, sometimes taking notice of us. “Look,” she says, giving her head a slight nod in their direction. I look up and see Plutarch Heavensbee in the magnificent purple robe with the fur-trimmed collar that designates him as Head Gamemaker. He’s eating a turkey leg.

I don’t see why this merits comment, but I say, “Yes, he’s been promoted to Head Gamemaker this year.”

“No, no. There by the corner of the table. You can just...” says Wiress.

Beetee squints under his glasses. “Just make it out.”

I stare in that direction, perplexed. But then I see it. A patch of space about six inches square at the corner of the table seems almost to be vibrating. It’s as if the air is rippling in tiny visible waves, distorting the sharp edges of the wood and a goblet of wine someone has set there.

“A force field. They’ve set one up between the Gamemakers and us. I wonder what brought that on,” Beetee says.

“Me, probably,” I confess. “Last year I shot an arrow at them during my private training session.” Beetee and Wiress look at me curiously. “I was

provoked. So, do all force fields have a spot like that?”

“Chink,” says Wiress vaguely.

“In the armor, as it were,” finishes Beetee. “Ideally it’d be invisible, wouldn’t it?”

I want to ask them more, but lunch is announced. I look for Peeta, but he’s hanging with a group of about ten other victors, so I decide just to eat with District 3. Maybe I can get Seeder to join us.

When we make our way into the dining area, I see some of Peeta’s gang have other ideas. They’re dragging all the smaller tables to form one large table so that we all have to eat together. Now I don’t know what to do. Even at school I used to avoid eating at a crowded table. Frankly, I’d probably have sat alone if Madge hadn’t made a habit of joining me. I guess I’d have eaten with Gale except, being two grades apart, our lunch never fell at the same time.

I take a tray and start making my way around the foodladen carts that ring the room. Peeta catches up with me at the stew. “How’s it going?”

“Good. Fine. I like the District Three victors,” I say. “Wiress and Beetee.”

“Really?” he asks. “They’re something of a joke to the others.”

“Why does that not surprise me?” I say. I think of how Peeta was always surrounded at school by a crowd of friends. It’s amazing, really, that he ever took any notice of me except to think I was odd.

“Johanna’s nicknamed them Nuts and Volts,” he says. “I think she’s Nuts and he’s Volts.”

“And so I’m stupid for thinking they might be useful. Because of something Johanna Mason said while she was oiling up her breasts for wrestling,” I retort.

“Actually I think the nickname’s been around for years. And I didn’t mean that as an insult. I’m just sharing information,” he says.

“Well, Wiress and Beetee are smart. They invent things. They could tell by sight that a force field had been put up between us and the Gamemakers. And if we have to have allies, I want them.” I toss the ladle back in a pot of stew, splattering us both with the gravy.

“What are you so angry about?” Peeta asks, wiping the gravy from his shirtfront. “Because I teased you on the elevator? I’m sorry. I thought you would just laugh about it.”

“Forget it,” I say with a shake of my head. “It’s a lot of things.”

“Darius,” he says.

“Darius. The Games. Haymitch making us team up with the others,” I say.

“It can just be you and me, you know,” he says.

“I know. But maybe Haymitch is right,” I say. “Don’t tell him I said so, but he usually is, where the Games are concerned.”

“Well, you can have final say about our allies. But right now, I’m leaning toward Chaff and Seeder,” says Peeta.

“I’m okay with Seeder, not Chaff,” I say. “Not yet, anyway.”

“Come on and eat with him. I promise, I won’t let him kiss you again,” says Peeta.

Chaff doesn’t seem as bad at lunch. He’s sober, and while he talks too loud and makes bad jokes a lot, most of them are at his own expense. I can see why he would be good for Haymitch, whose thoughts run so darkly. But I’m still not sure I’m ready to team up with him.

I try hard to be more sociable, not just with Chaff but with the group at large. After lunch I do the edible-insect station with the District 8 tributes—Cecelia, who’s got three kids at home, and Woof, a really old guy who’s hard of hearing and doesn’t seem to know what’s going on since he keeps trying to stuff poisonous bugs in his mouth. I wish I could mention meeting Twill and Bonnie in the woods, but I can’t figure out how. Cashmere and Gloss, the sister and brother from District 1, invite me over and we make hammocks for a while. They’re polite but cool, and I spend the whole time thinking about how I killed both the tributes from their district, Glimmer and Marvel, last year, and that they probably knew them and might even have been their mentors. Both my hammock and my attempt to connect with them are mediocre at best. I join Enobaria at sword training and exchange a few comments, but it’s clear neither of us wants to team up. Finnick appears again when I’m picking up fishing tips, but mostly just to introduce me to Mags, the elderly woman who’s also from District 4. Between her district accent and her garbled speech—possibly she’s had a stroke—I can’t make out more than one in four words. But I swear she can make a decent fishhook out of anything—a thorn, a wishbone, an earring. After a while I tune out the trainer and simply try to copy whatever Mags does. When I make a pretty good hook out of a bent nail and fasten it to some strands of my hair, she gives me a toothless smile and an unintelligible comment I think might be praise.

Suddenly I remember how she volunteered to replace the young, hysterical woman in her district. It couldn't be because she thought she had any chance of winning. She did it to save the girl, just like I volunteered last year to save Prim. And I decide I want her on my team.

Great. Now I have to go back and tell Haymitch I want an eighty-year-old and Nuts and Volts for my allies. He'll love that.

So I give up trying to make friends and go over to the archery range for some sanity. It's wonderful there, getting to try out all the different bows and arrows. The trainer, Tax, seeing that the standing targets offer no challenge for me, begins to launch these silly fake birds high into the air for me to hit. At first it seems stupid, but it turns out to be kind of fun. Much more like hunting a moving creature. Since I'm hitting everything he throws up, he starts increasing the number of birds he sends airborne. I forget the rest of the gym and the victors and how miserable I am and lose myself in the shooting. When I manage to take down five birds in one round, I realize it's so quiet I can hear each one hit the floor. I turn and see the majority of the victors have stopped to watch me. Their faces show everything from envy to hatred to admiration.

After training, Peeta and I hang out, waiting for Haymitch and Effie to show up for dinner. When we're called to eat, Haymitch pounces on me immediately. "So at least half the victors have instructed their mentors to request you as an ally. I know it can't be your sunny personality."

"They saw her shoot," says Peeta with a smile. "Actually, I saw her shoot, for real, for the first time. I'm about to put in a formal request myself."

"You're that good?" Haymitch asks me. "So good that Brutus wants you?"

I shrug. "But I don't want Brutus. I want Mags and District Three."

"Of course you do." Haymitch sighs and orders a bottle of wine. "I'll tell everybody you're still making up your mind."

After my shooting exhibition, I still get teased some, but I no longer feel like I'm being mocked. In fact, I feel as if I've somehow been initiated into the victors' circle. During the next two days, I spend time with almost everybody headed for the arena. Even the morphlings, who, with Peeta's help, paint me into a field of yellow flowers. Even Finnick, who gives me an hour of trident lessons in exchange for an hour of archery instruction. And the more I come to know these people, the worse it is. Because, on the whole, I don't hate them. And some I like. And a lot of them are so damaged that my

natural instinct would be to protect them. But all of them must die if I'm to save Peeta.

The final day of training ends with our private sessions. We each get fifteen minutes before the Gamemakers to amaze them with our skills, but I don't know what any of us might have to show them. There's a lot of kidding about it at lunch. What we might do. Sing, dance, strip, tell jokes. Mags, who I can understand a little better now, decides she's just going to take a nap. I don't know what I'm going to do. Shoot some arrows, I guess. Haymitch said to surprise them if we could, but I'm fresh out of ideas.

As the girl from 12, I'm scheduled to go last. The dining room gets quieter and quieter as the tributes file out to go perform. It's easier to keep up the irreverent, invincible manner we've all adopted when there are more of us. As people disappear through the door, all I can think is that they have a matter of days to live.

Peeta and I are finally left alone. He reaches across the table to take my hands. "Decided what to do for the Gamemakers yet?"

I shake my head. "I can't really use them for target practice this year, with the force field up and all. Maybe make some fishhooks. What about you?"

"Not a clue. I keep wishing I could bake a cake or something," he says.

"Do some more camouflage," I suggest.

"If the morphlings have left me anything to work with," he says wryly. "They've been glued to that station since training started."

We sit in silence awhile and then I blurt out the thing that's on both our minds. "How are we going to kill these people, Peeta?"

"I don't know." He leans his forehead down on our entwined hands.

"I don't want them as allies. Why did Haymitch want us to get to know them?" I say. "It'll make it so much harder than last time. Except for Rue maybe. But I guess I never really could've killed her, anyway. She was just too much like Prim."

Peeta looks up at me, his brow creased in thought. "Her death was the most despicable, wasn't it?"

"None of them were very pretty," I say, thinking of Glimmer's and Cato's ends.

They call Peeta, so I wait by myself. Fifteen minutes pass. Then half an hour. It's close to forty minutes before I'm called.

When I go in, I smell the sharp odor of cleaner and notice that one of the mats has been dragged to the center of the room. The mood is very different from last year's, when the Gamemakers were half drunk and distractedly picking at tidbits from the banquet table. They whisper among themselves, looking somewhat annoyed. What did Peeta do? Something to upset them?

I feel a pang of worry. That isn't good. I don't want Peeta singling himself out as a target for the Gamemakers' anger. That's part of my job. To draw fire away from Peeta. But how did he upset them? Because I'd love to do just that and more. To break through the smug veneer of those who use their brains to find amusing ways to kill us. To make them realize that while we're vulnerable to the Capitol's cruelties, they are as well.

Do you have any idea how much I hate you? I think. You, who have given your talents to the Games?

I try to catch Plutarch Heavensbee's eye, but he seems to be intentionally ignoring me, as he has the entire training period. I remember how he sought me out for a dance, how pleased he was to show me the mockingjay on his watch. His friendly manner has no place here. How could it, when I'm a mere tribute and he's the Head Gamemaker? So powerful, so removed, so safe...

Suddenly I know just what I'm going to do. Something that will blow anything Peeta did right out of the water. I go over to the knot-tying station and get a length of rope. I start to manipulate it, but it's hard because I've never made this actual knot myself. I've only watched Finnick's clever fingers, and they moved so fast. After about ten minutes, I've come up with a respectable noose. I drag one of the target dummies out into the middle of the room and, using some chinning bars, hang it so it dangles by the neck. Tying its hands behind its back would be a nice touch, but I think I might be running out of time. I hurry over to the camouflage station, where some of the other tributes, undoubtedly the morphlings, have made a colossal mess. But I find a partial container of bloodred berry juice that will serve my needs. The flesh-colored fabric of the dummy's skin makes a good, absorbent canvas. I carefully finger paint the words on its body, concealing them from view. Then I step away quickly to watch the reaction on the Gamemakers' faces as they read the name on the dummy.

SENECA CRANE.

The effect on the Gamemakers is immediate and satisfying. Several let out small shrieks. Others lose their grips on their wineglasses, which shatter musically against the ground. Two seem to be considering fainting. The look of shock is unanimous.

Now I have Plutarch Heavensbee's attention. He stares steadily at me as the juice from the peach he crushed in his hand runs through his fingers. Finally he clears his throat and says, "You may go now, Miss Everdeen."

I give a respectful nod and turn to go, but at the last moment I can't resist tossing the container of berry juice over my shoulder. I can hear the contents splatter against the dummy while a couple more wineglasses break. As the elevator doors close before me, I see no one has moved.

That surprised them, I think. It was rash and dangerous and no doubt I will pay for it ten times over. But for the moment, I feel something close to elation and I let myself savor it.

I want to find Haymitch immediately and tell him about my session, but no one's around. I guess they're getting ready for dinner and I decide to go take a shower myself, since my hands are stained from the juice. As I stand in the water, I begin to wonder about the wisdom of my latest trick. The question that should now always be my guide is "Will this help Peeta stay alive?" Indirectly, this might not. What happens in training is highly secretive, so there's no point in taking action against me when no one will know what my transgression was. In fact, last year I was rewarded for my brashness. This is a different sort of crime, though. If the Gamemakers are angry with me and decide to punish me in the arena, Peeta could get caught up in the attack as well. Maybe it was too impulsive. Still...I can't say I'm sorry I did it.

As we all gather for dinner, I notice Peeta's hands are faintly stained with a variety of colors, even though his hair is still damp from bathing. He must have done some form of camouflage after all. Once the soup is served, Haymitch gets right to the issue on everyone's mind. "All right, so how did your private sessions go?"

I exchange a look with Peeta. Somehow I'm not that eager to put what I did into words. In the calm of the dining room, it seems very extreme. "You first," I say to him. "It must have been really special. I had to wait for forty minutes to go in."

Peeta seems to be struck with the same reluctance I'm experiencing. "Well, I—I did the camouflage thing, like you suggested, Katniss." He hesitates. "Not exactly camouflage. I mean, I used the dyes."

"To do what?" asks Portia.

I think of how ruffled the Gamemakers were when I entered the gym for my session. The smell of cleaners. The mat pulled over that spot in the center of the gym. Was it to conceal something they were unable to wash away? "You painted something, didn't you? A picture."

"Did you see it?" Peeta asks.

"No. But they'd made a real point of covering it up," I say.

"Well, that would be standard. They can't let one tribute know what another did," says Effie, unconcerned. "What did you paint, Peeta?" She looks a little misty. "Was it a picture of Katniss?"

"Why would he paint a picture of me, Effie?" I ask, somehow annoyed.

"To show he's going to do everything he can to defend you. That's what everyone in the Capitol's expecting, anyway. Didn't he volunteer to go in with you?" Effie says, as if it's the most obvious thing in the world.

"Actually, I painted a picture of Rue," Peeta says. "How she looked after Katniss had covered her in flowers."

There's a long pause at the table while everyone absorbs this. "And what exactly were you trying to accomplish?" Haymitch asks in a very measured voice.

"I'm not sure. I just wanted to hold them accountable, if only for a moment," says Peeta. "For killing that little girl."

"This is dreadful." Effie sounds like she's about to cry. "That sort of thinking...it's forbidden, Peeta. Absolutely. You'll only bring down more trouble on yourself and Katniss."

"I have to agree with Effie on this one," says Haymitch. Portia and Cinna remain silent, but their faces are very serious. Of course, they're right. But even though it worries me, I think what he did was amazing.

"I guess this is a bad time to mention I hung a dummy and painted Seneca Crane's name on it," I say. This has the desired effect. After a moment of

disbelief, all the disapproval in the room hits me like a ton of bricks.

“You...hung...Seneca Crane?” says Cinna.

“Yes. I was showing off my new knot-tying skills, and he somehow ended up at the end of the noose,” I say.

“Oh, Katniss,” says Effie in a hushed voice. “How do you even know about that?”

“Is it a secret? President Snow didn’t act like it was. In fact, he seemed eager for me to know,” I say. Effie leaves the table with her napkin pressed to her face. “Now I’ve upset Effie. I should have lied and said I shot some arrows.”

“You’d have thought we planned it,” says Peeta, giving me just the hint of a smile.

“Didn’t you?” asks Portia. Her fingers press her eyelids closed as if she’s warding off a very bright light.

“No,” I say, looking at Peeta with a new sense of appreciation. “Neither of us even knew what we were going to do before we went in.”

“And, Haymitch?” says Peeta. “We decided we don’t want any other allies in the arena.”

“Good. Then I won’t be responsible for you killing off any of my friends with your stupidity,” he says.

“That’s just what we were thinking,” I tell him.

We finish the meal in silence, but when we rise to go into the sitting room, Cinna puts his arm around me and gives me a squeeze. “Come on and let’s go get those training scores.”

We gather around the television set and a red-eyed Effie rejoins us. The tributes’ faces come up, district by district, and their scores flash under their pictures. One through twelve. Predictably high scores for Cashmere, Gloss, Brutus, Enobaria, and Finnick. Low to medium for the rest.

“Have they ever given a zero?” I ask.

“No, but there’s a first time for everything,” Cinna answers.

And it turns out he’s right. Because when Peeta and I each pull a twelve, we make Hunger Games history. No one feels like celebrating, though.

“Why did they do that?” I ask.

“So that the others will have no choice but to target you,” says Haymitch flatly. “Go to bed. I can’t stand to look at either one of you.”

Peeta walks me down to my room in silence, but before he can say good night, I wrap my arms around him and rest my head against his chest. His hands slide up my back and his cheek leans against my hair. "I'm sorry if I made things worse," I say.

"No worse than I did. Why did you do it, anyway?" he says.

"I don't know. To show them that I'm more than just a piece in their Games?" I say.

He laughs a little, no doubt remembering the night before the Games last year. We were on the roof, neither of us able to sleep. Peeta had said something of the sort then, but I hadn't understood what he meant. Now I do.

"Me, too," he tells me. "And I'm not saying I'm not going to try. To get you home, I mean. But if I'm perfectly honest about it..."

"If you're perfectly honest about it, you think President Snow has probably given them direct orders to make sure we die in the arena anyway," I say.

"It's crossed my mind," says Peeta.

It's crossed my mind, too. Repeatedly. But while I know I'll never leave that arena alive, I'm still holding on to the hope that Peeta will. After all, he didn't pull out those berries, I did. No one has ever doubted that Peeta's defiance was motivated by love. So maybe President Snow will prefer keeping him alive, crushed and heartbroken, as a living warning to others.

"But even if that happens, everyone will know we've gone out fighting, right?" Peeta asks.

"Everyone will," I reply. And for the first time, I distance myself from the personal tragedy that has consumed me since they announced the Quell. I remember the old man they shot in District 11, and Bonnie and Twill, and the rumored uprisings. Yes, everyone in the districts will be watching me to see how I handle this death sentence, this final act of President Snow's dominance. They will be looking for some sign that their battles have not been in vain. If I can make it clear that I'm still defying the Capitol right up to the end, the Capitol will have killed me...but not my spirit. What better way to give hope to the rebels?

The beauty of this idea is that my decision to keep Peeta alive at the expense of my own life is itself an act of defiance. A refusal to play the Hunger Games by the Capitol's rules. My private agenda dovetails completely with my public one. And if I really could save Peeta...in terms of

a revolution, this would be ideal. Because I will be more valuable dead. They can turn me into some kind of martyr for the cause and paint my face on banners, and it will do more to rally people than anything I could do if I was living. But Peeta would be more valuable alive, and tragic, because he will be able to turn his pain into words that will transform people.

Peeta would lose it if he knew I was thinking any of this, so I only say, “So what should we do with our last few days?”

“I just want to spend every possible minute of the rest of my life with you,” Peeta replies.

“Come on, then,” I say, pulling him into my room.

It feels like such a luxury, sleeping with Peeta again. I didn’t realize until now how starved I’ve been for human closeness. For the feel of him beside me in the darkness. I wish I hadn’t wasted the last couple of nights shutting him out. I sink down into sleep, enveloped in his warmth, and when I open my eyes again, daylight’s streaming through the windows.

“No nightmares,” he says.

“No nightmares,” I confirm. “You?”

“None. I’d forgotten what a real night’s sleep feels like,” he says.

We lie there for a while, in no rush to begin the day. Tomorrow night will be the televised interview, so today Effie and Haymitch should be coaching us. *More high heels and sarcastic comments*, I think. But then the redheaded Avox girl comes in with a note from Effie saying that, given our recent tour, both she and Haymitch have agreed we can handle ourselves adequately in public. The coaching sessions have been canceled.

“Really?” says Peeta, taking the note from my hand and examining it. “Do you know what this means? We’ll have the whole day to ourselves.”

“It’s too bad we can’t go somewhere,” I say wistfully.

“Who says we can’t?” he asks.

The roof. We order a bunch of food, grab some blankets, and head up to the roof for a picnic. A daylong picnic in the flower garden that tinkles with wind chimes. We eat. We lie in the sun. I snap off hanging vines and use my newfound knowledge from training to practice knots and weave nets. Peeta sketches me. We make up a game with the force field that surrounds the roof—one of us throws an apple into it and the other person has to catch it.

No one bothers us. By late afternoon, I lie with my head on Peeta’s lap, making a crown of flowers while he fiddles with my hair, claiming he’s

practicing his knots. After a while, his hands go still. "What?" I ask.

"I wish I could freeze this moment, right here, right now, and live in it forever," he says.

Usually this sort of comment, the kind that hints of his undying love for me, makes me feel guilty and awful. But I feel so warm and relaxed and beyond worrying about a future I'll never have, I just let the word slip out. "Okay."

I can hear the smile in his voice. "Then you'll allow it?"

"I'll allow it," I say.

His fingers go back to my hair and I doze off, but he rouses me to see the sunset. It's a spectacular yellow and orange blaze behind the skyline of the Capitol. "I didn't think you'd want to miss it," he says.

"Thanks," I say. Because I can count on my fingers the number of sunsets I have left, and I don't want to miss any of them.

We don't go and join the others for dinner, and no one summons us.

"I'm glad. I'm tired of making everyone around me so miserable," says Peeta. "Everybody crying. Or Haymitch..." He doesn't need to go on.

We stay on the roof until bedtime and then quietly slip down to my room without encountering anyone.

The next morning, we're roused by my prep team. The sight of Peeta and me sleeping together is too much for Octavia, because she bursts into tears right away. "You remember what Cinna told us," Venia says fiercely. Octavia nods and goes out sobbing.

Peeta has to return to his room for prep, and I'm left alone with Venia and Flavius. The usual chatter has been suspended. In fact, there's little talk at all, other than to have me raise my chin or comment on a makeup technique. It's nearly lunch when I feel something dripping on my shoulder and turn to find Flavius, who's snipping away at my hair with silent tears running down his face. Venia gives him a look, and he gently sets the scissors on the table and leaves.

Then it's just Venia, whose skin is so pale her tattoos appear to be leaping off it. Almost rigid with determination, she does my hair and nails and makeup, fingers flying swiftly to compensate for her absent teammates. The whole time, she avoids my gaze. It's only when Cinna shows up to approve me and dismiss her that she takes my hands, looks me straight in the

eye, and says, “We would all like you to know what a...privilege it has been to make you look your best.” Then she hastens from the room.

My prep team. My foolish, shallow, affectionate pets, with their obsessions with feathers and parties, nearly break my heart with their good-bye. It’s certain from Venia’s last words that we all know I won’t be returning. *Does the whole world know it?* I wonder. I look at Cinna. He knows, certainly. But as he promised, there’s no danger of tears from him.

“So, what am I wearing tonight?” I ask, eyeing the garment bag that holds my dress.

“President Snow put in the dress order himself,” says Cinna. He unzips the bag, revealing one of the wedding dresses I wore for the photo shoot. Heavy white silk with a low neckline and tight waist and sleeves that fall from my wrists to the floor. And pearls. Everywhere pearls. Stitched into the dress and in ropes at my throat and forming the crown for the veil. “Even though they announced the Quarter Quell the night of the photo shoot, people still voted for their favorite dress, and this was the winner. The president says you’re to wear it tonight. Our objections were ignored.”

I rub a bit of the silk between my fingers, trying to figure out President Snow’s reasoning. I suppose since I was the greatest offender, my pain and loss and humiliation should be in the brightest spotlight. This, he thinks, will make that clear. It’s so barbaric, the president turning my bridal gown into my shroud, that the blow strikes home, leaving me with a dull ache inside. “Well, it’d be a shame to waste such a pretty dress” is all I say.

Cinna helps me carefully into the gown. As it settles on my shoulders, they can’t help giving a shrug of complaint. “Was it always this heavy?” I ask. I remember several of the dresses being dense, but this one feels like it weighs a ton.

“I had to make some slight alterations because of the lighting,” says Cinna. I nod, but I can’t see what that has to do with anything. He decks me out in the shoes and the pearl jewelry and the veil. Touches up my makeup. Has me walk.

“You’re ravishing,” he says. “Now, Katniss, because this bodice is so fitted, I don’t want you raising your arms above your head. Well, not until you twirl, anyway.”

“Will I be twirling again?” I ask, thinking of my dress last year.

“I’m sure Caesar will ask you. And if he doesn’t, you suggest it yourself. Only not right away. Save it for your big finale,” Cinna instructs me.

“You give me a signal so I know when,” I say.

“All right. Any plans for your interview? I know Haymitch left you two to your own devices,” he says.

“No, this year I’m just winging it. The funny thing is, I’m not nervous at all.” And I’m not. However much President Snow may hate me, this Capitol audience is mine.

We meet up with Effie, Haymitch, Portia, and Peeta at the elevator. Peeta’s in an elegant tuxedo and white gloves. The sort of thing grooms wear to get married in, here in the Capitol.

Back home everything is so much simpler. A woman usually rents a white dress that’s been worn hundreds of times. The man wears something clean that’s not mining clothes. They fill out some forms at the Justice Building and are assigned a house. Family and friends gather for a meal or bit of cake, if it can be afforded. Even if it can’t, there’s always a traditional song we sing as the new couple crosses the threshold of their home. And we have our own little ceremony, where they make their first fire, toast a bit of bread, and share it. Maybe it’s old-fashioned, but no one really feels married in District 12 until after the toasting.

The other tributes have already gathered offstage and are talking softly, but when Peeta and I arrive, they fall silent. I realize everyone’s staring daggers at my wedding dress. Are they jealous of its beauty? The power it might have to manipulate the crowd?

Finally Finnick says, “I can’t believe Cinna put you in that thing.”

“He didn’t have any choice. President Snow made him,” I say, somewhat defensively. I won’t let anyone criticize Cinna.

Cashmere tosses her flowing blond curls back and spits out, “Well, you look ridiculous!” She grabs her brother’s hand and pulls him into place to lead our procession onto the stage. The other tributes begin to line up as well. I’m confused because, while they all are angry, some are giving us sympathetic pats on the shoulder, and Johanna Mason actually stops to straighten my pearl necklace.

“Make him pay for it, okay?” she says.

I nod, but I don’t know what she means. Not until we’re all sitting out onstage and Caesar Flickerman, hair and face highlighted in lavender this

year, has done his opening spiel and the tributes begin their interviews. This is the first time I realize the depth of betrayal felt among the victors and the rage that accompanies it. But they are so smart, so wonderfully smart about how they play it, because it all comes back to reflect on the government and President Snow in particular. Not everyone. There are the old throwbacks, like Brutus and Enobaria, who are just here for another Games, and those too baffled or drugged or lost to join in on the attack. But there are enough victors who still have the wits and the nerve to come out fighting.

Cashmere starts the ball rolling with a speech about how she just can't stop crying when she thinks of how much the people in the Capitol must be suffering because they will lose us. Gloss recalls the kindness shown here to him and his sister. Beetee questions the legality of the Quell in his nervous, twitchy way, wondering if it's been fully examined by experts of late. Finnick recites a poem he wrote to his one true love in the Capitol, and about a hundred people faint because they're sure he means them. By the time Johanna Mason gets up, she's asking if something can't be done about the situation. Surely the creators of the Quarter Quell never anticipated such love forming between the victors and the Capitol. No one could be so cruel as to sever such a deep bond. Seeder quietly ruminates about how, back in District 11, everyone assumes President Snow is all-powerful. So if he's all-powerful, why doesn't he change the Quell? And Chaff, who comes right on her heels, insists the president could change the Quell if he wanted to, but he must not think it matters much to anyone.

By the time I'm introduced, the audience is an absolute wreck. People have been weeping and collapsing and even calling for change. The sight of me in my white silk bridal gown practically causes a riot. No more me, no more star-crossed lovers living happily ever after, no more wedding. I can see even Caesar's professionalism showing some cracks as he tries to quiet them so I can speak, but my three minutes are ticking quickly away.

Finally there's a lull and he gets out, "So, Katniss, obviously this is a very emotional night for everyone. Is there anything you'd like to say?"

My voice trembles as I speak. "Only that I'm so sorry you won't get to be at my wedding...but I'm glad you at least get to see me in my dress. Isn't it just...the most beautiful thing?" I don't have to look at Cinna for a signal. I know this is the right time. I begin to twirl slowly, raising the sleeves of my heavy gown above my head.

When I hear the screams of the crowd, I think it's because I must look stunning. Then I notice something is rising up around me. Smoke. From fire. Not the flickery stuff I wore last year in the chariot, but something much more real that devours my dress. I begin to panic as the smoke thickens. Charred bits of black silk swirl into the air, and pearls clatter to the stage. Somehow I'm afraid to stop because my flesh doesn't seem to be burning and I know Cinna must be behind whatever is happening. So I keep spinning and spinning. For a split second I'm gasping, completely engulfed in the strange flames. Then all at once, the fire is gone. I slowly come to a stop, wondering if I'm naked and why Cinna has arranged to burn away my wedding dress.

But I'm not naked. I'm in a dress of the exact design of my wedding dress, only it's the color of coal and made of tiny feathers. Wonderingly, I lift my long, flowing sleeves into the air, and that's when I see myself on the television screen. Clothed in black except for the white patches on my sleeves. Or should I say my wings.

Because Cinna has turned me into a mockingjay.

18

I'm still smoldering a little, so it's with a tentative hand that Caesar reaches out to touch my headpiece. The white has burned away, leaving a smooth, fitted veil of black that drapes into the neckline of the dress in the back. "Feathers," says Caesar. "You're like a bird."

"A mockingjay, I think," I say, giving my wings a small flap. "It's the bird on the pin I wear as a token."

A shadow of recognition flickers across Caesar's face, and I can tell he knows that the mockingjay isn't just my token. That it's come to symbolize so much more. That what will be seen as a flashy costume change in the Capitol is resonating in an entirely different way throughout the districts. But he makes the best of it.

"Well, hats off to your stylist. I don't think anyone can argue that that's not the most spectacular thing we've ever seen in an interview. Cinna, I think you better take a bow!" Caesar gestures for Cinna to rise. He does, and makes a small, gracious bow. And suddenly I am so afraid for him. What has he done? Something terribly dangerous. An act of rebellion in itself. And he's done it for me. I remember his words...

"Don't worry. I always channel my emotions into my work. That way I don't hurt anyone but myself."

...and I'm afraid he has hurt himself beyond repair. The significance of my fiery transformation will not be lost on President Snow.

The audience, who's been stunned into silence, breaks into wild applause. I can barely hear the buzzer that indicates that my three minutes are up. Caesar thanks me and I go back to my seat, my dress now feeling lighter than air.

As I pass Peeta, who's headed for his interview, he doesn't meet my eyes. I take my seat carefully, but aside from the puffs of smoke here and there, I seem unharmed, so I turn my attention to him.

Caesar and Peeta have been a natural team since they first appeared together a year ago. Their easy give-and-take, comic timing, and ability to segue into heart-wrenching moments, like Peeta's confession of love for me,

have made them a huge success with the audience. They effortlessly open with a few jokes about fires and feathers and overcooking poultry. But anyone can see that Peeta is preoccupied, so Caesar directs the conversation right into the subject that's on everyone's minds.

"So, Peeta, what was it like when, after all you've been through, you found out about the Quell?" asks Caesar.

"I was in shock. I mean, one minute I'm seeing Katniss looking so beautiful in all these wedding gowns, and the next..." Peeta trails off.

"You realized there was never going to be a wedding?" asks Caesar gently.

Peeta pauses for a long moment, as if deciding something. He looks out at the spellbound audience, then at the floor, then finally up at Caesar. "Caesar, do you think all our friends here can keep a secret?"

An uncomfortable laugh emanates from the audience. What can he mean? Keep a secret from who? Our whole world is watching.

"I feel quite certain of it," says Caesar.

"We're already married," says Peeta quietly. The crowd reacts in astonishment, and I have to bury my face in the folds of my skirt so they can't see my confusion. Where on earth is he going with this?

"But...how can that be?" asks Caesar.

"Oh, it's not an official marriage. We didn't go to the Justice Building or anything. But we have this marriage ritual in District Twelve. I don't know what it's like in the other districts. But there's this thing we do," says Peeta, and he briefly describes the toasting.

"Were your families there?" asks Caesar.

"No, we didn't tell anyone. Not even Haymitch. And Katniss's mother would never have approved. But you see, we knew if we were married in the Capitol, there wouldn't be a toasting. And neither of us really wanted to wait any longer. So one day, we just did it," Peeta says. "And to us, we're more married than any piece of paper or big party could make us."

"So this was before the Quell?" says Caesar.

"Of course before the Quell. I'm sure we'd never have done it after we knew," says Peeta, starting to get upset. "But who could've seen it coming? No one. We went through the Games, we were victors, everyone seemed so thrilled to see us together, and then out of nowhere—I mean, how could we anticipate a thing like that?"

“You couldn’t, Peeta.” Caesar puts an arm around his shoulders. “As you say, no one could’ve. But I have to confess, I’m glad you two had at least a few months of happiness together.”

Enormous applause. As if encouraged, I look up from my feathers and let the audience see my tragic smile of thanks. The residual smoke from the feathers has made my eyes teary, which adds a very nice touch.

“I’m not glad,” says Peeta. “I wish we had waited until the whole thing was done officially.”

This takes even Caesar aback. “Surely even a brief time is better than no time?”

“Maybe I’d think that, too, Caesar,” says Peeta bitterly, “if it weren’t for the baby.”

There. He’s done it again. Dropped a bomb that wipes out the efforts of every tribute who came before him. Well, maybe not. Maybe this year he has only lit the fuse on a bomb that the victors themselves have been building. Hoping someone would be able to detonate it. Perhaps thinking it would be me in my bridal gown. Not knowing how much I rely on Cinna’s talents, whereas Peeta needs nothing more than his wits.

As the bomb explodes, it sends accusations of injustice and barbarism and cruelty flying out in every direction. Even the most Capitol-loving, Games-hungry, bloodthirsty person out there can’t ignore, at least for a moment, how horrific the whole thing is.

I am pregnant.

The audience can’t absorb the news right away. It has to strike them and sink in and be confirmed by other voices before they begin to sound like a herd of wounded animals, moaning, shrieking, calling for help. And me? I know my face is projected in a tight close-up on the screen, but I don’t make any effort to hide it. Because for a moment, even I am working through what Peeta has said. Isn’t it the thing I dreaded most about the wedding, about the future—the loss of my children to the Games? And it could be true now, couldn’t it? If I hadn’t spent my life building up layers of defenses until I recoil at even the suggestion of marriage or a family?

Caesar can’t rein in the crowd again, not even when the buzzer sounds. Peeta nods his good-bye and comes back to his seat without any more conversation. I can see Caesar’s lips moving, but the place is in total chaos and I can’t hear a word. Only the blast of the anthem, cranked up so loud I

can feel it vibrating through my bones, lets us know where we stand in the program. I automatically rise and, as I do, I sense Peeta reaching out for me. Tears run down his face as I take his hand. How real are the tears? Is this an acknowledgment that he has been stalked by the same fears that I have? That every victor has? Every parent in every district in Panem?

I look back to the crowd, but the faces of Rue's mother and father swim before my eyes. Their sorrow. Their loss. I turn spontaneously to Chaff and offer my hand. I feel my fingers close around the stump that now completes his arm and hold fast.

And then it happens. Up and down the row, the victors begin to join hands. Some right away, like the morphlings, or Wiress and Beetee. Others unsure but caught up in the demands of those around them, like Brutus and Enobaria. By the time the anthem plays its final strains, all twenty-four of us stand in one unbroken line in what must be the first public show of unity among the districts since the Dark Days. You can see the realization of this as the screens begin to pop into blackness. It's too late, though. In the confusion they didn't cut us off in time. Everyone has seen.

There's disorder on the stage now, too, as the lights go out and we're left to stumble back into the Training Center. I've lost hold of Chaff, but Peeta guides me into an elevator. Finnick and Johanna try to join us, but a harried Peacekeeper blocks their way and we shoot upward alone.

The moment we step off the elevator, Peeta grips my shoulders. "There isn't much time, so tell me. Is there anything I have to apologize for?"

"Nothing," I say. It was a big leap to take without my okay, but I'm just as glad I didn't know, didn't have time to second-guess him, to let any guilt over Gale detract from how I really feel about what Peeta did. Which is empowered.

Somewhere, very far off, is a place called District 12, where my mother and sister and friends will have to deal with the fallout from this night. Just a brief hovercraft ride away is an arena where, tomorrow, Peeta and I and the other tributes will face our own form of punishment. But even if all of us meet terrible ends, something happened on that stage tonight that can't be undone. We victors staged our own uprising, and maybe, just maybe, the Capitol won't be able to contain this one.

We wait for the others to return, but when the elevator opens, only Haymitch appears. "It's madness out there. Everyone's been sent home and

they've canceled the recap of the interviews on television."

Peeta and I hurry to the window and try to make sense of the commotion far below us on the streets. "What are they saying?" Peeta asks. "Are they asking the president to stop the Games?"

"I don't think they know themselves what to ask. The whole situation is unprecedented. Even the idea of opposing the Capitol's agenda is a source of confusion for the people here," says Haymitch. "But there's no way Snow would cancel the Games. You know that, right?"

I do. Of course, he could never back down now. The only option left to him is to strike back, and strike back hard. "The others went home?" I ask.

"They were ordered to. I don't know how much luck they're having getting through the mob," says Haymitch.

"Then we'll never see Effie again," says Peeta. We didn't see her on the morning of the Games last year. "You'll give her our thanks."

"More than that. Really make it special. It's Effie, after all," I say. "Tell her how appreciative we are and how she was the best escort ever and tell her...tell her we send our love."

For a while we just stand there in silence, delaying the inevitable. Then Haymitch says it. "I guess this is where we say our good-byes as well."

"Any last words of advice?" Peeta asks.

"Stay alive," Haymitch says gruffly. That's almost an old joke with us now. He gives us each a quick embrace, and I can tell it's all he can stand. "Go to bed. You need your rest."

I know I should say a whole bunch of things to Haymitch, but I can't think of anything he doesn't already know, really, and my throat is so tight I doubt anything would come out, anyway. So, once again, I let Peeta speak for us both.

"You take care, Haymitch," he says.

We cross the room, but in the doorway, Haymitch's voice stops us. "Katniss, when you're in the arena," he begins. Then he pauses. He's scowling in a way that makes me sure I've already disappointed him.

"What?" I ask defensively.

"You just remember who the enemy is," Haymitch tells me. "That's all. Now go on. Get out of here."

We walk down the hallway. Peeta wants to stop by his room to shower off the makeup and meet me in a few minutes, but I won't let him. I'm certain

that if a door shuts between us, it will lock and I'll have to spend the night without him. Besides, I have a shower in my room. I refuse to let go of his hand.

Do we sleep? I don't know. We spend the night holding each other, in some halfway land between dreams and waking. Not talking. Both afraid to disturb the other in the hope that we'll be able to store up a few precious minutes of rest.

Cinna and Portia arrive with the dawn, and I know Peeta will have to go. Tributes enter the arena alone. He gives me a light kiss. "See you soon," he says.

"See you soon," I answer.

Cinna, who will help dress me for the Games, accompanies me to the roof. I'm about to mount the ladder to the hovercraft when I remember. "I didn't say good-bye to Portia."

"I'll tell her," says Cinna.

The electric current freezes me in place on the ladder until the doctor injects the tracker into my left forearm. Now they will always be able to locate me in the arena. The hovercraft takes off, and I look out the windows until they black out. Cinna keeps pressing me to eat and, when that fails, to drink. I manage to keep sipping water, thinking of the days of dehydration that almost killed me last year. Thinking of how I will need my strength to keep Peeta alive.

When we reach the Launch Room at the arena, I shower. Cinna braids my hair down my back and helps me dress over simple undergarments. This year's tribute outfit is a fitted blue jumpsuit, made of very sheer material, that zippers up the front. A six-inch-wide padded belt covered in shiny purple plastic. A pair of nylon shoes with rubber soles.

"What do you think?" I ask, holding the fabric out for Cinna to examine.

He frowns as he rubs the thin stuff between his fingers. "I don't know. It will offer little in the way of protection from cold or water."

"Sun?" I ask, picturing a burning sun over a barren desert.

"Possibly. If it's been treated," he says. "Oh, I almost forgot this." He takes my gold mockingjay pin from his pocket and fixes it to the jumpsuit.

"My dress was fantastic last night," I say. Fantastic and reckless. But Cinna must know that.

"I thought you might like it," he says with a tight smile.

We sit, as we did last year, holding hands until the voice tells me to prepare for the launch. He walks me over to the circular metal plate and zips up the neck of my jumpsuit securely. “Remember, girl on fire,” he says, “I’m still betting on you.” He kisses my forehead and steps back as the glass cylinder slides down around me.

“Thank you,” I say, although he probably can’t hear me. I lift my chin, holding my head high the way he always tells me to, and wait for the plate to rise. But it doesn’t. And it still doesn’t.

I look at Cinna, raising my eyebrows for an explanation. He just gives his head a slight shake, as perplexed as I am. Why are they delaying this?

Suddenly the door behind him bursts open and three Peacekeepers spring into the room. Two pin Cinna’s arms behind him and cuff him while the third hits him in the temple with such force he’s knocked to his knees. But they keep hitting him with metal-studded gloves, opening gashes on his face and body. I’m screaming my head off, banging on the unyielding glass, trying to reach him. The Peacekeepers ignore me completely as they drag Cinna’s limp body from the room. All that’s left are the smears of blood on the floor.

Sickened and terrified, I feel the plate begin to rise. I’m still leaning against the glass when the breeze catches my hair and I force myself to straighten up. Just in time, too, because the glass is retreating and I’m standing free in the arena. Something seems to be wrong with my vision. The ground is too bright and shiny and keeps undulating. I squint down at my feet and see that my metal plate is surrounded by blue waves that lap up over my boots. Slowly I raise my eyes and take in the water spreading out in every direction.

I can only form one clear thought.

This is no place for a girl on fire.

PART III
“THE ENEMY”

“Ladies and gentlemen, let the Seventy-fifth Hunger Games begin!” The voice of Claudius Templesmith, the Hunger Games announcer, hammers my ears. I have less than a minute to get my bearings. Then the gong will sound and the tributes will be free to move off their metal plates. But move where?

I can’t think straight. The image of Cinna, beaten and bloody, consumes me. Where is he now? What are they doing to him? Torturing him? Killing him? Turning him into an Avox? Obviously his assault was staged to unhinge me, the same way Darius’s presence in my quarters was. And it *has* unhinged me. All I want to do is collapse on my metal plate. But I can hardly do that after what I just witnessed. I must be strong. I owe it to Cinna, who risked everything by undermining President Snow and turning my bridal silk into mockingjay plumage. And I owe it to the rebels who, emboldened by Cinna’s example, might be fighting to bring down the Capitol at this moment. My refusal to play the Games on the Capitol’s terms is to be my last act of rebellion. So I grit my teeth and will myself to be a player.

Where are you? I can still make no sense of my surroundings. *Where are you?!* I demand an answer from myself and slowly the world comes into focus. Blue water. Pink sky. White-hot sun beating down. All right, there’s the Cornucopia, the shining gold metal horn, about forty yards away. At first, it appears to be sitting on a circular island. But on closer examination, I see the thin strips of land radiating from the circle like the spokes on a wheel. I think there are ten to twelve, and they seem equidistant from one another. Between the spokes, all is water. Water and a pair of tributes.

That’s it, then. There are twelve spokes, each with two tributes balanced on metal plates between them. The other tribute in my watery wedge is old Woof from District 8. He’s about as far to my right as the land strip on my left. Beyond the water, wherever you look, a narrow beach and then dense greenery. I scan the circle of tributes, looking for Peeta, but he must be blocked from my view by the Cornucopia.

I catch a handful of water as it washes in and smell it. Then I touch the tip of my wet finger to my tongue. As I suspected, it’s saltwater. Just like the

waves Peeta and I encountered on our brief tour of the beach in District 4. But at least it seems clean.

There are no boats, no ropes, not even a bit of driftwood to cling to. No, there's only one way to get to the Cornucopia. When the gong sounds, I don't even hesitate before I dive to my left. It's a longer distance than I'm used to, and navigating the waves takes a little more skill than swimming across my quiet lake at home, but my body seems oddly light and I cut through the water effortlessly. Maybe it's the salt. I pull myself, dripping, onto the land strip and sprint down the sandy stretch for the Cornucopia. I can see no one else converging from my side, although the gold horn blocks a good portion of my view. I don't let the thought of adversaries slow me down, though. I'm thinking like a Career now, and the first thing I want is to get my hands on a weapon.

Last year, the supplies were spread out quite a distance around the Cornucopia, with the most valuable closest to the horn. But this year, the booty seems to be piled at the twenty-foot-high mouth. My eyes instantly home in on a golden bow just in arm's reach and I yank it free.

There's someone behind me. I'm alerted by, I don't know, a soft shift of sand or maybe just a change in the air currents. I pull an arrow from the sheath that's still wedged in the pile and arm my bow as I turn.

Finnick, glistening and gorgeous, stands a few yards away, with a trident poised to attack. A net dangles from his other hand. He's smiling a little, but the muscles in his upper body are rigid in anticipation. "You can swim, too," he says. "Where did you learn that in District Twelve?"

"We have a big bathtub," I answer.

"You must," he says. "You like the arena?"

"Not particularly. But you should. They must have built it especially for you," I say with an edge of bitterness. It seems like it, anyway, with all the water, when I bet only a handful of the victors can swim. And there was no pool in the Training Center, no chance to learn. Either you came in here a swimmer or you'd better be a really fast learner. Even participation in the initial bloodbath depends on being able to cover twenty yards of water. That gives District 4 an enormous advantage.

For a moment we're frozen, sizing each other up, our weapons, our skill. Then Finnick suddenly grins. "Lucky thing we're allies. Right?"

Sensing a trap, I'm about to let my arrow fly, hoping it finds his heart before the trident impales me, when he shifts his hand and something on his wrist catches the sunlight. A solid-gold bangle patterned with flames. The same one I remember on Haymitch's wrist the morning I began training. I briefly consider that Finnick could have stolen it to trick me, but somehow I know this isn't the case. Haymitch gave it to him. As a signal to me. An order, really. To trust Finnick.

I can hear other footsteps approaching. I must decide at once. "Right!" I snap, because even though Haymitch is my mentor and trying to keep me alive, this angers me. Why didn't he tell me he'd made this arrangement before? Probably because Peeta and I had ruled out allies. Now Haymitch has chosen one on his own.

"Duck!" Finnick commands in such a powerful voice, so different from his usual seductive purr, that I do. His trident goes whizzing over my head and there's a sickening sound of impact as it finds its target. The man from District 5, the drunk who threw up on the sword-fighting floor, sinks to his knees as Finnick frees the trident from his chest. "Don't trust One and Two," Finnick says.

There's no time to question this. I work the sheath of arrows free. "Each take one side?" I say. He nods, and I dart around the pile. About four spokes apart, Enobaria and Gloss are just reaching land. Either they're slow swimmers or they thought the water might be laced with other dangers, which it might well be. Sometimes it's not good to consider too many scenarios. But now that they're on the sand, they'll be here in a matter of seconds.

"Anything useful?" I hear Finnick shout.

I quickly scan the pile on my side and find maces, swords, bows and arrows, tridents, knives, spears, axes, metallic objects I have no name for... and nothing else.

"Weapons!" I call back. "Nothing but weapons!"

"Same here," he confirms. "Grab what you want and let's go!"

I shoot an arrow at Enobaria, who's gotten in too close for comfort, but she's expecting it and dives back into the water before it can find its mark. Gloss isn't quite as swift, and I sink an arrow into his calf as he plunges into the waves. I sling an extra bow and a second sheath of arrows over my body, slide two long knives and an awl into my belt, and meet up with Finnick at the front of the pile.

“Do something about that, would you?” he says. I see Brutus barreling toward us. His belt is undone and he has it stretched between his hands as a kind of shield. I shoot at him and he manages to block the arrow with his belt before it can skewer his liver. Where it punctures the belt, a purple liquid spews forth, coating his face. As I reload, Brutus flattens on the ground, rolls the few feet to the water, and submerges. There’s a clang of metal falling behind me. “Let’s clear out,” I say to Finnick.

This last altercation has given Enobaria and Gloss time to reach the Cornucopia. Brutus is within shooting distance and somewhere, certainly, Cashmere is nearby, too. These four classic Careers will no doubt have a prior alliance. If I had only my own safety to consider, I might be willing to take them on with Finnick by my side. But it’s Peeta I’m thinking about. I spot him now, still stranded on his metal plate. I take off and Finnick follows without question, as if knowing this will be my next move. When I’m as close as I can get, I start removing knives from my belt, preparing to swim out to reach him and somehow bring him in.

Finnick drops a hand on my shoulder. “I’ll get him.”

Suspicion flickers up inside me. Could this all just be a ruse? For Finnick to win my trust and then swim out and drown Peeta? “I can,” I insist.

But Finnick has dropped all his weapons to the ground. “Better not exert yourself. Not in your condition,” he says, and reaches down and pats my abdomen.

Oh, right. I’m supposed to be pregnant, I think. While I’m trying to think what that means and how I should act—maybe throw up or something—Finnick has positioned himself at the edge of the water.

“Cover me,” he says. He disappears with a flawless dive.

I raise my bow, warding off any attackers from the Cornucopia, but no one seems interested in pursuing us. Sure enough, Gloss, Cashmere, Enobaria, and Brutus have gathered, their pack formed already, picking over the weapons. A quick survey of the rest of the arena shows that most of the tributes are still trapped on their plates. Wait, no, there’s someone standing on the spoke to my left, the one opposite Peeta. It’s Mags. But she neither heads for the Cornucopia nor tries to flee. Instead she splashes into the water and starts paddling toward me, her gray head bobbing above the waves. Well, she’s old, but I guess after eighty years of living in District 4 she can keep afloat.

Finnick has reached Peeta now and is towing him back, one arm across his chest while the other propels them through the water with easy strokes. Peeta rides along without resisting. I don't know what Finnick said or did that convinced him to put his life in his hands—showed him the bangle, maybe. Or just the sight of me waiting might have been enough. When they reach the sand, I help haul Peeta up onto dry land.

"Hello, again," he says, and gives me a kiss. "We've got allies."

"Yes. Just as Haymitch intended," I answer.

"Remind me, did we make deals with anyone else?" Peeta asks.

"Only Mags, I think," I say. I nod toward the old woman doggedly making her way toward us.

"Well, I can't leave Mags behind," says Finnick. "She's one of the few people who actually likes me."

"I've got no problem with Mags," I say. "Especially now that I see the arena. Her fishhooks are probably our best chance of getting a meal."

"Katniss wanted her on the first day," says Peeta.

"Katniss has remarkably good judgment," says Finnick. With one hand he reaches into the water and scoops out Mags like she weighs no more than a puppy. She makes some remark that I think includes the word "bob," then pats her belt.

"Look, she's right. Someone figured it out." Finnick points to Beetee. He's flailing around in the waves but managing to keep his head above water.

"What?" I say.

"The belts. They're flotation devices," says Finnick. "I mean, you have to propel yourself, but they'll keep you from drowning."

I almost ask Finnick to wait, to get Beetee and Wiress and take them with us, but Beetee's three spokes over and I can't even see Wiress. For all I know, Finnick would kill them as quickly as he did the tribute from 5, so instead I suggest we move on. I hand Peeta a bow, a sheath of arrows, and a knife, keeping the rest for myself. But Mags tugs on my sleeve and babbles on until I've given the awl to her. Pleased, she clamps the handle between her gums and reaches her arms up to Finnick. He tosses his net over his shoulder, hoists Mags on top of it, grips his tridents in his free hand, and we run away from the Cornucopia.

Where the sand ends, woods begin to rise sharply. No, not really woods. At least not the kind I know. *Jungle*. The foreign, almost obsolete word

comes to mind. Something I heard from another Hunger Games or learned from my father. Most of the trees are unfamiliar, with smooth trunks and few branches. The earth is very black and spongy underfoot, often obscured by tangles of vines with colorful blossoms. While the sun's hot and bright, the air's warm and heavy with moisture, and I get the feeling I will never really be dry here. The thin blue fabric of my jumpsuit lets the seawater evaporate easily, but it's already begun to cling to me with sweat.

Peeta takes the lead, cutting through the patches of dense vegetation with his long knife. I make Finnick go second because even though he's the most powerful, he's got his hands full with Mags. Besides, while he's a whiz with that trident, it's a weapon less suited to the jungle than my arrows. It doesn't take long, between the steep incline and the heat, to become short of breath. Peeta and I have been training intensely, though, and Finnick's such an amazing physical specimen that even with Mags over his shoulder, we climb rapidly for about a mile before he requests a rest. And then I think it's more for Mags's sake than his own.

The foliage has hidden the wheel from sight, so I scale a tree with rubbery limbs to get a better view. And then wish that I hadn't.

Around the Cornucopia, the ground appears to be bleeding; the water has purple stains. Bodies lie on the ground and float in the sea, but at this distance, with everyone dressed exactly the same, I can't tell who lives or dies. All I can tell is that some of the tiny blue figures still battle. Well, what did I think? That the victors' chain of locked hands last night would result in some sort of universal truce in the arena? No, I never believed that. But I guess I had hoped people might show some...what? Restraint? Reluctance, at least. Before they jumped right into massacre mode. *And you all knew each other*, I think. *You acted like friends*.

I have only one real friend in here. And he isn't from District 4.

I let the slight, soupy breeze cool my cheeks while I come to a decision. Despite the bangle, I should just get it over with and shoot Finnick. There's really no future in this alliance. And he's too dangerous to let go. Now, when we have this tentative trust, may be my only chance to kill him. I could easily shoot him in the back as we walk. It's despicable, of course, but will it be any more despicable if I wait? Know him better? Owe him more? No, this is the time. I take one last look at the battling figures, the bloody ground, to harden my resolve, and then slide to the ground.

But when I land, I find Finnick's kept pace with my thoughts. As if he knows what I have seen and how it will have affected me. He has one of his tridents raised in a casually defensive position.

"What's going on down there, Katniss? Have they all joined hands? Taken a vow of nonviolence? Tossed the weapons in the sea in defiance of the Capitol?" Finnick asks.

"No," I say.

"No," Finnick repeats. "Because whatever happened in the past is in the past. And no one in this arena was a victor by chance." He eyes Peeta for a moment. "Except maybe Peeta."

Finnick knows then what Haymitch and I know. About Peeta. Being truly, deep-down better than the rest of us. Finnick took out that tribute from 5 without blinking an eye. And how long did I take to turn deadly? I shot to kill when I targeted Enobaria and Gloss and Brutus. Peeta would at least have attempted negotiations first. Seen if some wider alliance was possible. But to what end? Finnick's right. I'm right. The people in this arena weren't crowned for their compassion.

I hold his gaze, weighing his speed against my own. The time it will take to send an arrow through his brain versus the time his trident will reach my body. I can see him, waiting for me to make the first move. Calculating if he should block first or go directly for an attack. I can feel we've both about worked it out when Peeta steps deliberately between us.

"So how many are dead?" he asks.

Move, you idiot, I think. But he remains planted firmly between us.

"Hard to say," I answer. "At least six, I think. And they're still fighting."

"Let's keep moving. We need water," he says.

So far there's been no sign of a freshwater stream or pond, and the saltwater's undrinkable. Again, I think of the last Games, where I nearly died of dehydration.

"Better find some soon," says Finnick. "We need to be undercover when the others come hunting us tonight."

We. Us. Hunting. All right, maybe killing Finnick would be a little premature. He's been helpful so far. He does have Haymitch's stamp of approval. And who knows what the night will hold? If worse comes to worst, I can always kill him in his sleep. So I let the moment pass. And so does Finnick.

The absence of water intensifies my thirst. I keep a sharp eye out as we continue our trek upward, but with no luck. After about another mile, I can see an end to the tree line and assume we're reaching the crest of the hill. "Maybe we'll have better luck on the other side. Find a spring or something."

But there is no other side. I know this before anyone else, even though I am farthest from the top. My eyes catch on a funny, rippling square hanging like a warped pane of glass in the air. At first I think it's the glare from the sun or the heat shimmering up off the ground. But it's fixed in space, not shifting when I move. And that's when I connect the square with Wiress and Beetee in the Training Center and realize what lies before us. My warning cry is just reaching my lips when Peeta's knife swings out to slash away some vines.

There's a sharp zapping sound. For an instant, the trees are gone and I see open space over a short stretch of bare earth. Then Peeta's flung back from the force field, bringing Finnick and Mags to the ground.

I rush over to where he lies, motionless in a web of vines. "Peeta?" There's a faint smell of singed hair. I call his name again, giving him a little shake, but he's unresponsive. My fingers fumble across his lips, where there's no warm breath although moments ago he was panting. I press my ear against his chest, to the spot where I always rest my head, where I know I will hear the strong and steady beat of his heart.

Instead, I find silence.

“Peeta!” I scream. I shake him harder, even resort to slapping his face, but it’s no use. His heart has failed. I am slapping emptiness. “Peeta!”

Finnick props Mags against a tree and pushes me out of the way. “Let me.” His fingers touch points at Peeta’s neck, run over the bones in his ribs and spine. Then he pinches Peeta’s nostrils shut.

“No!” I yell, hurling myself at Finnick, for surely he intends to make certain that Peeta’s dead, to keep any hope of life from returning to him. Finnick’s hand comes up and hits me so hard, so squarely in the chest that I go flying back into a nearby tree trunk. I’m stunned for a moment, by the pain, by trying to regain my wind, as I see Finnick close off Peeta’s nose again. From where I sit, I pull an arrow, whip the notch into place, and am about to let it fly when I’m stopped by the sight of Finnick kissing Peeta. And it’s so bizarre, even for Finnick, that I stay my hand. No, he’s not kissing him. He’s got Peeta’s nose blocked off but his mouth tilted open, and he’s blowing air into his lungs. I can see this, I can actually see Peeta’s chest rising and falling. Then Finnick unzips the top of Peeta’s jumpsuit and begins to pump the spot over his heart with the heels of his hands. Now that I’ve gotten through my shock, I understand what he’s trying to do.

Once in a blue moon, I’ve seen my mother try something similar, but not often. If your heart fails in District 12, it’s unlikely your family could get you to my mother in time, anyway. So her usual patients are burned or wounded or ill. Or starving, of course.

But Finnick’s world is different. Whatever he’s doing, he’s done it before. There’s a very set rhythm and method. And I find the arrow tip sinking to the ground as I lean in to watch, desperately, for some sign of success. Agonizing minutes drag past as my hopes diminish. Around the time that I’m deciding it’s too late, that Peeta’s dead, moved on, unreachable forever, he gives a small cough and Finnick sits back.

I leave my weapons in the dirt as I fling myself at him. “Peeta?” I say softly. I brush the damp blond strands of hair back from his forehead, find the pulse drumming against my fingers at his neck.

His lashes flutter open and his eyes meet mine. "Careful," he says weakly. "There's a force field up ahead."

I laugh, but there are tears running down my cheeks.

"Must be a lot stronger than the one on the Training Center roof," he says. "I'm all right, though. Just a little shaken."

"You were dead! Your heart stopped!" I burst out, before really considering if this is a good idea. I clap my hand over my mouth because I'm starting to make those awful choking sounds that happen when I sob.

"Well, it seems to be working now," he says. "It's all right, Katniss." I nod my head but the sounds aren't stopping. "Katniss?" Now Peeta's worried about me, which adds to the insanity of it all.

"It's okay. It's just her hormones," says Finnick. "From the baby." I look up and see him, sitting back on his knees but still panting a bit from the climb and the heat and the effort of bringing Peeta back from the dead.

"No. It's not—" I get out, but I'm cut off by an even more hysterical round of sobbing that seems only to confirm what Finnick said about the baby. He meets my eyes and I glare at him through my tears. It's stupid, I know, that his efforts make me so vexed. All I wanted was to keep Peeta alive, and I couldn't and Finnick could, and I should be nothing but grateful. And I am. But I am also furious because it means that I will never stop owing Finnick Odair. Ever. So how can I kill him in his sleep?

I expect to see a smug or sarcastic expression on his face, but his look is strangely quizzical. He glances between Peeta and me, as if trying to figure something out, then gives his head a slight shake as if to clear it. "How are you?" he asks Peeta. "Do you think you can move on?"

"No, he has to rest," I say. My nose is running like crazy and I don't even have a shred of fabric to use as a handkerchief. Mags rips off a handful of hanging moss from a tree limb and gives it to me. I'm too much of a mess to even question it. I blow my nose loudly and mop the tears off my face. It's nice, the moss. Absorbent and surprisingly soft.

I notice a gleam of gold on Peeta's chest. I reach out and retrieve the disk that hangs from a chain around his neck. My mockingjay has been engraved on it. "Is this your token?" I ask.

"Yes. Do you mind that I used your mockingjay? I wanted us to match," he says.

“No, of course I don’t mind.” I force a smile. Peeta showing up in the arena wearing a mockingjay is both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, it should give a boost to the rebels in the district. On the other, it’s hard to imagine President Snow will overlook it, and that makes the job of keeping Peeta alive harder.

“So you want to make camp here, then?” Finnick asks.

“I don’t think that’s an option,” Peeta answers. “Staying here. With no water. No protection. I feel all right, really. If we could just go slowly.”

“Slowly would be better than not at all.” Finnick helps Peeta to his feet while I pull myself together. Since I got up this morning I’ve watched Cinna beaten to a pulp, landed in another arena, and seen Peeta die. Still, I’m glad Finnick keeps playing the pregnancy card for me, because from a sponsor’s point of view, I’m not handling things all that well.

I check over my weapons, which I know are in perfect condition, because it makes me seem more in control. “I’ll take the lead,” I announce.

Peeta starts to object but Finnick cuts him off. “No, let her do it.” He frowns at me. “You knew that force field was there, didn’t you? Right at the last second? You started to give a warning.” I nod. “How did you know?”

I hesitate. To reveal that I know Beetee and Wiress’s trick of recognizing a force field could be dangerous. I don’t know if the Gamemakers made note of that moment during training when the two pointed it out to me or not. One way or the other, I have a very valuable piece of information. And if they know I have it, they might do something to alter the force field so I can’t see the aberration anymore. So I lie. “I don’t know. It’s almost as if I could hear it. Listen.” We all become still. There’s the sound of insects, birds, the breeze in the foliage.

“I don’t hear anything,” says Peeta.

“Yes,” I insist, “it’s like when the fence around District Twelve is on, only much, much quieter.” Everyone listens again intently. I do, too, although there’s nothing to hear. “There!” I say. “Can’t you hear it? It’s coming from right where Peeta got shocked.”

“I don’t hear it, either,” says Finnick. “But if you do, by all means, take the lead.”

I decide to play this for all it’s worth. “That’s weird,” I say. I turn my head from side to side as if puzzled. “I can only hear it out of my left ear.”

“The one the doctors reconstructed?” asks Peeta.

“Yeah,” I say, then give a shrug. “Maybe they did a better job than they thought. You know, sometimes I do hear funny things on that side. Things you wouldn’t ordinarily think have a sound. Like insect wings. Or snow hitting the ground.” Perfect. Now all the attention will turn to the surgeons who fixed my deaf ear after the Games last year, and they’ll have to explain why I can hear like a bat.

“You,” says Mags, nudging me forward, so I take the lead. Since we’re to be moving slowly, Mags prefers to walk with the aid of a branch Finnick quickly fashions into a cane for her. He makes a staff for Peeta as well, which is good because, despite his protestations, I think all Peeta really wants to do is lie down. Finnick brings up the rear, so at least someone alert has our backs.

I walk with the force field on my left, because that’s supposed to be the side with my superhuman ear. But since that’s all made up, I cut down a bunch of hard nuts that hang like grapes from a nearby tree and toss them ahead of me as I go. It’s good I do, too, because I have a feeling I’m missing the patches that indicate the force field more often than I’m spotting them. Whenever a nut hits the force field, there’s a puff of smoke before the nut lands, blackened and with a cracked shell, on the ground at my feet.

After a few minutes I become aware of a smacking sound behind me and turn to see Mags peeling the shell off one of the nuts and popping it in her already-full mouth. “Mags!” I cry. “Spit that out. It could be poisonous.”

She mumbles something and ignores me, licking her lips with apparent relish. I look to Finnick for help but he just laughs. “I guess we’ll find out,” he says.

I go forward, wondering about Finnick, who saved old Mags but will let her eat strange nuts. Who Haymitch has stamped with his seal of approval. Who brought Peeta back from the dead. Why didn’t he just let him die? He would have been blameless. I never would have guessed it was in his power to revive him. Why could he possibly have wanted to save Peeta? And why was he so determined to team up with me? Willing to kill me, too, if it comes to that. But leaving the choice of if we fight to me.

I keep walking, tossing my nuts, sometimes catching a glimpse of the force field, trying to press to the left to find a spot where we can break through, get away from the Cornucopia, and hopefully find water. But after another hour or so of this I realize it’s futile. We’re not making any progress

to the left. In fact, the force field seems to be herding us along a curved path. I stop and look back at Mags's limping form, the sheen of sweat on Peeta's face. "Let's take a break," I say. "I need to get another look from above."

The tree I choose seems to jut higher into the air than the others. I make my way up the twisting boughs, staying as close to the trunk as possible. No telling how easily these rubbery branches will snap. Still I climb beyond good sense because there's something I have to see. As I cling to a stretch of trunk no wider than a sapling, swaying back and forth in the humid breeze, my suspicions are confirmed. There's a reason we can't turn to the left, will never be able to. From this precarious vantage point, I can see the shape of the whole arena for the first time. A perfect circle. With a perfect wheel in the middle. The sky above the circumference of the jungle is tinged a uniform pink. And I think I can make out one or two of those wavy squares, chinks in the armor, Wiress and Beetee called them, because they reveal what was meant to be hidden and are therefore a weakness. Just to make absolutely sure, I shoot an arrow into the empty space above the tree line. There's a spurt of light, a flash of real blue sky, and the arrow's thrown back into the jungle. I climb down to give the others the bad news.

"The force field has us trapped in a circle. A dome, really. I don't know how high it goes. There's the Cornucopia, the sea, and then the jungle all around. Very exact. Very symmetrical. And not very large," I say.

"Did you see any water?" asks Finnick.

"Only the saltwater where we started the Games," I say.

"There must be some other source," says Peeta, frowning. "Or we'll all be dead in a matter of days."

"Well, the foliage is thick. Maybe there are ponds or springs somewhere," I say doubtfully. I instinctively feel the Capitol might want these unpopular Games over as soon as possible. Plutarch Heavensbee might have already been given orders to knock us off. "At any rate, there's no point in trying to find out what's over the edge of this hill, because the answer is nothing."

"There must be drinkable water between the force field and the wheel," Peeta insists. We all know what this means. Heading back down. Heading back to the Careers and the bloodshed. With Mags hardly able to walk and Peeta too weak to fight.

We decide to move down the slope a few hundred yards and continue circling. See if maybe there's some water at that level. I stay in the lead, occasionally chucking a nut to my left, but we're well out of range of the force field now. The sun beats down on us, turning the air to steam, playing tricks on our eyes. By midafternoon, it's clear Peeta and Mags can't go on.

Finnick chooses a campsite about ten yards below the force field, saying we can use it as a weapon by deflecting our enemies into it if attacked. Then he and Mags pull blades of the sharp grass that grows in five-foot-high tufts and begin to weave them together into mats. Since Mags seems to have no ill effects from the nuts, Peeta collects bunches of them and fries them by bouncing them off the force field. He methodically peels off the shells, piling the meats on a leaf. I stand guard, fidgety and hot and raw with the emotions of the day.

Thirsty. I am so thirsty. Finally I can't stand it anymore. "Finnick, why don't you stand guard and I'll hunt around some more for water," I say. No one's thrilled with the idea of me going off alone, but the threat of dehydration hangs over us.

"Don't worry, I won't go far," I promise Peeta.

"I'll go, too," he says.

"No, I'm going to do some hunting if I can," I tell him. I don't add, "And you can't come because you're too loud." But it's implied. He would both scare off prey and endanger me with his heavy tread. "I won't be long."

I move stealthily through the trees, happy to find that the ground lends itself to soundless footsteps. I work my way down at a diagonal, but I find nothing except more lush, green plant life.

The sound of the cannon brings me to a halt. The initial bloodbath at the Cornucopia must be over. The death toll of the tributes is now available. I count the shots, each representing one dead victor. Eight. Not as many as last year. But it seems like more since I know most of their names.

Suddenly weak, I lean against a tree to rest, feeling the heat draw the moisture from my body like a sponge. Already, swallowing is difficult and fatigue is creeping up on me. I try rubbing my hand across my belly, hoping some sympathetic pregnant woman will become my sponsor and Haymitch can send in some water. No luck. I sink to the ground.

In my stillness, I begin to notice the animals: strange birds with brilliant plumage, tree lizards with flickering blue tongues, and something that looks

like a cross between a rat and a possum clinging on the branches close to the trunk. I shoot one of the latter out of a tree to get a closer look.

It's ugly, all right, a big rodent with a fuzz of mottled gray fur and two wicked-looking gnawing teeth protruding over its lower lip. As I'm gutting and skinning it, I notice something else. Its muzzle is wet. Like an animal that's been drinking from a stream. Excited, I start at its home tree and move slowly out in a spiral. It can't be far, the creature's water source.

Nothing. I find nothing. Not so much as a dewdrop. Eventually, because I know Peeta will be worried about me, I head back to the camp, hotter and more frustrated than ever.

When I arrive, I see the others have transformed the place. Mags and Finnick have created a hut of sorts out of the grass mats, open on one side but with three walls, a floor, and a roof. Mags has also plaited several bowls that Peeta has filled with roasted nuts. Their faces turn to me hopefully, but I give my head a shake. "No. No water. It's out there, though. He knew where it was," I say, hoisting the skinned rodent up for all to see. "He'd been drinking recently when I shot him out of a tree, but I couldn't find his source. I swear, I covered every inch of ground in a thirty-yard radius."

"Can we eat him?" Peeta asks.

"I don't know for sure. But his meat doesn't look that different from a squirrel's. He ought to be cooked..." I hesitate as I think of trying to start a fire out here from complete scratch. Even if I succeed, there's the smoke to think about. We're all so close together in this arena, there's no chance of hiding it.

Peeta has another idea. He takes a cube of rodent meat, skewers it on the tip of a pointed stick, and lets it fall into the force field. There's a sharp sizzle and the stick flies back. The chunk of meat is blackened on the outside but well cooked inside. We give him a round of applause, then quickly stop, remembering where we are.

The white sun sinks in the rosy sky as we gather in the hut. I'm still leery about the nuts, but Finnick says Mags recognized them from another Games. I didn't bother spending time at the edible-plants station in training because it was so effortless for me last year. Now I wish I had. For surely there would have been some of the unfamiliar plants surrounding me. And I might have guessed a bit more about where I was headed. Mags seems fine, though, and she's been eating the nuts for hours. So I pick one up and take a small bite. It

has a mild, slightly sweet flavor that reminds me of a chestnut. I decide it's all right. The rodent's strong and gamey but surprisingly juicy. Really, it's not a bad meal for our first night in the arena. If only we had something to wash it down with.

Finnick asks a lot of questions about the rodent, which we decide to call a tree rat. How high was it, how long did I watch it before I shot, and what was it doing? I don't remember it doing much of anything. Snuffling around for insects or something.

I'm dreading the night. At least the tightly woven grass offers some protection from whatever slinks across the jungle floor after hours. But a short time before the sun slips below the horizon, a pale white moon rises, making things just visible enough. Our conversation trails off because we know what's coming. We position ourselves in a line at the mouth of the hut and Peeta slips his hand into mine.

The sky brightens when the seal of the Capitol appears as if floating in space. As I listen to the strains of the anthem I think, *It will be harder for Finnick and Mags*. But it turns out to be plenty hard for me as well. Seeing the faces of the eight dead victors projected into the sky.

The man from District 5, the one Finnick took out with his trident, is the first to appear. That means that all the tributes in 1 through 4 are alive—the four Careers, Beetee and Wiress, and, of course, Mags and Finnick. The man from District 5 is followed by the male morphling from 6, Cecelia and Woof from 8, both from 9, the woman from 10, and Seeder from 11. The Capitol seal is back with a final bit of music and then the sky goes dark except for the moon.

No one speaks. I can't pretend I knew any of them well. But I'm thinking of those three kids hanging on to Cecelia when they took her away. Seeder's kindness to me at our meeting. Even the thought of the glazed-eyed morphling painting my cheeks with yellow flowers gives me a pang. All dead. All gone.

I don't know how long we might have sat here if it weren't for the arrival of the silver parachute, which glides down through the foliage to land before us. No one reaches for it.

"Whose is it, do you think?" I say finally.

"No telling," says Finnick. "Why don't we let Peeta claim it, since he died today?"

Peeta unties the cord and flattens out the circle of silk. On the parachute sits a small metal object that I can't place. "What is it?" I ask. No one knows. We pass it from hand to hand, taking turns examining it. It's a hollow metal tube, tapered slightly at one end. On the other end a small lip curves downward. It's vaguely familiar. A part that could have fallen off a bicycle, a curtain rod, anything, really.

Peeta blows on one end to see if it makes a sound. It doesn't. Finnick slides his pinkie into it, testing it out as a weapon. Useless.

"Can you fish with it, Mags?" I ask. Mags, who can fish with almost anything, shakes her head and grunts.

I take it and roll it back and forth on my palm. Since we're allies, Haymitch will be working with the District 4 mentors. He had a hand in choosing this gift. That means it's valuable. Lifesaving, even. I think back to last year, when I wanted water so badly, but he wouldn't send it because he knew I could find it if I tried. Haymitch's gifts, or lack thereof, carry weighty messages. I can almost hear him growling at me, *Use your brain if you have one. What is it?*

I wipe the sweat from my eyes and hold the gift out in the moonlight. I move it this way and that, viewing it from different angles, covering portions and then revealing them. Trying to make it divulge its purpose to me. Finally, in frustration, I jam one end into the dirt. "I give up. Maybe if we hook up with Beetee or Wiress they can figure it out."

I stretch out, pressing my hot cheek on the grass mat, staring at the thing in aggravation. Peeta rubs a tense spot between my shoulders and I let myself relax a little. I wonder why this place hasn't cooled off at all now that the sun's gone down. I wonder what's going on back home.

Prim. My mother. Gale. Madge. I think of them watching me from home. At least I hope they're at home. Not taken into custody by Thread. Being punished as Cinna is. As Darius is. Punished because of me. Everybody.

I begin to ache for them, for my district, for my woods. A decent woods with sturdy hardwood trees, plentiful food, game that isn't creepy. Rushing streams. Cool breezes. No, cold winds to blow this stifling heat away. I conjure up such a wind in my mind, letting it freeze my cheeks and numb my fingers, and all at once, the piece of metal half buried in the black earth has a name.

"A spile!" I exclaim, sitting bolt upright.

“What?” asks Finnick.

I wrestle the thing from the ground and brush it clean. Cup my hand around the tapered end, concealing it, and look at the lip. Yes, I’ve seen one of these before. On a cold, windy day long ago, when I was out in the woods with my father. Inserted snugly into a hole drilled in the side of a maple. A pathway for the sap to follow as it flowed into our bucket. Maple syrup could make even our dull bread a treat. After my father died, I didn’t know what happened to the handful of spiles he had. Hidden out in the woods somewhere, probably. Never to be found.

“It’s a spile. Sort of like a faucet. You put it in a tree and sap comes out.” I look at the sinewy green trunks around me. “Well, the right sort of tree.”

“Sap?” asks Finnick. They don’t have the right kind of trees by the sea, either.

“To make syrup,” says Peeta. “But there must be something else inside these trees.”

We’re all on our feet at once. Our thirst. The lack of springs. The tree rat’s sharp front teeth and wet muzzle. There can only be one thing worth having inside these trees. Finnick goes to hammer the spile into the green bark of a massive tree with a rock, but I stop him. “Wait. You might damage it. We need to drill a hole first,” I say.

There’s nothing to drill with, so Mags offers her awl and Peeta drives it straight into the bark, burying the spike two inches deep. He and Finnick take turns opening up the hole with the awl and the knives until it can hold the spile. I wedge it in carefully and we all stand back in anticipation. At first nothing happens. Then a drop of water rolls down the lip and lands in Mags’s palm. She licks it off and holds out her hand for more.

By wiggling and adjusting the spile, we get a thin stream running out. We take turns holding our mouths under the tap, wetting our parched tongues. Mags brings over a basket, and the grass is so tightly woven it holds water. We fill the basket and pass it around, taking deep gulps and, later, luxuriously, splashing our faces clean. Like everything here, the water’s on the warm side, but this is no time to be picky.

Without our thirst to distract us, we’re all aware of how exhausted we are and make preparations for the night. Last year, I always tried to have my gear ready in case I had to make a speedy retreat in the night. This year, there’s no backpack to prepare. Just my weapons, which won’t leave my

grasp, anyway. Then I think of the spile and wrest it from the tree trunk. I strip a tough vine of its leaves, thread it through the hollow center, and tie the spile securely to my belt.

Finnick offers to take the first watch and I let him, knowing it has to be one of the two of us until Peeta's rested up. I lie down beside Peeta on the floor of the hut, telling Finnick to wake me when he's tired. Instead I find myself jarred from sleep a few hours later by what seems to be the tolling of a bell. *Bong! Bong!* It's not exactly like the one they ring in the Justice Building on New Year's but close enough for me to recognize it. Peeta and Mags sleep through it, but Finnick has the same look of attentiveness I feel. The tolling stops.

"I counted twelve," he says.

I nod. Twelve. What does that signify? One ring for each district? Maybe. But why? "Mean anything, do you think?"

"No idea," he says.

We wait for further instructions, maybe a message from Claudius Templesmith. An invitation to a feast. The only thing of note appears in the distance. A dazzling bolt of electricity strikes a towering tree and then a lightning storm begins. I guess it's an indication of rain, of a water source for those who don't have mentors as smart as Haymitch.

"Go to sleep, Finnick. It's my turn to watch, anyway," I say.

Finnick hesitates, but no one can stay awake forever. He settles down at the mouth of the hut, one hand gripped around a trident, and drifts into a restless sleep.

I sit with my bow loaded, watching the jungle, which is ghostly pale and green in the moonlight. After an hour or so, the lightning stops. I can hear the rain coming in, though, pattering on the leaves a few hundred yards away. I keep waiting for it to reach us but it never does.

The sound of the cannon startles me, although it makes little impression on my sleeping companions. There's no point in awakening them for this. Another victor dead. I don't even allow myself to wonder who it is.

The elusive rain shuts off suddenly, like the storm did last year in the arena.

Moments after it stops, I see the fog sliding softly in from the direction of the recent downpour. *Just a reaction. Cool rain on the steaming ground*, I think. It continues to approach at a steady pace. Tendrils reach forward and

then curl like fingers, as if they are pulling the rest behind them. As I watch, I feel the hairs on my neck begin to rise. Something's wrong with this fog. The progression of the front line is too uniform to be natural. And if it's not natural...

A sickeningly sweet odor begins to invade my nostrils and I reach for the others, shouting for them to wake up.

In the few seconds it takes to rouse them, I begin to blister.

21

Tiny, searing stabs. Wherever the droplets of mist touch my skin.

“Run!” I scream at the others. “Run!”

Finnick snaps awake instantly, rising to counter an enemy. But when he sees the wall of fog, he tosses a still-sleeping Mags onto his back and takes off. Peeta is on his feet but not as alert. I grab his arm and begin to propel him through the jungle after Finnick.

“What is it? What is it?” he says in bewilderment.

“Some kind of fog. Poisonous gas. Hurry, Peeta!” I urge. I can tell that however much he denied it during the day, the aftereffects of hitting the force field have been significant. He’s slow, much slower than usual. And the tangle of vines and undergrowth, which unbalance me occasionally, trip him at every step.

I look back at the wall of fog extending in a straight line as far as I can see in either direction. A terrible impulse to flee, to abandon Peeta and save myself, shoots through me. It would be so simple, to run full out, perhaps to even climb a tree above the fog line, which seems to top out at about forty feet. I remember how I did just this when the mutations appeared in the last Games. Took off and only thought of Peeta when I’d reached the Cornucopia. But this time, I trap my terror, push it down, and stay by his side. This time my survival isn’t the goal. Peeta’s is. I think of the eyes glued to the television screens in the districts, seeing if I will run, as the Capitol wishes, or hold my ground.

I lock my fingers tightly into his and say, “Watch my feet. Just try to step where I step.” It helps. We seem to move a little faster, but never enough to afford a rest, and the mist continues to lap at our heels. Droplets spring free of the body of vapor. They burn, but not like fire. Less a sense of heat and more of intense pain as the chemicals find our flesh, cling to it, and burrow down through the layers of skin. Our jumpsuits are no help at all. We may as well be dressed in tissue paper, for all the protection they give.

Finnick, who bounded off initially, stops when he realizes we’re having problems. But this is not a thing you can fight, only evade. He shouts

encouragement, trying to move us along, and the sound of his voice acts as a guide, though little more.

Peeta's artificial leg catches in a knot of creepers and he sprawls forward before I can catch him. As I help him up, I become aware of something scarier than the blisters, more debilitating than the burns. The left side of his face has sagged, as if every muscle in it has died. The lid droops, almost concealing his eye. His mouth twists in an odd angle toward the ground. "Peeta—" I begin. And that's when I feel the spasms run up my arm.

Whatever chemical laces the fog does more than burn—it targets our nerves. A whole new kind of fear shoots through me and I yank Peeta forward, which only causes him to stumble again. By the time I get him to his feet, both of my arms are twitching uncontrollably. The fog has moved in on us, the body of it less than a yard away. Something is wrong with Peeta's legs; he's trying to walk but they move in a spastic, puppetlike fashion.

I feel him lurch forward and realize Finnick has come back for us and is hauling Peeta along. I wedge my shoulder, which still seems under my control, under Peeta's arm and do my best to keep up with Finnick's rapid pace. We put about ten yards between us and the fog when Finnick stops.

"It's no good. I'll have to carry him. Can you take Mags?" he asks me.

"Yes," I say stoutly, although my heart sinks. It's true that Mags can't weigh more than about seventy pounds, but I'm not very big myself. Still, I'm sure I've carried heavier loads. If only my arms would stop jumping around. I squat down and she positions herself over my shoulder, the way she rides on Finnick. I slowly straighten my legs and, with my knees locked, I can manage her. Finnick has Peeta slung across his back now and we move forward, Finnick leading, me following in the trail he breaks through the vines.

On the fog comes, silent and steady and flat, except for the grasping tendrils. Although my instinct is to run directly away from it, I realize Finnick is moving at a diagonal down the hill. He's trying to keep a distance from the gas while steering us toward the water that surrounds the Cornucopia. *Yes, water*, I think as the acid droplets bore deeper into me. Now I'm so thankful I didn't kill Finnick, because how would I have gotten Peeta out of here alive? So thankful to have someone else on my side, even if it's only temporarily.

It's not Mags's fault when I begin falling. She's doing everything she can to be an easy passenger, but the fact is, there is only so much weight I can

handle. Especially now that my right leg seems to be going stiff. The first two times I crash to the ground, I manage to make it back on my feet, but the third time, I cannot get my leg to cooperate. As I struggle to get up, it gives out and Mags rolls off onto the ground before me. I flail around, trying to use vines and trunks to right myself.

Finnick's back by my side, Peeta hanging over him. "It's no use," I say. "Can you take them both? Go on ahead, I'll catch up." A somewhat doubtful proposal, but I say it with as much surety as I can muster.

I can see Finnick's eyes, green in the moonlight. I can see them as clear as day. Almost like a cat's, with a strange reflective quality. Maybe because they are shiny with tears. "No," he says. "I can't carry them both. My arms aren't working." It's true. His arms jerk uncontrollably at his sides. His hands are empty. Of his three tridents, only one remains, and it's in Peeta's hands. "I'm sorry, Mags. I can't do it."

What happens next is so fast, so senseless, I can't even move to stop it. Mags hauls herself up, plants a kiss on Finnick's lips, and then hobbles straight into the fog. Immediately, her body is seized by wild contortions and she falls to the ground in a horrible dance.

I want to scream, but my throat is on fire. I take one futile step in her direction when I hear the cannon blast, know her heart has stopped, that she is dead. "Finnick?" I call out hoarsely, but he has already turned from the scene, already continued his retreat from the fog. Dragging my useless leg behind me, I stagger after him, having no idea what else to do.

Time and space lose meaning as the fog seems to invade my brain, muddling my thoughts, making everything unreal. Some deep-rooted animal desire for survival keeps me stumbling after Finnick and Peeta, continuing to move, although I'm probably dead already. Parts of me are dead, or clearly dying. And Mags is dead. This is something I know, or maybe just think I know, because it makes no sense at all.

Moonlight glinting on Finnick's bronze hair, beads of searing pain peppering me, a leg turned to wood. I follow Finnick until he collapses on the ground, Peeta still on top of him. I seem to have no ability to stop my own forward motion and simply propel myself onward until I trip over their prone bodies, just one more on the heap. *This is where and how and when we all die*, I think. But the thought is abstract and far less alarming than the current agonies of my body. I hear Finnick groan and manage to drag myself off the

others. Now I can see the wall of fog, which has taken on a pearly white quality. Maybe it's my eyes playing tricks, or the moonlight, but the fog seems to be transforming. Yes, it's becoming thicker, as if it has pressed up against a glass window and is being forced to condense. I squint harder and realize the fingers no longer protrude from it. In fact, it has stopped moving forward entirely. Like other horrors I have witnessed in the arena, it has reached the end of its territory. Either that or the Gamemakers have decided not to kill us just yet.

"It's stopped," I try to say, but only an awful croaking sound comes from my swollen mouth. "It's stopped," I say again, and this time I must be clearer, because both Peeta and Finnick turn their heads to the fog. It begins to rise upward now, as if being slowly vacuumed into the sky. We watch until it has all been sucked away and not the slightest wisp remains.

Peeta rolls off Finnick, who turns over onto his back. We lie there gasping, twitching, our minds and bodies invaded by the poison. After a few minutes pass, Peeta vaguely gestures upward. "Mon-hees." I look up and spot a pair of what I guess are monkeys. I have never seen a live monkey—there's nothing like that in our woods at home. But I must have seen a picture, or one in the Games, because when I see the creatures, the same word comes to my mind. I think these have orange fur, although it's hard to tell, and are about half the size of a full-grown human. I take the monkeys for a good sign. Surely they would not hang around if the air was deadly. For a while, we quietly observe one another, humans and monkeys. Then Peeta struggles to his knees and crawls down the slope. We all crawl, since walking now seems as remarkable a feat as flying; we crawl until the vines turn to a narrow strip of sandy beach and the warm water that surrounds the Cornucopia laps our faces. I jerk back as if I've touched an open flame.

Rubbing salt in a wound. For the first time I truly appreciate the expression, because the salt in the water makes the pain of my wounds so blinding I nearly black out. But there's another sensation, of drawing out. I experiment by gingerly placing only my hand in the water. Torturous, yes, but then less so. And through the blue layer of water, I see a milky substance leaching out of the wounds on my skin. As the whiteness diminishes, so does the pain. I unbuckle my belt and strip off my jumpsuit, which is little more than a perforated rag. My shoes and undergarments are inexplicably unaffected. Little by little, one small portion of a limb at a time, I soak the

poison out of my wounds. Peeta seems to be doing the same. But Finnick backed away from the water at first touch and lies facedown on the sand, either unwilling or unable to purge himself.

Finally, when I have survived the worst, opening my eyes underwater, sniffing water into my sinuses and snorting it out, and even gargling repeatedly to wash out my throat, I'm functional enough to help Finnick. Some feeling has returned to my leg, but my arms are still riddled with spasms. I can't drag Finnick into the water, and possibly the pain would kill him, anyway. So I scoop up shaky handfuls and empty them on his fists. Since he's not underwater, the poison comes out of his wounds just as it went in, in wisps of fog that I take great care to steer clear of. Peeta recovers enough to help me. He cuts away Finnick's jumpsuit. Somewhere he finds two shells that work much better than our hands do. We concentrate on soaking Finnick's arms first, since they have been so badly damaged, and even though a lot of white stuff pours out of them, he doesn't notice. He just lies there, eyes shut, giving an occasional moan.

I look around with growing awareness of how dangerous a position we're in. It's night, yes, but this moon gives off too much light for concealment. We're lucky no one's attacked us yet. We could see them coming from the Cornucopia, but if all four Careers attacked, they'd overpower us. If they didn't spot us at first, Finnick's moans would give us away soon.

"We've got to get more of him into the water," I whisper. But we can't put him in face-first, not while he's in this condition. Peeta nods to Finnick's feet. We each take one, pull him one hundred and eighty degrees around, and start to drag him into the saltwater. Just a few inches at a time. His ankles. Wait a few minutes. Up to his midcalf. Wait. His knees. Clouds of white swirl out from his flesh and he groans. We continue to detoxify him, bit by bit. What I find is that the longer I sit in the water, the better I feel. Not just my skin, but my brain and muscle control continue to improve. I can see Peeta's face beginning to return to normal, his eyelid opening, the grimace leaving his mouth.

Finnick slowly begins to revive. His eyes open, focus on us, and register awareness that he's being helped. I rest his head on my lap and we let him soak about ten minutes with everything immersed from the neck down. Peeta and I exchange a smile as Finnick lifts his arms above the seawater.

“There’s just your head left, Finnick. That’s the worst part, but you’ll feel much better after, if you can bear it,” Peeta says. We help him to sit up and let him grip our hands as he purges his eyes and nose and mouth. His throat is still too raw to speak.

“I’m going to try to tap a tree,” I say. My fingers fumble at my belt and find the spile still hanging from its vine.

“Let me make the hole first,” says Peeta. “You stay with him. You’re the healer.”

That’s a joke, I think. But I don’t say it out loud, since Finnick has enough to deal with. He got the worst of the fog, although I’m not sure why. Maybe because he’s the biggest or maybe because he had to exert himself the most. And then, of course, there’s Mags. I still don’t understand what happened there. Why he essentially abandoned her to carry Peeta. Why she not only didn’t question it, but ran straight to her death without a moment’s hesitation. Was it because she was so old that her days were numbered, anyway? Did they think that Finnick would stand a better chance of winning if he had Peeta and me as allies? The haggard look on Finnick’s face tells me that now is not the moment to ask.

Instead I try to put myself back together. I rescue my mockingjay pin from my ruined jumpsuit and pin it to the strap of my undershirt. The flotation belt must be acid resistant, since it looks as good as new. I can swim, so the flotation belt’s not really necessary, but Brutus blocked my arrow with his, so I buckle it back on, thinking it might offer some protection. I undo my hair and comb it with my fingers, thinning it out considerably since the fog droplets damaged it. Then I braid back what’s left of it.

Peeta has found a good tree about ten yards from the narrow strip of beach. We can hardly see him, but the sound of his knife against the wooden trunk is crystal clear. I wonder what happened to the awl. Mags must’ve either dropped it or taken it into the fog with her. Anyway, it’s gone.

I have moved out a bit farther into the shallows, floating alternately on my belly and back. If the seawater healed Peeta and me, it seems to be transforming Finnick altogether. He begins to move slowly, just testing his limbs, and gradually begins to swim. But it’s not like me swimming, the rhythmic strokes, the even pace. It’s like watching some strange sea animal coming back to life. He dives and surfaces, spraying water out of his mouth, rolls over and over in some bizarre corkscrew motion that makes me dizzy

even to watch. And then, when he's been underwater so long I feel certain he's drowned, his head pops up right next to me and I start.

"Don't do that," I say.

"What? Come up or stay under?" he says.

"Either. Neither. Whatever. Just soak in the water and behave," I say. "Or if you feel this good, let's go help Peeta."

In just the short time it takes to cross to the edge of the jungle, I become aware of the change. Put it down to years of hunting, or maybe my reconstructed ear does work a little better than anyone intended. But I sense the mass of warm bodies poised above us. They don't need to chatter or scream. The mere breathing of so many is enough.

I touch Finnick's arm and he follows my gaze upward. I don't know how they arrived so silently. Perhaps they didn't. We've all been absorbed in restoring our bodies. During that time they've assembled. Not five or ten but scores of monkeys weigh down the limbs of the jungle trees. The pair we spotted when we first escaped the fog felt like a welcoming committee. This crew feels ominous.

I arm my bow with two arrows and Finnick adjusts the trident in his hand. "Peeta," I say as calmly as possible. "I need your help with something."

"Okay, just a minute. I think I've just about got it," he says, still occupied with the tree. "Yes, there. Have you got the spile?"

"I do. But we've found something you'd better take a look at," I continue in a measured voice. "Only move toward us quietly, so you don't startle it." For some reason, I don't want him to notice the monkeys, or even glance their way. There are creatures that interpret mere eye contact as aggression.

Peeta turns to us, panting from his work on the tree. The tone of my request is so odd that it's alerted him to some irregularity. "Okay," he says casually. He begins to move through the jungle, and although I know he's trying hard to be quiet, this has never been his strong suit, even when he had two sound legs. But it's all right, he's moving, the monkeys are holding their positions. He's just five yards from the beach when he senses them. His eyes only dart up for a second, but it's as if he's triggered a bomb. The monkeys explode into a shrieking mass of orange fur and converge on him.

I've never seen any animal move so fast. They slide down the vines as if the things were greased. Leap impossible distances from tree to tree. Fangs

bared, hackles raised, claws shooting out like switchblades. I may be unfamiliar with monkeys, but animals in nature don't act like this. "*Mutts!*" I spit out as Finnick and I crash into the greenery.

I know every arrow must count, and they do. In the eerie light, I bring down monkey after monkey, targeting eyes and hearts and throats, so that each hit means a death. But still it wouldn't be enough without Finnick spearing the beasts like fish and flinging them aside, Peeta slashing away with his knife. I feel claws on my leg, down my back, before someone takes out the attacker. The air grows heavy with trampled plants, the scent of blood, and the musty stink of the monkeys. Peeta and Finnick and I position ourselves in a triangle, a few yards apart, our backs to one another. My heart sinks as my fingers draw back my last arrow. Then I remember Peeta has a sheath, too. And he's not shooting, he's hacking away with that knife. My own knife is out now, but the monkeys are quicker, can spring in and out so fast you can barely react.

"Peeta!" I shout. "Your arrows!"

Peeta turns to see my predicament and is sliding off his sheath when it happens. A monkey lunges out of a tree for his chest. I have no arrow, no way to shoot. I can hear the thud of Finnick's trident finding another mark and know his weapon is occupied. Peeta's knife arm is disabled as he tries to remove the sheath. I throw my knife at the oncoming mutt but the creature somersaults, evading the blade, and stays on its trajectory.

Weaponless, defenseless, I do the only thing I can think of. I run for Peeta, to knock him to the ground, to protect his body with mine, even though I know I won't make it in time.

She does, though. Materializing, it seems, from thin air. One moment nowhere, the next reeling in front of Peeta. Already bloody, mouth open in a high-pitched scream, pupils enlarged so her eyes seem like black holes.

The insane morphling from District 6 throws up her skeletal arms as if to embrace the monkey, and it sinks its fangs into her chest.

Peeta drops the sheath and buries his knife into the monkey's back, stabbing it again and again until it releases its jaw. He kicks the mutt away, bracing for more. I have his arrows now, a loaded bow, and Finnick at my back, breathing hard but not actively engaged.

"Come on, then! Come on!" shouts Peeta, panting with rage. But something has happened to the monkeys. They are withdrawing, backing up trees, fading into the jungle, as if some unheard voice calls them away. A Gamemaker's voice, telling them this is enough.

"Get her," I say to Peeta. "We'll cover you."

Peeta gently lifts up the morphling and carries her the last few yards to the beach while Finnick and I keep our weapons at the ready. But except for the orange carcasses on the ground, the monkeys are gone. Peeta lays the morphling on the sand. I cut away the material over her chest, revealing the four deep puncture wounds. Blood slowly trickles from them, making them look far less deadly than they are. The real damage is inside. By the position of the openings, I feel certain the beast ruptured something vital, a lung, maybe even her heart.

She lies on the sand, gasping like a fish out of water. Sagging skin, sickly green, her ribs as prominent as a child's dead of starvation. Surely she could afford food, but turned to the morphling just as Haymitch turned to drink, I guess. Everything about her speaks of waste—her body, her life, the vacant look in her eyes. I hold one of her twitching hands, unclear whether it moves from the poison that affected our nerves, the shock of the attack, or withdrawal from the drug that was her sustenance. There is nothing we can do. Nothing but stay with her while she dies.

"I'll watch the trees," Finnick says before walking away. I'd like to walk away, too, but she grips my hand so tightly I would have to pry off her fingers, and I don't have the strength for that kind of cruelty. I think of Rue, how maybe I could sing a song or something. But I don't even know the morphling's name, let alone if she likes songs. I just know she's dying.

Peeta crouches down on the other side of her and strokes her hair. When he begins to speak in a soft voice, it seems almost nonsensical, but the words aren't for me. "With my paint box at home, I can make every color imaginable. Pink. As pale as a baby's skin. Or as deep as rhubarb. Green like spring grass. Blue that shimmers like ice on water."

The morphling stares into Peeta's eyes, hanging on to his words.

"One time, I spent three days mixing paint until I found the right shade for sunlight on white fur. You see, I kept thinking it was yellow, but it was much more than that. Layers of all sorts of color. One by one," says Peeta.

The morphling's breathing is slowing into shallow catch-breaths. Her free hand dabbles in the blood on her chest, making the tiny swirling motions she so loved to paint with.

"I haven't figured out a rainbow yet. They come so quickly and leave so soon. I never have enough time to capture them. Just a bit of blue here or purple there. And then they fade away again. Back into the air," says Peeta.

The morphling seems mesmerized by Peeta's words. Entranced. She lifts up a trembling hand and paints what I think might be a flower on Peeta's cheek.

"Thank you," he whispers. "That looks beautiful."

For a moment, the morphling's face lights up in a grin and she makes a small squeaking sound. Then her blooddappled hand falls back onto her chest, she gives one last huff of air, and the cannon fires. The grip on my hand releases.

Peeta carries her out into the water. He returns and sits beside me. The morphling floats out toward the Cornucopia for a while, then the hovercraft appears and a four-pronged claw drops, encases her, carries her into the night sky, and she's gone.

Finnick rejoins us, his fist full of my arrows still wet with monkey blood. He drops them beside me on the sand. "Thought you might want these."

"Thanks," I say. I wade into the water and wash off the gore, from my weapons, my wounds. By the time I return to the jungle to gather some moss to dry them, all the monkeys' bodies have vanished.

"Where did they go?" I ask.

"We don't know exactly. The vines shifted and they were gone," says Finnick.

We stare at the jungle, numb and exhausted. In the quiet, I notice that the spots where the fog droplets touched my skin have scabbed over. They've stopped hurting and begun to itch. Intensely. I try to think of this as a good sign. That they are healing. I glance over at Peeta, at Finnick, and see they're both scratching at their damaged faces. Yes, even Finnick's beauty has been marred by this night.

"Don't scratch," I say, wanting badly to scratch myself. But I know it's the advice my mother would give. "You'll only bring infection. Think it's safe to try for the water again?"

We make our way back to the tree Peeta was tapping. Finnick and I stand with our weapons poised while he works the spile in, but no threat appears. Peeta's found a good vein and the water begins to gush from the spile. We slake our thirst, let the warm water pour over our itching bodies. We fill a handful of shells with drinking water and go back to the beach.

It's still night, though dawn can't be too many hours away. Unless the Gamemakers want it to be. "Why don't you two get some rest?" I say. "I'll watch for a while."

"No, Katniss, I'd rather," says Finnick. I look in his eyes, at his face, and realize he's barely holding back tears. Mags. The least I can do is give him the privacy to mourn her.

"All right, Finnick, thanks," I say. I lie down on the sand with Peeta, who drifts off at once. I stare into the night, thinking of what a difference a day makes. How yesterday morning, Finnick was on my kill list, and now I'm willing to sleep with him as my guard. He saved Peeta and let Mags die and I don't know why. Only that I can never settle the balance owed between us. All I can do at the moment is go to sleep and let him grieve in peace. And so I do.

It's midmorning when I open my eyes again. Peeta's still out beside me. Above us, a mat of grass suspended on branches shields our faces from the sunlight. I sit up and see that Finnick's hands have not been idle. Two woven bowls are filled with fresh water. A third holds a mess of shellfish.

Finnick sits on the sand, cracking them open with a stone. "They're better fresh," he says, ripping a chunk of flesh from a shell and popping it into his mouth. His eyes are still puffy but I pretend not to notice.

My stomach begins to growl at the smell of food and I reach for one. The sight of my fingernails, caked with blood, stops me. I've been scratching my

skin raw in my sleep.

“You know, if you scratch you’ll bring on infection,” says Finnick.

“That’s what I’ve heard,” I say. I go into the saltwater and wash off the blood, trying to decide which I hate more, pain or itching. Fed up, I stomp back onto the beach, turn my face upward, and snap, “Hey, Haymitch, if you’re not too drunk, we could use a little something for our skin.”

It’s almost funny how quickly the parachute appears above me. I reach up and the tube lands squarely in my open hand. “About time,” I say, but I can’t keep the scowl on my face. Haymitch. What I wouldn’t give for five minutes of conversation with him.

I plunk down on the sand next to Finnick and screw the lid off the tube. Inside is a thick, dark ointment with a pungent smell, a combination of tar and pine needles. I wrinkle my nose as I squeeze a glob of the medicine onto my palm and begin to massage it into my leg. A sound of pleasure slips out of my mouth as the stuff eradicates my itching. It also stains my scabby skin a ghastly gray-green. As I start on the second leg I toss the tube to Finnick, who eyes me doubtfully.

“It’s like you’re decomposing,” says Finnick. But I guess the itching wins out, because after a minute Finnick begins to treat his own skin, too. Really, the combination of the scabs and the ointment looks hideous. I can’t help enjoying his distress.

“Poor Finnick. Is this the first time in your life you haven’t looked pretty?” I say.

“It must be. The sensation’s completely new. How have you managed it all these years?” he asks.

“Just avoid mirrors. You’ll forget about it,” I say.

“Not if I keep looking at you,” he says.

We slather ourselves down, even taking turns rubbing the ointment into each other’s backs where the undershirts don’t protect our skin. “I’m going to wake Peeta,” I say.

“No, wait,” says Finnick. “Let’s do it together. Put our faces right in front of his.”

Well, there’s so little opportunity for fun left in my life, I agree. We position ourselves on either side of Peeta, lean over until our faces are inches from his nose, and give him a shake. “Peeta. Peeta, wake up,” I say in a soft, singsong voice.

His eyelids flutter open and then he jumps like we've stabbed him. "Aa!"

Finnick and I fall back in the sand, laughing our heads off. Every time we try to stop, we look at Peeta's attempt to maintain a disdainful expression and it sets us off again. By the time we pull ourselves together, I'm thinking that maybe Finnick Odair is all right. At least not as vain or self-important as I'd thought. Not so bad at all, really. And just as I've come to this conclusion, a parachute lands next to us with a fresh loaf of bread. Remembering from last year how Haymitch's gifts are often timed to send a message, I make a note to myself. *Be friends with Finnick. You'll get food.*

Finnick turns the bread over in his hands, examining the crust. A bit too possessively. It's not necessary. It's got that green tint from seaweed that the bread from District 4 always has. We all know it's his. Maybe he's just realized how precious it is, and that he may never see another loaf again. Maybe some memory of Mags is associated with the crust. But all he says is, "This will go well with the shellfish."

While I help Peeta coat his skin with the ointment, Finnick deftly cleans the meat from the shellfish. We gather round and eat the delicious sweet flesh with the salty bread from District 4.

We all look monstrous—the ointment seems to be causing some of the scabs to peel—but I'm glad for the medicine. Not just because it gives relief from the itching, but also because it acts as protection from that blazing white sun in the pink sky. By its position, I estimate it must be going on ten o'clock, that we've been in the arena for about a day. Eleven of us are dead. Thirteen alive. Somewhere in the jungle, ten are concealed. Three or four are the Careers. I don't really feel like trying to remember who the others are.

For me, the jungle has quickly evolved from a place of protection to a sinister trap. I know at some point we'll be forced to reenter its depths, either to hunt or be hunted, but for right now I'm planning to stick to our little beach. And I don't hear Peeta or Finnick suggesting we do otherwise. For a while the jungle seems almost static, humming, shimmering, but not flaunting its dangers. Then, in the distance, comes screaming. Across from us, a wedge of the jungle begins to vibrate. An enormous wave crests high on the hill, topping the trees and roaring down the slope. It hits the existing seawater with such force that, even though we're as far as we can get from it, the surf bubbles up around our knees, setting our few possessions afloat. Among the three of us, we manage to collect everything before it's carried off, except for

our chemical-riddled jumpsuits, which are so eaten away no one cares if we lose them.

A cannon fires. We see the hovercraft appear over the area where the wave began and pluck a body from the trees. *Twelve*, I think.

The circle of water slowly calms down, having absorbed the giant wave. We rearrange our things back on the wet sand and are about to settle down when I see them. Three figures, about two spokes away, stumbling onto the beach. “There,” I say quietly, nodding in the newcomers’ direction. Peeta and Finnick follow my gaze. As if by previous agreement, we all fade back into the shadows of the jungle.

The trio’s in bad shape—you can see that right off. One is being practically dragged out by a second, and the third wanders in loopy circles, as if deranged. They’re a solid brick-red color, as if they’ve been dipped in paint and left out to dry.

“Who is that?” asks Peeta. “Or what? Muttations?”

I draw back an arrow, readying for an attack. But all that happens is that the one who was being dragged collapses on the beach. The dragger stamps the ground in frustration and, in an apparent fit of temper, turns and shoves the circling, deranged one over.

Finnick’s face lights up. “Johanna!” he calls, and runs for the red things.

“Finnick!” I hear Johanna’s voice reply.

I exchange a look with Peeta. “What now?” I ask.

“We can’t really leave Finnick,” he says.

“Guess not. Come on, then,” I say grouchily, because even if I’d had a list of allies, Johanna Mason would definitely not have been on it. The two of us tromp down the beach to where Finnick and Johanna are just meeting up. As we move in closer, I see her companions, and confusion sets in. That’s Beetee on the ground on his back and Wiress who’s regained her feet to continue making loops. “She’s got Wiress and Beetee.”

“Nuts and Volts?” says Peeta, equally puzzled. “I’ve got to hear how this happened.”

When we reach them, Johanna’s gesturing toward the jungle and talking very fast to Finnick. “We thought it was rain, you know, because of the lightning, and we were all so thirsty. But when it started coming down, it turned out to be blood. Thick, hot blood. You couldn’t see, you couldn’t

speaking without getting a mouthful. We just staggered around, trying to get out of it. That's when Blight hit the force field."

"I'm sorry, Johanna," says Finnick. It takes a moment to place Blight. I think he was Johanna's male counterpart from District 7, but I hardly remember seeing him. Come to think of it, I don't even think he showed up for training.

"Yeah, well, he wasn't much, but he was from home," she says. "And he left me alone with these two." She nudges Beetee, who's barely conscious, with her shoe. "He got a knife in the back at the Cornucopia. And her—"

We all look over at Wiress, who's circling around, coated in dried blood, and murmuring, "Tick, tock. Tick, tock."

"Yeah, we know. Tick, tock. Nuts is in shock," says Johanna. This seems to draw Wiress in her direction and she careens into Johanna, who harshly shoves her to the beach. "Just stay down, will you?"

"Lay off her," I snap.

Johanna narrows her brown eyes at me in hatred. "Lay off her?" she hisses. She steps forward before I can react and slaps me so hard I see stars. "Who do you think got them out of that bleeding jungle for you? You—" Finnick tosses her writhing body over his shoulder and carries her out into the water and repeatedly dunks her while she screams a lot of really insulting things at me. But I don't shoot. Because she's with Finnick and because of what she said, about getting them for me.

"What did she mean? She got them for me?" I ask Peeta.

"I don't know. You did want them originally," he reminds me.

"Yeah, I did. Originally." But that answers nothing. I look down at Beetee's inert body. "But I won't have them long unless we do something."

Peeta lifts Beetee up in his arms and I take Wiress by the hand and we go back to our little beach camp. I sit Wiress in the shallows so she can get washed up a bit, but she just clutches her hands together and occasionally mumbles, "Tick, tock." I unhook Beetee's belt and find a heavy metal cylinder attached to the side with a rope of vines. I can't tell what it is, but if he thought it was worth saving, I'm not going to be the one who loses it. I toss it up on the sand. Beetee's clothes are glued to him with blood, so Peeta holds him in the water while I loosen them. It takes some time to get the jumpsuit off, and then we find his undergarments are saturated with blood as well. There's no choice but to strip him naked to get him clean, but I have to

say this doesn't make much of an impression on me anymore. Our kitchen table's been full of so many naked men this year. You kind of get used to it after a while.

We put down Finnick's mat and lay Beetee on his stomach so we can examine his back. There's a gash about six inches long running from his shoulder blade to below his ribs. Fortunately it's not too deep. He's lost a lot of blood, though—you can tell by the pallor of his skin—and it's still oozing out of the wound.

I sit back on my heels, trying to think. What do I have to work with? Seawater? I feel like my mother when her first line of defense for treating everything was snow. I look over at the jungle. I bet there's a whole pharmacy in there if I knew how to use it. But these aren't my plants. Then I think about the moss Mags gave me to blow my nose. "Be right back," I tell Peeta. Fortunately the stuff seems to be pretty common in the jungle. I rip an armful from the nearby trees and carry it back to the beach. I make a thick pad out of the moss, place it on Beetee's cut, and secure it by tying vines around his body. We get some water into him and then pull him into the shade at the edge of the jungle.

"I think that's all we can do," I say.

"It's good. You're good with this healing stuff," he says. "It's in your blood."

"No," I say, shaking my head. "I got my father's blood." The kind that quickens during a hunt, not an epidemic. "I'm going to see about Wiress."

I take a handful of the moss to use as a rag and join Wiress in the shallows. She doesn't resist as I work off her clothing, scrub the blood from her skin. But her eyes are dilated with fear, and when I speak, she doesn't respond except to say with ever-increasing urgency, "Tick, tock." She does seem to be trying to tell me something, but with no Beetee to explain her thoughts, I'm at a loss.

"Yes, tick, tock. Tick, tock," I say. This seems to calm her down a little. I wash out her jumpsuit until there's hardly a trace of blood, and help her back into it. It's not damaged like ours were. Her belt's fine, so I fasten that on, too. Then I pin her undergarments, along with Beetee's, under some rocks and let them soak.

By the time I've rinsed out Beetee's jumpsuit, a shiny clean Johanna and peeling Finnick have joined us. For a while, Johanna gulps water and stuffs

herself with shellfish while I try to coax something into Wiress. Finnick tells about the fog and the monkeys in a detached, almost clinical voice, avoiding the most important detail of the story.

Everybody offers to guard while the others rest, but in the end, it's Johanna and I who stay up. Me because I'm really rested, she because she simply refuses to lie down. The two of us sit in silence on the beach until the others have gone to sleep.

Johanna glances over at Finnick, to be sure, then turns to me. "How'd you lose Mags?"

"In the fog. Finnick had Peeta. I had Mags for a while. Then I couldn't lift her. Finnick said he couldn't take them both. She kissed him and walked right into the poison," I say.

"She was Finnick's mentor, you know," Johanna says accusingly.

"No, I didn't," I say.

"She was half his family," she says a few moments later, but there's less venom behind it.

We watch the water lap up over the undergarments. "So what were you doing with Nuts and Volts?" I ask.

"I told you—I got them for you. Haymitch said if we were to be allies I had to bring them to you," says Johanna. "That's what you told him, right?"

No, I think. But I nod my head in assent. "Thanks. I appreciate it."

"I hope so." She gives me a look filled with loathing, like I'm the biggest drag possible on her life. I wonder if this is what it's like to have an older sister who really hates you.

"Tick, tock," I hear behind me. I turn and see Wiress has crawled over. Her eyes are focused on the jungle.

"Oh, goody, she's back. Okay, I'm going to sleep. You and Nuts can guard together," Johanna says. She goes over and flings herself down beside Finnick.

"Tick, tock," whispers Wiress. I guide her in front of me and get her to lie down, stroking her arm to soothe her. She drifts off, stirring restlessly, occasionally sighing out her phrase. "Tick, tock."

"Tick, tock," I agree softly. "It's time for bed. Tick, tock. Go to sleep."

The sun rises in the sky until it's directly over us. *It must be noon*, I think absently. Not that it matters. Across the water, off to the right, I see the enormous flash as the lightning bolt hits the tree and the electrical storm

begins again. Right in the same area it did last night. Someone must have moved into its range, triggered the attack. I sit for a while watching the lightning, keeping Wiress calm, lulled into a sort of peacefulness by the lapping of the water. I think of last night, how the lightning began just after the bell tolled. Twelve bongs.

“Tick, tock,” Wiress says, surfacing to consciousness for a moment and then going back under.

Twelve bongs last night. Like it was midnight. Then lightning. The sun overhead now. Like it’s noon. And lightning.

Slowly I rise up and survey the arena. The lightning there. In the next pie wedge over came the blood rain, where Johanna, Wiress, and Beetee were caught. We would have been in the third section, right next to that, when the fog appeared. And as soon as it was sucked away, the monkeys began to gather in the fourth. Tick, tock. My head snaps to the other side. A couple of hours ago, at around ten, that wave came out of the second section to the left of where the lightning strikes now. At noon. At midnight. At noon.

“Tick, tock,” Wiress says in her sleep. As the lightning ceases and the blood rain begins just to the right of it, her words suddenly make sense.

“Oh,” I say under my breath. “Tick, tock.” My eyes sweep around the full circle of the arena and I know she’s right. “Tick, tock. This is a clock.”

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A clock. I can almost see the hands ticking around the twelve-sectioned face of the arena. Each hour begins a new horror, a new Gamemaker weapon, and ends the previous. Lightning, blood rain, fog, monkeys—those are the first four hours on the clock. And at ten, the wave. I don't know what happens in the other seven, but I know Wiress is right.

At present, the blood rain's falling and we're on the beach below the monkey segment, far too close to the fog for my liking. Do the various attacks stay within the confines of the jungle? Not necessarily. The wave didn't. If that fog leaches out of the jungle, or the monkeys return...

"Get up," I order, shaking Peeta and Finnick and Johanna awake. "Get up—we have to move." There's enough time, though, to explain the clock theory to them. About Wiress's tick-tocking and how the movements of the invisible hands trigger a deadly force in each section.

I think I've convinced everyone who's conscious except Johanna, who's naturally opposed to liking anything I suggest. But even she agrees it's better to be safe than sorry.

While the others collect our few possessions and get Beetee back into his jumpsuit, I rouse Wiress. She awakes with a panicked "tick, tock!"

"Yes, tick, tock, the arena's a clock. It's a clock, Wiress, you were right," I say. "You were right."

Relief floods her face—I guess because somebody has finally understood what she's known probably from the first tolling of the bells. "Midnight."

"It starts at midnight," I confirm.

A memory struggles to surface in my brain. I see a clock. No, it's a watch, resting in Plutarch Heavensbee's palm. "*It starts at midnight*," Plutarch said. And then my mockingjay lit up briefly and vanished. In retrospect, it's like he was giving me a clue about the arena. But why would he? At the time, I was no more a tribute in these Games than he was. Maybe he thought it would help me as a mentor. Or maybe this had been the plan all along.

Wiress nods at the blood rain. "One-thirty," she says.

“Exactly. One-thirty. And at two, a terrible poisonous fog begins there,” I say, pointing at the nearby jungle. “So we have to move somewhere safe now.” She smiles and stands up obediently. “Are you thirsty?” I hand her the woven bowl and she gulps down about a quart. Finnick gives her the last bit of bread and she gnaws on it. With the inability to communicate overcome, she’s functioning again.

I check my weapons. Tie up the spile and the tube of medicine in the parachute and fix it to my belt with vine.

Beetee’s still pretty out of it, but when Peeta tries to lift him, he objects. “Wire,” he says.

“She’s right here,” Peeta tells him. “Wire is fine. She’s coming, too.”

But still Beetee struggles. “Wire,” he insists.

“Oh, I know what he wants,” says Johanna impatiently. She crosses the beach and picks up the cylinder we took from his belt when we were bathing him. It’s coated in a thick layer of congealed blood. “This worthless thing. It’s some kind of wire or something. That’s how he got cut. Running up to the Cornucopia to get this. I don’t know what kind of weapon it’s supposed to be. I guess you could pull off a piece and use it as a garrote or something. But really, can you imagine Beetee garroting somebody?”

“He won his Games with wire. Setting up that electrical trap,” says Peeta. “It’s the best weapon he could have.”

There’s something odd about Johanna not putting this together. Something that doesn’t quite ring true. Suspicious. “Seems like you’d have figured that out,” I say. “Since you nicknamed him Volts and all.”

Johanna’s eyes narrow at me dangerously. “Yeah, that was really stupid of me, wasn’t it?” she says. “I guess I must have been distracted by keeping your little friends alive. While you were...what, again? Getting Mags killed off?”

My fingers tighten on the knife handle at my belt.

“Go ahead. Try it. I don’t care if you are knocked up, I’ll rip your throat out,” says Johanna.

I know I can’t kill her right now. But it’s just a matter of time with Johanna and me. Before one of us offs the other.

“Maybe we all had better be careful where we step,” says Finnick, shooting me a look. He takes the coil and sets it on Beetee’s chest. “There’s your wire, Volts. Watch where you plug it.”

Peeta picks up the now-unresisting Beetee. “Where to?”

“I’d like to go to the Cornucopia and watch. Just to make sure we’re right about the clock,” says Finnick. It seems as good a plan as any. Besides, I wouldn’t mind the chance of going over the weapons again. And there are six of us now. Even if you count Beetee and Wiress out, we’ve got four good fighters. It’s so different from where I was last year at this point, doing everything on my own. Yes, it’s great to have allies as long as you can ignore the thought that you’ll have to kill them.

Beetee and Wiress will probably find some way to die on their own. If we have to run from something, how far would they get? Johanna, frankly, I could easily kill if it came down to protecting Peeta. Or maybe even just to shut her up. What I really need is for someone to take out Finnick for me, since I don’t think I can do it personally. Not after all he’s done for Peeta. I think about maneuvering him into some kind of encounter with the Careers. It’s cold, I know. But what are my options? Now that we know about the clock, he probably won’t die in the jungle, so someone’s going to have to kill him in battle.

Because this is so repellent to think about, my mind frantically tries to change topics. But the only thing that distracts me from my current situation is fantasizing about killing President Snow. Not very pretty daydreams for a seventeen-year-old girl, I guess, but very satisfying.

We walk down the nearest sand strip, approaching the Cornucopia with care, just in case the Careers are concealed there. I doubt they are, because we’ve been on the beach for hours and there’s been no sign of life. The area’s abandoned, as I expected. Only the big golden horn and the picked-over pile of weapons remain.

When Peeta lays Beetee in the bit of shade the Cornucopia provides, he calls out to Wiress. She crouches beside him and he puts the coil of wire in her hands. “Clean it, will you?” he asks.

Wiress nods and scampers over to the water’s edge, where she dunks the coil in the water. She starts quietly singing some funny little song, about a mouse running up a clock. It must be for children, but it seems to make her happy.

“Oh, not the song again,” says Johanna, rolling her eyes. “That went on for hours before she started tick-tocking.”

Suddenly Wiress stands up very straight and points to the jungle. “Two,” she says.

I follow her finger to where the wall of fog has just begun to seep out onto the beach. “Yes, look, Wiress is right. It’s two o’clock and the fog has started.”

“Like clockwork,” says Peeta. “You were very smart to figure that out, Wiress.”

Wiress smiles and goes back to singing and dunking her coil. “Oh, she’s more than smart,” says Beetee. “She’s intuitive.” We all turn to look at Beetee, who seems to be coming back to life. “She can sense things before anyone else. Like a canary in one of your coal mines.”

“What’s that?” Finnick asks me.

“It’s a bird that we take down into the mines to warn us if there’s bad air,” I say.

“What’s it do, die?” asks Johanna.

“It stops singing first. That’s when you should get out. But if the air’s too bad, it dies, yes. And so do you.” I don’t want to talk about dying songbirds. They bring up thoughts of my father’s death and Rue’s death and Maysilee Donner’s death and my mother inheriting her songbird. Oh, great, and now I’m thinking of Gale, deep down in that horrible mine, with President Snow’s threat hanging over his head. So easy to make it look like an accident down there. A silent canary, a spark, and nothing more.

I go back to imagining killing the president.

Despite her annoyance at Wiress, Johanna’s as happy as I’ve seen her in the arena. While I’m adding to my stock of arrows, she pokes around until she comes up with a pair of lethal-looking axes. It seems an odd choice until I see her throw one with such force it sticks in the sunsoftened gold of the Cornucopia. Of course. Johanna Mason. District 7. Lumber. I bet she’s been tossing around axes since she could toddle. It’s like Finnick with his trident. Or Beetee with his wire. Rue with her knowledge of plants. I realize it’s just another disadvantage the District 12 tributes have faced over the years. We don’t go down in the mines until we’re eighteen. It looks like most of the other tributes learn something about their trades early on. There are things you do in a mine that could come in handy in the Games. Wielding a pick. Blowing things up. Give you an edge. The way my hunting did. But we learn them too late.

While I've been messing with the weapons, Peeta's been squatting on the ground, drawing something with the tip of his knife on a large, smooth leaf he brought from the jungle. I look over his shoulder and see he's creating a map of the arena. In the center is the Cornucopia on its circle of sand with the twelve strips branching out from it. It looks like a pie sliced into twelve equal wedges. There's another circle representing the waterline and a slightly larger one indicating the edge of the jungle. "Look how the Cornucopia's positioned," he says to me.

I examine the Cornucopia and see what he means. "The tail points toward twelve o'clock," I say.

"Right, so this is the top of our clock," he says, and quickly scratches the numbers one through twelve around the clock face. "Twelve to one is the lightning zone." He writes *lightning* in tiny print in the corresponding wedge, then works clockwise adding *blood*, *fog*, and *monkeys* in the following sections.

"And ten to eleven is the wave," I say. He adds it. Finnick and Johanna join us at this point, armed to the teeth with tridents, axes, and knives.

"Did you notice anything unusual in the others?" I ask Johanna and Beetee, since they might have seen something we didn't. But all they've seen is a lot of blood. "I guess they could hold anything."

"I'm going to mark the ones where we know the Gamemakers' weapon follows us out past the jungle, so we'll stay clear of those," says Peeta, drawing diagonal lines on the fog and wave beaches. Then he sits back. "Well, it's a lot more than we knew this morning, anyway."

We all nod in agreement, and that's when I notice it. The silence. Our canary has stopped singing.

I don't wait. I load an arrow as I twist and get a glimpse of a dripping-wet Gloss letting Wiress slide to the ground, her throat slit open in a bright red smile. The point of my arrow disappears into his right temple, and in the instant it takes to reload, Johanna has buried an ax blade in Cashmere's chest. Finnick knocks away a spear Brutus throws at Peeta and takes Enobaria's knife in his thigh. If there wasn't a Cornucopia to duck behind, they'd be dead, both of the tributes from District 2. I spring forward in pursuit. *Boom! Boom! Boom!* The cannon confirms there's no way to help Wiress, no need to finish off Gloss or Cashmere. My allies and I are rounding the horn, starting

to give chase to Brutus and Enobaria, who are sprinting down a sand strip toward the jungle.

Suddenly the ground jerks beneath my feet and I'm flung on my side in the sand. The circle of land that holds the Cornucopia starts spinning fast, really fast, and I can see the jungle going by in a blur. I feel the centrifugal force pulling me toward the water and dig my hands and feet into the sand, trying to get some purchase on the unstable ground. Between the flying sand and the dizziness, I have to squeeze my eyes shut. There is literally nothing I can do but hold on until, with no deceleration, we slam to a stop.

Coughing and queasy, I sit up slowly to find my companions in the same condition. Finnick, Johanna, and Peeta have hung on. The three dead bodies have been tossed out into the seawater.

The whole thing, from missing Wiress's song to now, can't have taken more than a minute or two. We sit there panting, scraping the sand out of our mouths.

"Where's Volts?" says Johanna. We're on our feet. One wobbly circle of the Cornucopia confirms he's gone. Finnick spots him about twenty yards out in the water, barely keeping afloat, and swims out to haul him in.

That's when I remember the wire and how important it was to him. I look frantically around. Where is it? Where is it? And then I see it, still clutched in Wiress's hands, far out in the water. My stomach contracts at the thought of what I must do next. "Cover me," I say to the others. I toss aside my weapons and race down the strip closest to her body. Without slowing down, I dive into the water and start for her. Out of the corner of my eye, I can see the hovercraft appearing over us, the claw starting to descend to take her away. But I don't stop. I just keep swimming as hard as I can and end up slamming into her body. I come up gasping, trying to avoid swallowing the bloodstained water that spreads out from the open wound in her neck. She's floating on her back, borne up by her belt and death, staring into that relentless sun. As I tread water, I have to wrench the coil of wire from her fingers, because her final grip on it is so tight. There's nothing I can do then but close her eyelids, whisper good-bye, and swim away. By the time I swing the coil up onto the sand and pull myself from the water, her body's gone. But I can still taste her blood mingled with the sea salt.

I walk back to the Cornucopia. Finnick's gotten Beetee back alive, although a little waterlogged, sitting up and snorting out water. He had the

good sense to hang on to his glasses, so at least he can see. I place the reel of wire on his lap. It's sparkling clean, no blood left at all. He unravels a piece of the wire and runs it through his fingers. For the first time I see it, and it's unlike any wire I know. A pale golden color and as fine as a piece of hair. I wonder how long it is. There must be miles of the stuff to fill the large spool. But I don't ask, because I know he's thinking of Wiress.

I look at the others' sober faces. Now Finnick, Johanna, and Beetee have all lost their district partners. I cross to Peeta and wrap my arms around him, and for a while we all stay silent.

"Let's get off this stinking island," Johanna says finally. There's only the matter of our weapons now, which we've largely retained. Fortunately the vines here are strong and the spile and tube of medicine wrapped in the parachute are still secured to my belt. Finnick strips off his undershirt and ties it around the wound Enobaria's knife made in his thigh; it's not deep. Beetee thinks he can walk now, if we go slowly, so I help him up. We decide to head to the beach at twelve o'clock. That should provide hours of calm and keep us clear of any poisonous residue. And then Peeta, Johanna, and Finnick head off in three different directions.

"Twelve o'clock, right?" says Peeta. "The tail points at twelve."

"Before they spun us," says Finnick. "I was judging by the sun."

"The sun only tells you it's going on four, Finnick," I say.

"I think Katniss's point is, knowing the time doesn't mean you necessarily know where four is on the clock. You might have a general idea of the direction. Unless you consider that they may have shifted the outer ring of jungle as well," says Beetee.

No, Katniss's point was a lot more basic than that. Beetee's articulated a theory far beyond my comment on the sun. But I just nod my head like I've been on the same page all along. "Yes, so any one of these paths could lead to twelve o'clock," I say.

We circle around the Cornucopia, scrutinizing the jungle. It has a baffling uniformity. I remember the tall tree that took the first lightning strike at twelve o'clock, but every sector has a similar tree. Johanna thinks to follow Enobaria's and Brutus's tracks, but they have been blown or washed away. There's no way to tell where anything is. "I should have never mentioned the clock," I say bitterly. "Now they've taken that advantage away as well."

“Only temporarily,” says Beetee. “At ten, we’ll see the wave again and be back on track.”

“Yes, they can’t redesign the whole arena,” says Peeta.

“It doesn’t matter,” says Johanna impatiently. “You had to tell us or we never would have moved our camp in the first place, brainless.” Ironically, her logical, if demeaning, reply is the only one that comforts me. Yes, I had to tell them to get them to move. “Come on, I need water. Anyone have a good gut feeling?”

We randomly choose a path and take it, having no idea what number we’re headed for. When we reach the jungle, we peer into it, trying to decipher what may be waiting inside.

“Well, it must be monkey hour. And I don’t see any of them in there,” says Peeta. “I’m going to try to tap a tree.”

“No, it’s my turn,” says Finnick.

“I’ll at least watch your back,” Peeta says.

“Katniss can do that,” says Johanna. “We need you to make another map. The other washed away.” She yanks a large leaf off a tree and hands it to him.

For a moment, I’m suspicious they’re trying to divide and kill us. But it doesn’t make sense. I’ll have the advantage on Finnick if he’s dealing with the tree and Peeta’s much bigger than Johanna. So I follow Finnick about fifteen yards into the jungle, where he finds a good tree and starts stabbing to make a hole with his knife.

As I stand there, weapons ready, I can’t lose the uneasy feeling that something is going on and that it has to do with Peeta. I retrace our steps, starting from the moment the gong rang out, searching for the source of my discomfort. Finnick towing Peeta in off his metal plate. Finnick reviving Peeta after the force field stopped his heart. Mags running into the fog so that Finnick could carry Peeta. The morphling hurling herself in front of him to block the monkey’s attack. The fight with the Careers was so quick, but didn’t Finnick block Brutus’s spear from hitting Peeta even though it meant taking Enobaria’s knife in his leg? And even now Johanna has him drawing a map on a leaf rather than risking the jungle...

There is no question about it. For reasons completely unfathomable to me, some of the other victors are trying to keep him alive, even if it means sacrificing themselves.

I'm dumbfounded. For one thing, that's my job. For another, it doesn't make sense. Only one of us can get out. So why have they chosen Peeta to protect? What has Haymitch possibly said to them, what has he bargained with to make them put Peeta's life above their own?

I know my own reasons for keeping Peeta alive. He's my friend, and this is my way to defy the Capitol, to subvert its terrible Games. But if I had no real ties to him, what would make me want to save him, to choose him over myself? Certainly he is brave, but we have all been brave enough to survive a Games. There is that quality of goodness that's hard to overlook, but still... and then I think of it, what Peeta can do so much better than the rest of us. He can use words. He obliterated the rest of the field at both interviews. And maybe it's because of that underlying goodness that he can move a crowd—no, a country—to his side with the turn of a simple sentence.

I remember thinking that was the gift the leader of our revolution should have. Has Haymitch convinced the others of this? That Peeta's tongue would have far greater power against the Capitol than any physical strength the rest of us could claim? I don't know. It still seems like a really long leap for some of the tributes. I mean, we're talking about Johanna Mason here. But what other explanation can there be for their decided efforts to keep him alive?

"Katniss, got that spile?" Finnick asks, snapping me back to reality. I cut the vine that ties the spile to my belt and hold the metal tube out to him.

That's when I hear the scream. So full of fear and pain it ices my blood. And so familiar. I drop the spile, forget where I am or what lies ahead, only know I must reach her, protect her. I run wildly in the direction of the voice, heedless of danger, ripping through vines and branches, through anything that keeps me from reaching her.

From reaching my little sister.

Where is she? What are they doing to her? “Prim!” I cry out. “Prim!” Only another agonized scream answers me. *How did she get here? Why is she part of the Games?* “Prim!”

Vines cut into my face and arms, creepers grab my feet. But I am getting closer to her. Closer. Very close now. Sweat pours down my face, stinging the healing acid wounds. I pant, trying to get some use out of the warm, moist air that seems empty of oxygen. Prim makes a sound—such a lost, irretrievable sound—that I can’t even imagine what they have done to evoke it.

“Prim!” I rip through a wall of green into a small clearing and the sound repeats directly above me. Above me? My head whips back. Do they have her up in the trees? I desperately search the branches but see nothing. “Prim?” I say pleadingly. I hear her but can’t see her. Her next wail rings out, clear as a bell, and there’s no mistaking the source. It’s coming from the mouth of a small, crested black bird perched on a branch about ten feet over my head. And then I understand.

It’s a jabberjay.

I’ve never seen one before—I thought they no longer existed—and for a moment, as I lean against the trunk of the tree, clutching the stitch in my side, I examine it. The muttation, the forerunner, the father. I pull up a mental image of a mockingbird, fuse it with the jabberjay, and yes, I can see how they mated to make my mockingjay. There is nothing about the bird that suggests it’s a mutt. Nothing except the horribly lifelike sounds of Prim’s voice streaming from its mouth. I silence it with an arrow in its throat. The bird falls to the ground. I remove my arrow and wring its neck for good measure. Then I hurl the revolting thing into the jungle. No degree of hunger would ever tempt me to eat it.

It wasn’t real, I tell myself. The same way the muttation wolves last year weren’t really the dead tributes. It’s just a sadistic trick of the Gamemakers.

Finnick crashes into the clearing to find me wiping my arrow clean with some moss. “Katniss?”

“It’s okay. I’m okay,” I say, although I don’t feel okay at all. “I thought I heard my sister but—” The piercing shriek cuts me off. It’s another voice, not Prim’s, maybe a young woman’s. I don’t recognize it. But the effect on Finnick is instantaneous. The color vanishes from his face and I can actually see his pupils dilate in fear. “Finnick, wait!” I say, reaching out to reassure him, but he’s bolted away. Gone off in pursuit of the victim, as mindlessly as I pursued Prim. “Finnick!” I call, but I know he won’t turn back and wait for me to give a rational explanation. So all I can do is follow him.

It’s no effort to track him, even though he’s moving so fast, since he leaves a clear, trampled path in his wake. But the bird is at least a quarter mile away, most of it uphill, and by the time I reach him, I’m winded. He’s circling around a giant tree. The trunk must be four feet in diameter and the limbs don’t even begin until twenty feet up. The woman’s shrieks emanate from somewhere in the foliage, but the jabberjay’s concealed. Finnick’s screaming as well, over and over. “Annie! Annie!” He’s in a state of panic and completely unreachable, so I do what I would do anyway. I scale an adjacent tree, locate the jabberjay, and take it out with an arrow. It falls straight down, landing right at Finnick’s feet. He picks it up, slowly making the connection, but when I slide down to join him, he looks more despairing than ever.

“It’s all right, Finnick. It’s just a jabberjay. They’re playing a trick on us,” I say. “It’s not real. It’s not your...Annie.”

“No, it’s not Annie. But the voice was hers. Jabberjays mimic what they hear. Where did they get those screams, Katniss?” he says.

I can feel my own cheeks grow pale as I understand his meaning. “Oh, Finnick, you don’t think they...”

“Yes. I do. That’s exactly what I think,” he says.

I have an image of Prim in a white room, strapped to a table, while masked, robed figures elicit those sounds from her. Somewhere they are torturing her, or did torture her, to get those sounds. My knees turn to water and I sink to the ground. Finnick is trying to tell me something, but I can’t hear him. What I do finally hear is another bird starting up somewhere off to my left. And this time, the voice is Gale’s.

Finnick catches my arm before I can run. “No. It’s not him.” He starts pulling me downhill, toward the beach. “We’re getting out of here!” But Gale’s voice is so full of pain I can’t help struggling to reach it. “It’s not him, Katniss! It’s a mutt!” Finnick shouts at me. “Come on!” He moves me along, half dragging, half carrying me, until I can process what he said. He’s right, it’s just another jabberjay. I can’t help Gale by chasing it down. But that doesn’t change the fact that it is Gale’s voice, and somewhere, sometime, someone has made him sound like this.

I stop fighting Finnick, though, and like the night in the fog, I flee what I can’t fight. What can only do me harm. Only this time it’s my heart and not my body that’s disintegrating. This must be another weapon of the clock. Four o’clock, I guess. When the hands tick-tock onto the four, the monkeys go home and the jabberjays come out to play. Finnick is right—getting out of here is the only thing to do. Although there will be nothing Haymitch can send in a parachute that will help either Finnick or me recover from the wounds the birds have inflicted.

I catch sight of Peeta and Johanna standing at the tree line and I’m filled with a mixture of relief and anger. Why didn’t Peeta come to help me? Why did no one come after us? Even now he hangs back, his hands raised, palms toward us, lips moving but no words reaching us. Why?

The wall is so transparent, Finnick and I run smack into it and bounce back onto the jungle floor. I’m lucky. My shoulder took the worst of the impact, whereas Finnick hit face-first and now his nose is gushing blood. This is why Peeta and Johanna and even Beetee, who I see sadly shaking his head behind them, have not come to our aid. An invisible barrier blocks the area in front of us. It’s not a force field. You can touch the hard, smooth surface all you like. But Peeta’s knife and Johanna’s ax can’t make a dent in it. I know, without checking more than a few feet to one side, that it encloses the entire four-to-five-o’clock wedge. That we will be trapped like rats until the hour passes.

Peeta presses his hand against the surface and I put my own up to meet it, as if I can feel him through the wall. I see his lips moving but I can’t hear him, can’t hear anything outside our wedge. I try to make out what he’s saying, but I can’t focus, so I just stare at his face, doing my best to hang on to my sanity.

Then the birds begin to arrive. One by one. Perching in the surrounding branches. And a carefully orchestrated chorus of horror begins to spill out of their mouths. Finnick gives up at once, hunching on the ground, clenching his hands over his ears as if he's trying to crush his skull. I try to fight for a while. Emptying my quiver of arrows into the hated birds. But every time one drops dead, another quickly takes its place. And finally I give up and curl up beside Finnick, trying to block out the excruciating sounds of Prim, Gale, my mother, Madge, Rory, Vick, even Posy, helpless little Posy...

I know it's stopped when I feel Peeta's hands on me, feel myself lifted from the ground and out of the jungle. But I stay eyes squeezed shut, hands over my ears, muscles too rigid to release. Peeta holds me on his lap, speaking soothing words, rocking me gently. It takes a long time before I begin to relax the iron grip on my body. And when I do, the trembling begins.

"It's all right, Katniss," he whispers.

"You didn't hear them," I answer.

"I heard Prim. Right in the beginning. But it wasn't her," he says. "It was a jabberjay."

"It was her. Somewhere. The jabberjay just recorded it," I say.

"No, that's what they want you to think. The same way I wondered if Glimmer's eyes were in that mutt last year. But those weren't Glimmer's eyes. And that wasn't Prim's voice. Or if it was, they took it from an interview or something and distorted the sound. Made it say whatever she was saying," he says.

"No, they were torturing her," I answer. "She's probably dead."

"Katniss, Prim isn't dead. How could they kill Prim? We're almost down to the final eight of us. And what happens then?" Peeta says.

"Seven more of us die," I say hopelessly.

"No, back home. What happens when they reach the final eight tributes in the Games?" He lifts my chin so I have to look at him. Forces me to make eye contact. "What happens? At the final eight?"

I know he's trying to help me, so I make myself think. "At the final eight?" I repeat. "They interview your family and friends back home."

"That's right," says Peeta. "They interview your family and friends. And can they do that if they've killed them all?"

"No?" I ask, still unsure.

“No. That’s how we know Prim’s alive. She’ll be the first one they interview, won’t she?” he asks.

I want to believe him. Badly. It’s just...those voices...

“First Prim. Then your mother. Your cousin, Gale. Madge,” he continues. “It was a trick, Katniss. A horrible one. But we’re the only ones who can be hurt by it. We’re the ones in the Games. Not them.”

“You really believe that?” I say.

“I really do,” says Peeta. I waver, thinking of how Peeta can make anyone believe anything. I look over at Finnick for confirmation, see he’s fixated on Peeta, his words.

“Do you believe it, Finnick?” I ask.

“It could be true. I don’t know,” he says. “Could they do that, Beetee? Take someone’s regular voice and make it...”

“Oh, yes. It’s not even that difficult, Finnick. Our children learn a similar technique in school,” says Beetee.

“Of course Peeta’s right. The whole country adores Katniss’s little sister. If they really killed her like this, they’d probably have an uprising on their hands,” says Johanna flatly. “Don’t want that, do they?” She throws back her head and shouts, “Whole country in rebellion? Wouldn’t want anything like that!”

My mouth drops open in shock. No one, ever, says anything like this in the Games. Absolutely, they’ve cut away from Johanna, are editing her out. But I have heard her and can never think about her again in the same way. She’ll never win any awards for kindness, but she certainly is gutsy. Or crazy. She picks up some shells and heads toward the jungle. “I’m getting water,” she says.

I can’t help catching her hand as she passes me. “Don’t go in there. The birds—” I remember the birds must be gone, but I still don’t want anyone in there. Not even her.

“They can’t hurt me. I’m not like the rest of you. There’s no one left I love,” Johanna says, and frees her hand with an impatient shake. When she brings me back a shell of water, I take it with a silent nod of thanks, knowing how much she would despise the pity in my voice.

While Johanna collects water and my arrows, Beetee fiddles with his wire, and Finnick takes to the water. I need to clean up, too, but I stay in Peeta’s arms, still too shaken to move.

“Who did they use against Finnick?” he asks.

“Somebody named Annie,” I say.

“Must be Annie Cresta,” he says.

“Who?” I ask.

“Annie Cresta. She was the girl Mags volunteered for. She won about five years ago,” says Peeta.

That would have been the summer after my father died, when I first began feeding my family, when my whole being was occupied with battling starvation. “I don’t remember those Games much,” I say. “Was that the earthquake year?”

“Yeah. Annie’s the one who went mad when her district partner got beheaded. Ran off by herself and hid. But an earthquake broke a dam and most of the arena got flooded. She won because she was the best swimmer,” says Peeta.

“Did she get better after?” I ask. “I mean, her mind?”

“I don’t know. I don’t remember ever seeing her at the Games again. But she didn’t look too stable during the reaping this year,” says Peeta.

So that’s who Finnick loves, I think. Not his string of fancy lovers in the Capitol. But a poor, mad girl back home.

A cannon blast brings us all together on the beach. A hovercraft appears in what we estimate to be the six-to-seven-o’clock zone. We watch as the claw dips down five different times to retrieve the pieces of one body, torn apart. It’s impossible to tell who it was. Whatever happens at six o’clock, I never want to know.

Peeta draws a new map on a leaf, adding a *JJ* for jabberjays in the four-to-five-o’clock section and simply writing *beast* in the one where we saw the tribute collected in pieces. We now have a good idea of what seven of the hours will bring. And if there’s any positive to the jabberjay attack, it’s that it let us know where we are on the clock face again.

Finnick weaves yet another water basket and a net for fishing. I take a quick swim and put more ointment on my skin. Then I sit at the edge of the water, cleaning the fish Finnick catches and watching the sun drop below the horizon. The bright moon is already on the rise, filling the arena with that strange twilight. We’re about to settle down to our meal of raw fish when the anthem begins. And then the faces...

Cashmere. Gloss. Wiress. Mags. The woman from District 5. The morphling who gave her life for Peeta. Blight. The man from 10.

Eight dead. Plus eight from the first night. Two-thirds of us gone in a day and a half. That must be some kind of record.

"They're really burning through us," says Johanna.

"Who's left? Besides us five and District Two?" asks Finnick.

"Chaff," says Peeta, without needing to think about it. Perhaps he's been keeping an eye out for him because of Haymitch.

A parachute comes down with a pile of bite-sized square-shaped rolls. "These are from your district, right, Beetee?" Peeta asks.

"Yes, from District Three," he says. "How many are there?"

Finnick counts them, turning each one over in his hands before he sets it in a neat configuration. I don't know what it is with Finnick and bread, but he seems obsessed with handling it. "Twenty-four," he says.

"An even two dozen, then?" says Beetee.

"Twenty-four on the nose," says Finnick. "How should we divide them?"

"Let's each have three, and whoever is still alive at breakfast can take a vote on the rest," says Johanna. I don't know why this makes me laugh a little. I guess because it's true. When I do, Johanna gives me a look that's almost approving. No, not approving. But maybe slightly pleased.

We wait until the giant wave has flooded out of the ten-to-eleven-o'clock section, wait for the water to recede, and then go to that beach to make camp. Theoretically, we should have a full twelve hours of safety from the jungle. There's an unpleasant chorus of clicking, probably from some evil type of insect, coming from the eleven-to-twelve-o'clock wedge. But whatever is making the sound stays within the confines of the jungle and we keep off that part of the beach in case they're just waiting for a carelessly placed footfall to swarm out.

I don't know how Johanna's still on her feet. She's only had about an hour of sleep since the Games started. Peeta and I volunteer for the first watch because we're better rested, and because we want some time alone. The others go out immediately, although Finnick's sleep is restless. Every now and then I hear him murmuring Annie's name.

Peeta and I sit on the damp sand, facing away from each other, my right shoulder and hip pressed against his. I watch the water as he watches the jungle, which is better for me. I'm still haunted by the voices of the

jabberjays, which unfortunately the insects can't drown out. After a while I rest my head against his shoulder. Feel his hand caress my hair.

"Katniss," he says softly, "it's no use pretending we don't know what the other one is trying to do." No, I guess there isn't, but it's no fun discussing it, either. Well, not for us, anyway. The Capitol viewers will be glued to their sets so they don't miss one wretched word.

"I don't know what kind of deal you think you've made with Haymitch, but you should know he made me promises as well." Of course, I know this, too. He told Peeta they could keep me alive so that he wouldn't be suspicious. "So I think we can assume he was lying to one of us."

This gets my attention. A double deal. A double promise. With only Haymitch knowing which one is real. I raise my head, meet Peeta's eyes. "Why are you saying this now?"

"Because I don't want you forgetting how different our circumstances are. If you die, and I live, there's no life for me at all back in District Twelve. You're my whole life," he says. "I would never be happy again." I start to object but he puts a finger to my lips. "It's different for you. I'm not saying it wouldn't be hard. But there are other people who'd make your life worth living."

Peeta pulls the chain with the gold disk from around his neck. He holds it in the moonlight so I can clearly see the mockingjay. Then his thumb slides along a catch I didn't notice before and the disk pops open. It's not solid, as I had thought, but a locket. And within the locket are photos. On the right side, my mother and Prim, laughing. And on the left, Gale. Actually smiling.

There is nothing in the world that could break me faster at this moment than these three faces. After what I heard this afternoon...it is the perfect weapon.

"Your family needs you, Katniss," Peeta says.

My family. My mother. My sister. And my pretend cousin Gale. But Peeta's intention is clear. That Gale really is my family, or will be one day, if I live. That I'll marry him. So Peeta's giving me his life and Gale at the same time. To let me know I shouldn't ever have doubts about it. Everything. That's what Peeta wants me to take from him.

I wait for him to mention the baby, to play to the cameras, but he doesn't. And that's how I know that none of this is part of the Games. That he is telling me the truth about what he feels.

“No one really needs me,” he says, and there’s no selfpity in his voice. It’s true his family doesn’t need him. They will mourn him, as will a handful of friends. But they will get on. Even Haymitch, with the help of a lot of white liquor, will get on. I realize only one person will be damaged beyond repair if Peeta dies. Me.

“I do,” I say. “I need you.” He looks upset, takes a deep breath as if to begin a long argument, and that’s no good, no good at all, because he’ll start going on about Prim and my mother and everything and I’ll just get confused. So before he can talk, I stop his lips with a kiss.

I feel that thing again. The thing I only felt once before. In the cave last year, when I was trying to get Haymitch to send us food. I kissed Peeta about a thousand times during those Games and after. But there was only one kiss that made me feel something stir deep inside. Only one that made me want more. But my head wound started bleeding and he made me lie down.

This time, there is nothing but us to interrupt us. And after a few attempts, Peeta gives up on talking. The sensation inside me grows warmer and spreads out from my chest, down through my body, out along my arms and legs, to the tips of my being. Instead of satisfying me, the kisses have the opposite effect, of making my need greater. I thought I was something of an expert on hunger, but this is an entirely new kind.

It’s the first crack of the lightning storm—the bolt hitting the tree at midnight—that brings us to our senses. It rouses Finnick as well. He sits up with a sharp cry. I see his fingers digging into the sand as he reassures himself that whatever nightmare he inhabited wasn’t real.

“I can’t sleep anymore,” he says. “One of you should rest.” Only then does he seem to notice our expressions, the way we’re wrapped around each other. “Or both of you. I can watch alone.”

Peeta won’t let him, though. “It’s too dangerous,” he says. “I’m not tired. You lie down, Katniss.” I don’t object because I do need to sleep if I’m to be of any use keeping him alive. I let him lead me over to where the others are. He puts the chain with the locket around my neck, then rests his hand over the spot where our baby would be. “You’re going to make a great mother, you know,” he says. He kisses me one last time and goes back to Finnick.

His reference to the baby signals that our time-out from the Games is over. That he knows the audience will be wondering why he hasn’t used the most persuasive argument in his arsenal. That sponsors must be manipulated.

But as I stretch out on the sand I wonder, could it be more? Like a reminder to me that I could still one day have kids with Gale? Well, if that was it, it was a mistake. Because for one thing, that's never been part of my plan. And for another, if only one of us can be a parent, anyone can see it should be Peeta.

As I drift off, I try to imagine that world, somewhere in the future, with no Games, no Capitol. A place like the meadow in the song I sang to Rue as she died. Where Peeta's child could be safe.

When I wake, I have a brief, delicious feeling of happiness that is somehow connected with Peeta. Happiness, of course, is a complete absurdity at this point, since at the rate things are going, I'll be dead in a day. And that's the best-case scenario, if I'm able to eliminate the rest of the field, including myself, and get Peeta crowned as the winner of the Quarter Quell. Still, the sensation's so unexpected and sweet I cling to it, if only for a few moments. Before the gritty sand, the hot sun, and my itching skin demand a return to reality.

Everyone's already up and watching the descent of a parachute to the beach. I join them for another delivery of bread. It's identical to the one we received the night before. Twenty-four rolls from District 3. That gives us thirty-three in all. We each take five, leaving eight in reserve. No one says it, but eight will divide up perfectly after the next death. Somehow, in the light of day, joking about who will be around to eat the rolls has lost its humor.

How long can we keep this alliance? I don't think anyone expected the number of tributes to drop so quickly. What if I am wrong about the others protecting Peeta? If things were simply coincidental, or it's all been a strategy to win our trust to make us easy prey, or I don't understand what's actually going on? Wait, there's no ifs about that. I *don't* understand what's going on. And if I don't, it's time for Peeta and me to clear out of here.

I sit next to Peeta on the sand to eat my rolls. For some reason, it's difficult to look at him. Maybe it was all that kissing last night, although the two of us kissing isn't anything new. It might not even have felt any different for him. Maybe it's knowing the brief amount of time we have left. And how we're working at such cross-purposes when it comes to who should survive these Games.

After we eat, I take his hand and tug him toward the water. "Come on. I'll teach you how to swim." I need to get him away from the others where we can discuss breaking away. It will be tricky, because once they realize we're severing the alliance, we'll be instant targets.

If I was really teaching him to swim, I'd make him take off the belt since it keeps him afloat, but what does it matter now? So I just show him the basic stroke and let him practice going back and forth in waist-high water. At first, I notice Johanna keeping a careful eye on us, but eventually she loses interest and goes to take a nap. Finnick's weaving a new net out of vines and Beetee plays with his wire. I know the time has come.

While Peeta has been swimming, I've discovered something. My remaining scabs are starting to peel off. By gently rubbing a handful of sand up and down my arm, I clean off the rest of the scales, revealing fresh new skin underneath. I stop Peeta's practice, on the pretext of showing him how to rid himself of the itchy scabs, and as we scrub ourselves, I bring up our escape.

"Look, the pool is down to eight. I think it's time we took off," I say under my breath, although I doubt any of the tributes can hear me.

Peeta nods, and I can see him considering my proposition. Weighing if the odds will be in our favor. "Tell you what," he says. "Let's stick around until Brutus and Enobaria are dead. I think Beetee's trying to put together some kind of trap for them now. Then, I promise, we'll go."

I'm not entirely convinced. But if we leave now, we'll have two sets of adversaries after us. Maybe three, because who knows what Chaff's up to? Plus the clock to contend with. And then there's Beetee to think of. Johanna only brought him for me, and if we leave she'll surely kill him. Then I remember. I can't protect Beetee, too. There can only be one victor and it has to be Peeta. I must accept this. I must make decisions based on his survival only.

"All right," I say. "We'll stay until the Careers are dead. But that's the end of it." I turn and wave to Finnick. "Hey, Finnick, come on in! We figured out how to make you pretty again!"

The three of us scour all the scabs from our bodies, helping with the others' backs, and come out the same pink as the sky. We apply another round of medicine because the skin seems too delicate for the sunlight, but it doesn't look half as bad on smooth skin and will be good camouflage in the jungle.

Beetee calls us over, and it turns out that during all those hours of fiddling with wire, he has indeed come up with a plan. "I think we'll all agree our next job is to kill Brutus and Enobaria," he says mildly. "I doubt

they'll attack us openly again, now that they're so outnumbered. We could track them down, I suppose, but it's dangerous, exhausting work."

"Do you think they've figured out about the clock?" I ask.

"If they haven't, they'll figure it out soon enough. Perhaps not as specifically as we have. But they must know that at least some of the zones are wired for attacks and that they're reoccurring in a circular fashion. Also, the fact that our last fight was cut off by Gamemaker intervention will not have gone unnoticed by them. We know it was an attempt to disorient us, but they must be asking themselves why it was done, and this, too, may lead them to the realization that the arena's a clock," says Beetee. "So I think our best bet will be setting our own trap."

"Wait, let me get Johanna up," says Finnick. "She'll be rabid if she thinks she missed something this important."

"Or not," I mutter, since she's always pretty much rabid, but I don't stop him, because I'd be angry myself if I was excluded from a plan at this point.

When she's joined us, Beetee shoos us all back a bit so he can have room to work in the sand. He swiftly draws a circle and divides it into twelve wedges. It's the arena, not rendered in Peeta's precise strokes but in the rough lines of a man whose mind is occupied by other, far more complex things. "If you were Brutus and Enobaria, knowing what you do now about the jungle, where would you feel safest?" Beetee asks. There's nothing patronizing in his voice, and yet I can't help thinking he reminds me of a schoolteacher about to ease children into a lesson. Perhaps it's the age difference, or simply that Beetee is probably about a million times smarter than the rest of us.

"Where we are now. On the beach," says Peeta. "It's the safest place."

"So why aren't they on the beach?" says Beetee.

"Because we're here," says Johanna impatiently.

"Exactly. We're here, claiming the beach. Now where would you go?" says Beetee.

I think about the deadly jungle, the occupied beach. "I'd hide just at the edge of the jungle. So I could escape if an attack came. And so I could spy on us."

"Also to eat," Finnick says. "The jungle's full of strange creatures and plants. But by watching us, I'd know the seafood's safe."

Beetee smiles at us as if we've exceeded his expectations. "Yes, good. You do see. Now here's what I propose: a twelve o'clock strike. What happens exactly at noon and at midnight?"

"The lightning bolt hits the tree," I say.

"Yes. So what I'm suggesting is that after the bolt hits at noon, but before it hits at midnight, we run my wire from that tree all the way down into the saltwater, which is, of course, highly conductive. When the bolt strikes, the electricity will travel down the wire and into not only the water but also the surrounding beach, which will still be damp from the ten o'clock wave. Anyone in contact with those surfaces at that moment will be electrocuted," says Beetee.

There's a long pause while we all digest Beetee's plan. It seems a bit fantastical to me, impossible even. But why? I've set thousands of snares. Isn't this just a larger snare with a more scientific component? Could it work? How can we even question it, we tributes trained to gather fish and lumber and coal? What do we know about harnessing power from the sky?

Peeta takes a stab at it. "Will that wire really be able to conduct that much power, Beetee? It looks so fragile, like it would just burn up."

"Oh, it will. But not until the current has passed through it. It will act something like a fuse, in fact. Except the electricity will travel along it," says Beetee.

"How do you know?" asks Johanna, clearly not convinced.

"Because I invented it," says Beetee, as if slightly surprised. "It's not actually wire in the usual sense. Nor is the lightning natural lightning nor the tree a real tree. You know trees better than any of us, Johanna. It would be destroyed by now, wouldn't it?"

"Yes," she says glumly.

"Don't worry about the wire—it will do just what I say," Beetee assures us.

"And where will we be when this happens?" asks Finnick.

"Far enough up in the jungle to be safe," Beetee replies.

"The Careers will be safe, too, then, unless they're in the vicinity of the water," I point out.

"That's right," says Beetee.

"But all the seafood will be cooked," says Peeta.

“Probably more than cooked,” says Beetee. “We will most likely be eliminating that as a food source for good. But you found other edible things in the jungle, right, Katniss?”

“Yes. Nuts and rats,” I say. “And we have sponsors.”

“Well, then. I don’t see that as a problem,” says Beetee. “But as we are allies and this will require all our efforts, the decision of whether or not to attempt it is up to you four.”

We *are* like schoolchildren. Completely unable to dispute his theory with anything but the most elementary concerns. Most of which don’t even have anything to do with his actual plan. I look at the others’ disconcerted faces. “Why not?” I say. “If it fails, there’s no harm done. If it works, there’s a decent chance we’ll kill them. And even if we don’t and just kill the seafood, Brutus and Enobaria lose it as a food source, too.”

“I say we try it,” says Peeta. “Katniss is right.”

Finnick looks at Johanna and raises his eyebrows. He will not go forward without her. “All right,” she says finally. “It’s better than hunting them down in the jungle, anyway. And I doubt they’ll figure out our plan, since we can barely understand it ourselves.”

Beetee wants to inspect the lightning tree before he has to rig it. Judging by the sun, it’s about nine in the morning. We have to leave our beach soon, anyway. So we break camp, walk over to the beach that borders the lightning section, and head into the jungle. Beetee’s still too weak to hike up the slope on his own, so Finnick and Peeta take turns carrying him. I let Johanna lead because it’s a pretty straight shot up to the tree, and I figure she can’t get us too lost. Besides, I can do a lot more damage with a sheath of arrows than she can with two axes, so I’m the best one to bring up the rear.

The dense, muggy air weighs on me. There’s been no break from it since the Games began. I wish Haymitch would stop sending us that District 3 bread and get us some more of that District 4 stuff, because I’ve sweated out buckets in the last two days, and even though I’ve had the fish, I’m craving salt. A piece of ice would be another good idea. Or a cold drink of water. I’m grateful for the fluid from the trees, but it’s the same temperature as the seawater and the air and the other tributes and me. We’re all just one big, warm stew.

As we near the tree, Finnick suggests I take the lead. “Katniss can hear the force field,” he explains to Beetee and Johanna.

“Hear it?” asks Beetee.

“Only with the ear the Capitol reconstructed,” I say. Guess who I’m not fooling with that story? Beetee. Because surely he remembers that he showed me how to spot a force field, and probably it’s impossible to hear force fields, anyway. But, for whatever reason, he doesn’t question my claim.

“Then by all means, let Katniss go first,” he says, pausing a moment to wipe the steam off his glasses. “Force fields are nothing to play around with.”

The lightning tree’s unmistakable as it towers so high above the others. I find a bunch of nuts and make everybody wait while I move slowly up the slope, tossing the nuts ahead of me. But I see the force field almost immediately, even before a nut hits it, because it’s only about fifteen yards away. My eyes, which are sweeping the greenery before me, catch sight of the rippled square high up and to my right. I throw a nut directly in front of me and hear it sizzle in confirmation.

“Just stay below the lightning tree,” I tell the others.

We divide up duties. Finnick guards Beetee while he examines the tree, Johanna taps for water, Peeta gathers nuts, and I hunt nearby. The tree rats don’t seem to have any fear of humans, so I take down three easily. The sound of the ten o’clock wave reminds me I should get back, and I return to the others and clean my kill. Then I draw a line in the dirt a few feet from the force field as a reminder to keep back, and Peeta and I settle down to roast nuts and sear cubes of rat.

Beetee is still messing around the tree, doing I don’t know what, taking measurements and such. At one point he snaps off a sliver of bark, joins us, and throws it against the force field. It bounces back and lands on the ground, glowing. In a few moments it returns to its original color. “Well, that explains a lot,” says Beetee. I look at Peeta and can’t help biting my lip to keep from laughing since it explains absolutely nothing to anyone but Beetee.

About this time we hear the sound of clicks rising from the sector adjacent to us. That means it’s eleven o’clock. It’s far louder in the jungle than it was on the beach last night. We all listen intently.

“It’s not mechanical,” Beetee says decidedly.

“I’d guess insects,” I say. “Maybe beetles.”

“Something with pincers,” adds Finnick.

The sound swells, as if alerted by our quiet words to the proximity of live flesh. Whatever is making that clicking, I bet it could strip us to the bone in seconds.

“We should get out of here, anyway,” says Johanna. “There’s less than an hour before the lightning starts.”

We don’t go that far, though. Only to the identical tree in the blood-rain section. We have a picnic of sorts, squatting on the ground, eating our jungle food, waiting for the bolt that signals noon. At Beetee’s request, I climb up into the canopy as the clicking begins to fade out. When the lightning strikes, it’s dazzling, even from here, even in this bright sunlight. It completely encompasses the distant tree, making it glow a hot blue-white and causing the surrounding air to crackle with electricity. I swing down and report my findings to Beetee, who seems satisfied, even if I’m not terribly scientific.

We take a circuitous route back to the ten o’clock beach. The sand is smooth and damp, swept clean by the recent wave. Beetee essentially gives us the afternoon off while he works with the wire. Since it’s his weapon and the rest of us have to defer to his knowledge so entirely, there’s the odd feeling of being let out of school early. At first we take turns having naps in the shadowy edge of the jungle, but by late afternoon everyone is awake and restless. We decide, since this might be our last chance for seafood, to make a sort of feast of it. Under Finnick’s guidance we spear fish and gather shellfish, even dive for oysters. I like this last part best, not because I have any great appetite for oysters. I only ever tasted them once, in the Capitol, and I couldn’t get around the sliminess. But it’s lovely, deep down under the water, like being in a different world. The water’s very clear, and schools of bright-hued fish and strange sea flowers decorate the sand floor.

Johanna keeps watch while Finnick, Peeta, and I clean and lay out the seafood. Peeta’s just pried open an oyster when I hear him give a laugh. “Hey, look at this!” He holds up a glistening, perfect pearl about the size of a pea. “You know, if you put enough pressure on coal it turns to pearls,” he says earnestly to Finnick.

“No, it doesn’t,” says Finnick dismissively. But I crack up, remembering that’s how a clueless Effie Trinket presented us to the people of the Capitol last year, before anyone knew us. As coal pressured into pearls by our weighty existence. Beauty that arose out of pain.

Peeta rinses the pearl off in the water and hands it to me. "For you." I hold it out on my palm and examine its iridescent surface in the sunlight. Yes, I will keep it. For the few remaining hours of my life I will keep it close. This last gift from Peeta. The only one I can really accept. Perhaps it will give me strength in the final moments.

"Thanks," I say, closing my fist around it. I look coolly into the blue eyes of the person who is now my greatest opponent, the person who would keep me alive at his own expense. And I promise myself I will defeat his plan.

The laughter drains from those eyes, and they are staring so intensely into mine, it's like they can read my thoughts. "The locket didn't work, did it?" Peeta says, even though Finnick is right there. Even though everyone can hear him. "Katniss?"

"It worked," I say.

"But not the way I wanted it to," he says, averting his glance. After that he will look at nothing but oysters.

Just as we're about to eat, a parachute appears bearing two supplements to our meal. A small pot of spicy red sauce and yet another round of rolls from District 3. Finnick, of course, immediately counts them. "Twenty-four again," he says.

Thirty-two rolls, then. So we each take five, leaving seven, which will never divide equally. It's bread for only one.

The salty fish flesh, the succulent shellfish. Even the oysters seem tasty, vastly improved by the sauce. We gorge ourselves until no one can hold another bite, and even then there are leftovers. They won't keep, though, so we toss all the remaining food back into the water so the Careers won't get it when we leave. No one bothers about the shells. The wave should clear those away.

There's nothing to do now but wait. Peeta and I sit at the edge of the water, hand in hand, wordless. He gave his speech last night but it didn't change my mind, and nothing I can say will change his. The time for persuasive gifts is over.

I have the pearl, though, secured in a parachute with the spile and the medicine at my waist. I hope it makes it back to District 12.

Surely my mother and Prim will know to return it to Peeta before they bury my body.

The anthem begins, but there are no faces in the sky tonight. The audience will be restless, thirsting for blood. Beetee's trap holds enough promise, though, that the Gamemakers haven't sent in other attacks. Perhaps they are simply curious to see if it will work.

At what Finnick and I judge to be about nine, we leave our shell-strewn camp, cross to the twelve o'clock beach, and begin to quietly hike up to the lightning tree in the light of the moon. Our full stomachs make us more uncomfortable and breathless than we were on the morning's climb. I begin to regret those last dozen oysters.

Beetee asks Finnick to assist him, and the rest of us stand guard. Before he even attaches any wire to the tree, Beetee unrolls yards and yards of the stuff. He has Finnick secure it tightly around a broken branch and lay it on the ground. Then they stand on either side of the tree, passing the spool back and forth as they wrap the wire around and around the trunk. At first it seems arbitrary, then I see a pattern, like an intricate maze, appearing in the moonlight on Beetee's side. I wonder if it makes any difference how the wire's placed, or if this is merely to add to the speculation of the audience. I bet most of them know as much about electricity as I do.

The work on the trunk's completed just as we hear the wave begin. I've never really worked out at what point in the ten o'clock hour it erupts. There must be some buildup, then the wave itself, then the aftermath of the flooding. But the sky tells me ten-thirty.

This is when Beetee reveals the rest of the plan. Since we move most swiftly through the trees, he wants Johanna and me to take the coil down through the jungle, unwinding the wire as we go. We are to lay it across the twelve o'clock beach and drop the metal spool, with whatever is left, deep into the water, making sure it sinks. Then run for the jungle. If we go now, right now, we should make it to safety.

"I want to go with them as a guard," Peeta says immediately. After the moment with the pearl, I know he's less willing than ever to let me out of his sight.

“You’re too slow. Besides, I’ll need you on this end. Katniss will guard,” says Beetee. “There’s no time to debate this. I’m sorry. If the girls are to get out of there alive, they need to move now.” He hands the coil to Johanna.

I don’t like the plan any more than Peeta does. How can I protect him at a distance? But Beetee’s right. With his leg, Peeta is too slow to make it down the slope in time. Johanna and I are the fastest and most sure-footed on the jungle floor. I can’t think of any alternative. And if I trust anyone here besides Peeta, it’s Beetee.

“It’s okay,” I tell Peeta. “We’ll just drop the coil and come straight back up.”

“Not into the lightning zone,” Beetee reminds me. “Head for the tree in the one-to-two-o’clock sector. If you find you’re running out of time, move over one more. Don’t even think about going back on the beach, though, until I can assess the damage.”

I take Peeta’s face in my hands. “Don’t worry. I’ll see you at midnight.” I give him a kiss and, before he can object any further, I let go and turn to Johanna. “Ready?”

“Why not?” says Johanna with a shrug. She’s clearly no happier about being teamed up than I am. But we’re all caught up in Beetee’s trap. “You guard, I’ll unwind. We can trade off later.”

Without further discussion, we head down the slope. In fact there’s very little discussion between us at all. We move at a pretty good clip, one manning the coil, the other keeping watch. About halfway down, we hear the clicking beginning to rise, indicating it’s after eleven.

“Better hurry,” Johanna says. “I want to put a lot of distance between me and that water before the lightning hits. Just in case Volts miscalculated something.”

“I’ll take the coil for a while,” I say. It’s harder work laying out the wire than guarding, and she’s had a long turn.

“Here,” Johanna says, passing me the coil.

Both of our hands are still on the metal cylinder when there’s a slight vibration. Suddenly the thin golden wire from above springs down at us, bunching in tangled loops and curls around our wrists. Then the severed end snakes up to our feet.

It only takes a second to register this rapid turn of events. Johanna and I look at each other, but neither of us has to say it. Someone not far above us

has cut the wire. And they will be on us at any moment.

My hand frees itself from the wire and has just closed on the feathers of an arrow when the metal cylinder smashes into the side of my head. The next thing I know, I'm lying on my back in the vines, a terrible pain in my left temple. Something's wrong with my eyes. My vision blurs in and out of focus as I strain to make the two moons floating up in the sky into one. It's hard to breathe, and I realize Johanna's sitting on my chest, pinning me at the shoulders with her knees.

There's a stab in my left forearm. I try to jerk away but I'm still too incapacitated. Johanna's digging something, I guess the point of her knife, into my flesh, twisting it around. There's an excruciating ripping sensation and warmth runs down my wrist, filling my palm. She swipes down my arm and coats half my face with my blood.

"Stay down!" she hisses. Her weight leaves my body and I'm alone.

Stay down? I think. *What? What is happening?* My eyes shut, blocking out the inconsistent world, as I try to make sense of my situation.

All I can think of is Johanna shoving Wiress to the beach. "*Just stay down, will you?*" But she didn't attack Wiress. Not like this. I'm not Wiress, anyway. I'm not Nuts. "*Just stay down, will you?*" echoes around inside my brain.

Footsteps coming. Two pairs. Heavy, not trying to conceal their whereabouts.

Brutus's voice. "She's good as dead! Come on, Enobaria!" Feet moving into the night.

Am I? I drift in and out of consciousness looking for an answer. Am I as good as dead? I'm in no position to make an argument to the contrary. In fact, rational thinking is a struggle. This much I know. Johanna attacked me. Smashed that cylinder into my head. Cut my arm, probably doing irreparable damage to veins and arteries, and then Brutus and Enobaria showed up before she had time to finish me off.

The alliance is over. Finnick and Johanna must have had an agreement to turn on us tonight. I knew we should have left this morning. I don't know where Beetee stands. But I'm fair game, and so is Peeta.

Peeta! My eyes fly open in panic. Peeta is waiting up by the tree, unsuspecting and off guard. Maybe Finnick has even killed him already. "No," I whisper. That wire was cut from a short distance away by the

Careers. Finnick and Beetee and Peeta—they can't know what's going on down here. They can only be wondering what has happened, why the wire has gone slack or maybe even sprung back to the tree. This, in itself, can't be a signal to kill, can it? Surely this was just Johanna deciding the time had come to break with us. Kill me. Escape from the Careers. Then bring Finnick into the fight as soon as possible.

I don't know. I don't know. I only know that I must get back to Peeta and keep him alive. It takes every ounce of will I have to push up into a sitting position and drag myself up the side of a tree to my feet. It's lucky I have something to hold on to because the jungle's tilting back and forth. Without any warning, I lean forward and vomit up the seafood feast, heaving until there can't possibly be an oyster left in my body. Trembling and slick with sweat, I assess my physical condition.

As I lift up my damaged arm, blood sprays me in the face and the world makes another alarming shift. I squeeze my eyes shut and cling to the tree until things steady a little. Then I take a few careful steps to a neighboring tree, pull off some moss, and without examining the wound further, tightly bandage my arm. Better. Definitely better not to see it. Then I allow my hand to tentatively touch my head wound. There's a huge lump but not too much blood. Obviously I've got some internal damage, but I don't seem in danger of bleeding to death. At least not through my head.

I dry my hands on moss and get a shaky grip on my bow with my damaged left arm. Secure the notch of an arrow to the string. Make my feet move up the slope.

Peeta. My dying wish. My promise. To keep him alive. My heart lifts a bit when I realize he must be alive because no cannon has fired. Maybe Johanna was acting alone, knowing Finnick would side with her once her intentions were clear. Although it's hard to guess what goes on between those two. I think of how he looked to her for confirmation before he'd agree to help set Beetee's trap. There's a much deeper alliance based on years of friendship and who knows what else. Therefore, if Johanna has turned on me, I should no longer trust Finnick.

I reach this conclusion only seconds before I hear someone running down the slope toward me. Neither Peeta nor Beetee could move at this pace. I duck behind a curtain of vines, concealing myself just in time. Finnick flies by me, his skin shadowy with medicine, leaping through the undergrowth like

a deer. He soon reaches the sight of my attack, must see the blood. “Johanna! Katniss!” he calls. I stay put until he goes in the direction Johanna and the Careers took.

I move as quickly as I can without sending the world into a whirl. My head throbs with the rapid beat of my heart. The insects, possibly excited by the smell of blood, have increased their clicking until it’s a continuous roar in my ears. No, wait. Maybe my ears are actually ringing from the hit. Until the insects shut up, it will be impossible to tell. But when the insects go silent, the lightning will start. I have to move faster. I have to get to Peeta.

The boom of a cannon pulls me up short. Someone has died. I know that with everyone running around armed and scared right now, it could be anybody. But whoever it is, I believe the death will trigger a kind of free-for-all out here in the night. People will kill first and wonder about their motives later. I force my legs into a run.

Something snags my feet and I sprawl out on the ground. I feel it wrapping around me, entwining me in sharp fibers. A net! This must be one of Finnick’s fancy nets, positioned to trap me, and he must be nearby, trident in hand. I flail around for a moment, only working the web more tightly around me, and then I catch a glimpse of it in the moonlight. Confused, I lift my arm and see it’s entangled in shimmering golden threads. It’s not one of Finnick’s nets at all, but Beetee’s wire. I carefully rise to my feet and find I’m in a patch of the stuff that caught on a trunk on its way back to the lightning tree. Slowly I disengage myself from the wire, step out of its reach, and continue uphill.

On the good side, I’m on the right path and have not been so disoriented by the head injury as to lose my sense of direction. On the bad side, the wire has reminded me of the oncoming lightning storm. I can still hear the insects, but are they starting to fade?

I keep the loops of wire a few feet to my left as a guide as I run but take great care not to touch them. If those insects are fading and the first bolt is about to strike the tree, then all its power will come surging down that wire and anyone in contact with it will die.

The tree swims into view, its trunk festooned with gold. I slow down, try to move with some stealth, but I’m really just lucky to be upright. I look for a sign of the others. No one. No one is there. “Peeta?” I call softly. “Peeta?”

A soft moan answers me and I whip around to find a figure lying higher up on the ground. “Beetee!” I exclaim. I hurry and kneel beside him. The moan must have been involuntary. He’s not conscious, although I can see no wound except a gash below the crook of his elbow. I grab a nearby handful of moss and clumsily wrap it while I try to rouse him. “Beetee! Beetee, what’s going on! Who cut you? Beetee!” I shake him in the way you should never shake an injured person, but I don’t know what else to do. He moans again and briefly raises a hand to ward me off.

This is when I notice he’s holding a knife, one Peeta was carrying earlier, I think, which is wrapped loosely in wire. Perplexed, I stand and lift the wire, confirming it’s attached back at the tree. It takes me a moment to remember the second, much shorter strand that Beetee wound around a branch and left on the ground before he even began his design on the tree. I’d thought it had some electrical significance, had been set aside to be used later. But it never was, because there’s probably a good twenty, twenty-five yards here.

I squint hard up the hill and realize we’re only a few paces from the force field. There’s the telltale square, high up and to my right, just as it was this morning. What did Beetee do? Did he actually try to drive the knife into the force field the way Peeta did by accident? And what’s the deal with the wire? Was this his backup plan? If electrifying the water failed, did he mean to send the lightning bolt’s energy into the force field? What would that do, anyway? Nothing? A great deal? Fry us all? The force field must mostly be energy, too, I guess. The one in the Training Center was invisible. This one seems to somehow mirror the jungle. But I’ve seen it falter when Peeta’s knife struck it and when my arrows hit. The real world lies right behind it.

My ears are not ringing. It was the insects after all. I know that now because they are dying out quickly and I hear nothing but the jungle sounds. Beetee is useless. I can’t rouse him. I can’t save him. I don’t know what he was trying to do with the knife and the wire and he’s incapable of explaining. The moss bandage on my arm is soaked and there’s no use fooling myself. I’m so light-headed I’ll black out in a matter of minutes. I’ve got to get away from this tree and—

“Katniss!” I hear his voice though he’s a far distance away. But what is he doing? Peeta must have figured out that everyone is hunting us by now. “Katniss!”

I can't protect him. I can't move fast or far and my shooting abilities are questionable at best. I do the one thing I can to draw the attackers away from him and over to me. "Peeta!" I scream out. "Peeta! I'm here! Peeta!" Yes, I will draw them in, any in my vicinity, away from Peeta and over to me and the lightning tree that will soon be a weapon in and of itself. "I'm here! I'm here!" He won't make it. Not with that leg in the night. He will never make it in time. "Peeta!"

It's working. I can hear them coming. Two of them. Crashing through the jungle. My knees start to give out and I sink down next to Beetee, resting my weight on my heels. My bow and arrow lift into position. If I can take them out, will Peeta survive the rest?

Enobaria and Finnick reach the lightning tree. They can't see me, sitting above them on the slope, my skin camouflaged in ointment. I home in on Enobaria's neck. With any luck, when I kill her, Finnick will duck behind the tree for cover just as the lightning bolt strikes. And it will be any second. There's only a faint insect click here and there. I can kill them now. I can kill them both.

Another cannon.

"Katniss!" Peeta's voice howls for me. But this time I don't answer. Beetee still breathes faintly beside me. He and I will soon die. Finnick and Enobaria will die. Peeta is alive. Two cannons have sounded. Brutus, Johanna, Chaff. Two of them are already dead. That will leave Peeta with only one tribute to kill. And that is the very best I can do. One enemy.

Enemy. Enemy. The word is tugging at a recent memory. Pulling it into the present. The look on Haymitch's face. "*Katniss, when you're in the arena...*" The scowl, the misgiving. "*What?*" I hear my own voice tighten as I bristle at some unspoken accusation. "*You just remember who the enemy is,*" Haymitch says. "*That's all.*"

Haymitch's last words of advice to me. Why would I need reminding? I have always known who the enemy is. Who starves and tortures and kills us in the arena. Who will soon kill everyone I love.

My bow drops as his meaning registers. Yes, I know who the enemy is. And it's not Enobaria.

I finally see Beetee's knife with clear eyes. My shaking hands slide the wire from the hilt, wind it around the arrow just above the feathers, and secure it with a knot picked up in training.

I rise, turning to the force field, fully revealing myself but no longer caring. Only caring about where I should direct my tip, where Beetee would have driven the knife if he'd been able to choose. My bow tilts up at the wavering square, the flaw, the...what did he call it that day? The chink in the armor. I let the arrow fly, see it hit its mark and vanish, pulling the thread of gold behind it.

My hair stands on end and the lightning strikes the tree.

A flash of white runs up the wire, and for just a moment, the dome bursts into a dazzling blue light. I'm thrown backward to the ground, body useless, paralyzed, eyes frozen wide, as feathery bits of matter rain down on me. I can't reach Peeta. I can't even reach my pearl. My eyes strain to capture one last image of beauty to take with me.

Right before the explosions begin, I find a star.

Everything seems to erupt at once. The earth explodes into showers of dirt and plant matter. Trees burst into flames. Even the sky fills with brightly colored blossoms of light. I can't think why the sky's being bombed until I realize the Gamemakers are shooting off fireworks up there, while the real destruction occurs on the ground. Just in case it's not enough fun watching the obliteration of the arena and the remaining tributes. Or perhaps to illuminate our gory ends.

Will they let anyone survive? Will there be a victor of the Seventy-fifth Hunger Games? Maybe not. After all, what is this Quarter Quell but...what was it President Snow read from the card?

"...a reminder to the rebels that even the strongest among them cannot overcome the power of the Capitol..."

Not even the strongest of the strong will triumph. Perhaps they never intended to have a victor in these Games at all. Or perhaps my final act of rebellion forced their hand.

I'm sorry, Peeta, I think. I'm sorry I couldn't save you. Save him? More likely I stole his last chance at life, condemned him, by destroying the force field. Maybe, if we had all played by the rules, they might have let him live.

The hovercraft materializes above me without warning. If it was quiet, and a mockingjay perched close at hand, I would have heard the jungle go silent and then the bird's call that precedes the appearance of the Capitol's aircraft. But my ears could never make out anything so delicate in this bombardment.

The claw drops from the underside until it's directly overhead. The metal talons slide under me. I want to scream, run, smash my way out of it but I'm frozen, helpless to do anything but fervently hope I'll die before I reach the shadowy figures awaiting me above. They have not spared my life to crown me victor but to make my death as slow and public as possible.

My worst fears are confirmed when the face that greets me inside the hovercraft belongs to Plutarch Heavensbee, Head Gamemaker. What a mess I have made of his beautiful Games with the clever ticking clock and the field

of victors. He will suffer for his failure, probably lose his life, but not before he sees me punished. His hand reaches for me, I think to strike me, but he does something worse. With his thumb and his forefinger, he slides my eyelids shut, sentencing me to the vulnerability of darkness. They can do anything to me now and I will not even see it coming.

My heart pounds so hard the blood begins to stream from beneath my soaked moss bandage. My thoughts grow foggy. Possibly I can bleed to death before they can revive me after all. In my mind, I whisper a thank-you to Johanna Mason for the excellent wound she inflicted as I black out.

When I swim back into semiconsciousness, I can feel I'm lying on a padded table. There's the pinching sensation of tubes in my left arm. They are trying to keep me alive because, if I slide quietly, privately into death, it will be a victory. I'm still largely unable to move, open my eyelids, raise my head. But my right arm has regained a little motion. It flops across my body, feeling like a flipper, no, something less animated, like a club. I have no real motor coordination, no proof that I even still have fingers. Yet I manage to swing my arm around until I rip the tubes out. A beeping goes off but I can't stay awake to find out who it will summon.

The next time I surface, my hands are tied down to the table, the tubes back in my arm. I can open my eyes and lift my head slightly, though. I'm in a large room with low ceilings and a silvery light. There are two rows of beds facing each other. I can hear the breathing of what I assume are my fellow victors. Directly across from me I see Beetee with about ten different machines hooked up to him. *Just let us die!* I scream in my mind. I slam my head back hard on the table and go out again.

When I finally, truly, wake up, the restraints are gone. I raise my hand and find I have fingers that can move at my command again. I push myself to a sitting position and hold on to the padded table until the room settles into focus. My left arm is bandaged but the tubes dangle off stands by the bed.

I'm alone except for Beetee, who still lies in front of me, being sustained by his army of machines. Where are the others, then? Peeta, Finnick, Enobaria, and...and...one more, right? Either Johanna or Chaff or Brutus was still alive when the bombs began. I'm sure they'll want to make an example of us all. But where have they taken them? Moved them from hospital to prison?

“Peeta...” I whisper. I so wanted to protect him. Am still resolved to. Since I have failed to keep him safe in life, I must find him, kill him now before the Capitol gets to choose the agonizing means of his death. I slide my legs off the table and look around for a weapon. There are a few syringes sealed in sterile plastic on a table near Beetee’s bed. Perfect. All I’ll need is air and a clear shot at one of his veins.

I pause for a moment, consider killing Beetee. But if I do, the monitors will start beeping and I’ll be caught before I get to Peeta. I make a silent promise to return and finish him off if I can.

I’m naked except for a thin nightgown, so I slip the syringe under the bandage that covers the wound on my arm. There are no guards at the door. No doubt I’m miles beneath the Training Center or in some Capitol stronghold, and the possibility of my escape is nonexistent. It doesn’t matter. I’m not escaping, just finishing a job.

I creep down a narrow hallway to a metal door that stands slightly ajar. Someone is behind it. I take out the syringe and grip it in my hand. Flattening myself against the wall, I listen to the voices inside.

“Communications are down in Seven, Ten, and Twelve. But Eleven has control of transportation now, so there’s at least a hope of them getting some food out.”

Plutarch Heavensbee. I think. Although I’ve only really spoken with him once. A hoarse voice asks a question.

“No, I’m sorry. There’s no way I can get you to Four. But I’ve given special orders for her retrieval if possible. It’s the best I can do, Finnick.”

Finnick. My mind struggles to make sense of the conversation, of the fact that it’s taking place between Plutarch Heavensbee and Finnick. Is he so near and dear to the Capitol that he’ll be excused his crimes? Or did he really have no idea what Beetee intended? He croaks out something else. Something heavy with despair.

“Don’t be stupid. That’s the worst thing you could do. Get her killed for sure. As long as *you’re* alive, they’ll keep *her* alive for bait,” says Haymitch.

Says Haymitch! I bang through the door and stumble into the room. Haymitch, Plutarch, and a very beat-up Finnick sit around a table laid with a meal no one is eating. Daylight streams in the curved windows, and in the distance I see the top of a forest of trees. We are flying.

“Done knocking yourself out, sweetheart?” says Haymitch, the annoyance clear in his voice. But as I careen forward he steps up and catches my wrists, steadying me. He looks at my hand. “So it’s you and a syringe against the Capitol? See, this is why no one lets you make the plans.” I stare at him uncomprehendingly. “Drop it.” I feel the pressure increase on my right wrist until my hand is forced to open and I release the syringe. He settles me in a chair next to Finnick.

Plutarch puts a bowl of broth in front of me. A roll. Slips a spoon into my hand. “Eat,” he says in a much kinder voice than Haymitch used.

Haymitch sits directly in front of me. “Katniss, I’m going to explain what happened. I don’t want you to ask any questions until I’m through. Do you understand?”

I nod numbly. And this is what he tells me.

There was a plan to break us out of the arena from the moment the Quell was announced. The victor tributes from 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, and 11 had varying degrees of knowledge about it. Plutarch Heavensbee has been, for several years, part of an undercover group aiming to overthrow the Capitol. He made sure the wire was among the weapons. Beetee was in charge of blowing a hole in the force field. The bread we received in the arena was code for the time of the rescue. The district where the bread originated indicated the day. Three. The number of rolls the hour. Twenty-four. The hovercraft belongs to District 13. Bonnie and Twill, the women I met in the woods from 8, were right about its existence and its defense capabilities. We are currently on a very roundabout journey to District 13. Meanwhile, most of the districts in Panem are in full-scale rebellion.

Haymitch stops to see if I am following. Or maybe he is done for the moment.

It’s an awful lot to take in, this elaborate plan in which I was a piece, just as I was meant to be a piece in the Hunger Games. Used without consent, without knowledge. At least in the Hunger Games, I knew I was being played with.

My supposed friends have been a lot more secretive.

“You didn’t tell me.” My voice is as ragged as Finnick’s.

“Neither you nor Peeta were told. We couldn’t risk it,” says Plutarch. “I was even worried you might mention my indiscretion with the watch during the Games.” He pulls out his pocket watch and runs his thumb across the

crystal, lighting up the mockingjay. “Of course, when I showed you this, I was merely tipping you off about the arena. As a mentor. I thought it might be a first step toward gaining your trust. I never dreamed you’d be a tribute again.”

“I still don’t understand why Peeta and I weren’t let in on the plan,” I say.

“Because once the force field blew, you’d be the first ones they’d try to capture, and the less you knew, the better,” says Haymitch.

“The first ones? Why?” I say, trying to hang on to the train of thought.

“For the same reason the rest of us agreed to die to keep you alive,” says Finnick.

“No, Johanna tried to kill me,” I say.

“Johanna knocked you out to cut the tracker from your arm and lead Brutus and Enobaria away from you,” says Haymitch.

“What?” My head aches so and I want them to stop talking in circles. “I don’t know what you’re—”

“We had to save you because you’re the mockingjay, Katniss,” says Plutarch. “While you live, the revolution lives.”

The bird, the pin, the song, the berries, the watch, the cracker, the dress that burst into flames. I am the mockingjay. The one that survived despite the Capitol’s plans. The symbol of the rebellion.

It’s what I suspected in the woods when I found Bonnie and Twill escaping. Though I never really understood the magnitude. But then, I wasn’t meant to understand. I think of Haymitch’s sneering at my plans to flee District 12, start my own uprising, even the very notion that District 13 could exist. Subterfuges and deceptions. And if he could do that, behind his mask of sarcasm and drunkenness, so convincingly and for so long, what else has he lied about? I know what else.

“Peeta,” I whisper, my heart sinking.

“The others kept Peeta alive because if he died, we knew there’d be no keeping you in an alliance,” says Haymitch. “And we couldn’t risk leaving you unprotected.” His words are matter-of-fact, his expression unchanged, but he can’t hide the tinge of gray that colors his face.

“Where is Peeta?” I hiss at him.

“He was picked up by the Capitol along with Johanna and Enobaria,” says Haymitch. And finally he has the decency to drop his gaze.

Technically, I am unarmed. But no one should ever underestimate the harm that fingernails can do, especially if the target is unprepared. I lunge across the table and rake mine down Haymitch's face, causing blood to flow and damage to one eye. Then we are both screaming terrible, terrible things at each other, and Finnick is trying to drag me out, and I know it's all Haymitch can do not to rip me apart, but I'm the mockingjay. I'm the mockingjay and it's too hard keeping me alive as it is.

Other hands help Finnick and I'm back on my table, my body restrained, my wrists tied down, so I slam my head in fury again and again against the table. A needle pokes my arm and my head hurts so badly I stop fighting and simply wail in a horrible, dying-animal way, until my voice gives out.

The drug causes sedation, not sleep, so I am trapped in fuzzy, dully aching misery for what seems like always. They reinsert their tubes and talk to me in soothing voices that never reach me. All I can think of is Peeta, lying on a similar table somewhere, while they try to break him for information he doesn't even have.

"Katniss. Katniss, I'm sorry." Finnick's voice comes from the bed next to me and slips into my consciousness. Perhaps because we're in the same kind of pain. "I wanted to go back for him and Johanna, but I couldn't move."

I don't answer. Finnick Odair's good intentions mean less than nothing.

"It's better for him than Johanna. They'll figure out he doesn't know anything pretty fast. And they won't kill him if they think they can use him against you," says Finnick.

"Like bait?" I say to the ceiling. "Like how they'll use Annie for bait, Finnick?"

I can hear him weeping but I don't care. They probably won't even bother to question her, she's so far gone. Gone right off the deep end years ago in her Games. There's a good chance I'm headed in the same direction. Maybe I'm already going crazy and no one has the heart to tell me. I feel crazy enough.

"I wish she was dead," he says. "I wish they were all dead and we were, too. It would be best."

Well, there's no good response to that. I can hardly dispute it since I was walking around with a syringe to kill Peeta when I found them. Do I really want him dead? What I want...what I want is to have him back. But I'll never get him back now. Even if the rebel forces could somehow overthrow the

Capitol, you can be sure President Snow's last act would be to cut Peeta's throat. No. I will never get him back. So then dead is best.

But will Peeta know that or will he keep fighting? He's so strong and such a good liar. Does he think he has a chance of surviving? Does he even care if he does? He wasn't planning on it, anyway. He had already signed off on life. Maybe, if he knows I was rescued, he's even happy. Feels he fulfilled his mission to keep me alive.

I think I hate him even more than I do Haymitch.

I give up. Stop speaking, responding, refuse food and water. They can pump whatever they want into my arm, but it takes more than that to keep a person going once she's lost the will to live. I even have a funny notion that if I do die, maybe Peeta will be allowed to live. Not as a free person but as an Avox or something, waiting on the future tributes of District 12. Then maybe he could find some way to escape. My death could, in fact, still save him.

If it can't, no matter. It's enough to die of spite. To punish Haymitch, who, of all the people in this rotting world, has turned Peeta and me into pieces in his Games. I trusted him. I put what was precious in Haymitch's hands. And he has betrayed me.

"See, this is why no one lets you make the plans," he said.

That's true. No one in their right mind would let me make the plans. Because I obviously can't tell a friend from an enemy.

A lot of people come by to talk to me, but I make all their words sound like the clicking of the insects in the jungle. Meaningless and distant. Dangerous, but only if approached. Whenever the words start to become distinct, I moan until they give me more painkiller and that fixes things right up.

Until one time, I open my eyes and find someone I cannot block out looking down at me. Someone who will not plead, or explain, or think he can alter my design with entreaties, because he alone really knows how I operate.

"Gale," I whisper.

"Hey, Catnip." He reaches down and pushes a strand of hair out of my eyes. One side of his face has been burned fairly recently. His arm is in a sling, and I can see bandages under his miner's shirt. What has happened to him? How is he even here? Something very bad has happened back home.

It is not so much a question of forgetting Peeta as remembering the others. All it takes is one look at Gale and they come surging into the present, demanding to be acknowledged.

“Prim?” I gasp.

“She’s alive. So is your mother. I got them out in time,” he says.

“They’re not in District Twelve?” I ask.

“After the Games, they sent in planes. Dropped firebombs.” He hesitates. “Well, you know what happened to the Hob.”

I do know. I saw it go up. That old warehouse embedded with coal dust. The whole district’s covered with the stuff. A new kind of horror begins to rise up inside me as I imagine firebombs hitting the Seam.

“They’re not in District Twelve?” I repeat. As if saying it will somehow fend off the truth.

“Katniss,” Gale says softly.

I recognize that voice. It’s the same one he uses to approach wounded animals before he delivers a deathblow. I instinctively raise my hand to block his words but he catches it and holds on tightly.

“Don’t,” I whisper.

But Gale is not one to keep secrets from me. “Katniss, there is no District Twelve.”

END OF BOOK TWO

MOCKINGJAY

SUZANNE COLLINS



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For Cap, Charlie, and Isabel

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PART I
“THE ASHES”

I stare down at my shoes, watching as a fine layer of ash settles on the worn leather. This is where the bed I shared with my sister, Prim, stood. Over there was the kitchen table. The bricks of the chimney, which collapsed in a charred heap, provide a point of reference for the rest of the house. How else could I orient myself in this sea of gray?

Almost nothing remains of District 12. A month ago, the Capitol's firebombs obliterated the poor coal miners' houses in the Seam, the shops in the town, even the Justice Building. The only area that escaped incineration was the Victor's Village. I don't know why exactly. Perhaps so anyone forced to come here on Capitol business would have somewhere decent to stay. The odd reporter. A committee assessing the condition of the coal mines. A squad of Peacekeepers checking for returning refugees.

But no one is returning except me. And that's only for a brief visit. The authorities in District 13 were against my coming back. They viewed it as a costly and pointless venture, given that at least a dozen invisible hovercraft are circling overhead for my protection and there's no intelligence to be gained. I had to see it, though. So much so that I made it a condition of my cooperating with any of their plans.

Finally, Plutarch Heavensbee, the Head Gamemaker who had organized the rebels in the Capitol, threw up his hands. "Let her go. Better to waste a day than another month. Maybe a little tour of Twelve is just what she needs to convince her we're on the same side."

The same side. A pain stabs my left temple and I press my hand against it. Right on the spot where Johanna Mason hit me with the coil of wire. The memories swirl as I try to sort out what is true and what is false. What series of events led me to be standing in the ruins of my city? This is hard because the effects of the concussion she gave me haven't completely subsided and my thoughts still have a tendency to jumble together. Also, the drugs they use to control my pain and mood sometimes make me see things. I guess. I'm still not entirely convinced that I was hallucinating the night the floor of my hospital room transformed into a carpet of writhing snakes.

I use a technique one of the doctors suggested. I start with the simplest things I know to be true and work toward the more complicated. The list begins to roll in my head....

My name is Katniss Everdeen. I am seventeen years old. My home is District 12. I was in the Hunger Games. I escaped. The Capitol hates me. Peeta was taken prisoner. He is thought to be dead. Most likely he is dead. It is probably best if he is dead....

“Katniss. Should I come down?” My best friend Gale’s voice reaches me through the headset the rebels insisted I wear. He’s up in a hovercraft, watching me carefully, ready to swoop in if anything goes amiss. I realize I’m crouched down now, elbows on my thighs, my head braced between my hands. I must look on the verge of some kind of breakdown. This won’t do. Not when they’re finally weaning me off the medication.

I straighten up and wave his offer away. “No. I’m fine.” To reinforce this, I begin to move away from my old house and in toward the town. Gale asked to be dropped off in 12 with me, but he didn’t force the issue when I refused his company. He understands I don’t want anyone with me today. Not even him. Some walks you have to take alone.

The summer’s been scorching hot and dry as a bone. There’s been next to no rain to disturb the piles of ash left by the attack. They shift here and there, in reaction to my footsteps. No breeze to scatter them. I keep my eyes on what I remember as the road, because when I first landed in the Meadow, I wasn’t careful and I walked right into a rock. Only it wasn’t a rock—it was someone’s skull. It rolled over and over and landed faceup, and for a long time I couldn’t stop looking at the teeth, wondering whose they were, thinking of how mine would probably look the same way under similar circumstances.

I stick to the road out of habit, but it’s a bad choice, because it’s full of the remains of those who tried to flee. Some were incinerated entirely. But others, probably overcome with smoke, escaped the worst of the flames and now lie reeking in various states of decomposition, carrion for scavengers, blanketed by flies. *I killed you*, I think as I pass a pile. *And you. And you.*

Because I did. It was my arrow, aimed at the chink in the force field surrounding the arena, that brought on this firestorm of retribution. That sent the whole country of Panem into chaos.

In my head I hear President Snow’s words, spoken the morning I was to begin the Victory Tour. “*Katniss Everdeen, the girl who was on fire, you*

have provided a spark that, left unattended, may grow to an inferno that destroys Panem.” It turns out he wasn’t exaggerating or simply trying to scare me. He was, perhaps, genuinely attempting to enlist my help. But I had already set something in motion that I had no ability to control.

Burning. Still burning, I think numbly. The fires at the coal mines belch black smoke in the distance. There’s no one left to care, though. More than ninety percent of the district’s population is dead. The remaining eight hundred or so are refugees in District 13—which, as far as I’m concerned, is the same thing as being homeless forever.

I know I shouldn’t think that; I know I should be grateful for the way we have been welcomed. Sick, wounded, starving, and empty-handed. Still, I can never get around the fact that District 13 was instrumental in 12’s destruction. This doesn’t absolve me of blame—there’s plenty of blame to go around. But without them, I would not have been part of a larger plot to overthrow the Capitol or had the wherewithal to do it.

The citizens of District 12 had no organized resistance movement of their own. No say in any of this. They only had the misfortune to have me. Some survivors think it’s good luck, though, to be free of District 12 at last. To have escaped the endless hunger and oppression, the perilous mines, the lash of our final Head Peacekeeper, Romulus Thread. To have a new home at all is seen as a wonder since, up until a short time ago, we hadn’t even known that District 13 still existed.

The credit for the survivors’ escape has landed squarely on Gale’s shoulders, although he’s loath to accept it. As soon as the Quarter Quell was over—as soon as I had been lifted from the arena—the electricity in District 12 was cut, the televisions went black, and the Seam became so silent, people could hear one another’s heartbeats. No one did anything to protest or celebrate what had happened in the arena. Yet within fifteen minutes, the sky was filled with hoverplanes and the bombs were raining down.

It was Gale who thought of the Meadow, one of the few places not filled with old wooden homes embedded with coal dust. He herded those he could in its direction, including my mother and Prim. He formed the team that pulled down the fence—now just a harmless chain-link barrier, with the electricity off—and led the people into the woods. He took them to the only place he could think of, the lake my father had shown me as a child. And it was from there they watched the distant flames eat up everything they knew in the world.

By dawn the bombers were long gone, the fires dying, the final stragglers rounded up. My mother and Prim had set up a medical area for the injured and were attempting to treat them with whatever they could glean from the woods. Gale had two sets of bows and arrows, one hunting knife, one fishing net, and over eight hundred terrified people to feed. With the help of those who were able-bodied, they managed for three days. And that's when the hovercraft unexpectedly arrived to evacuate them to District 13, where there were more than enough clean, white living compartments, plenty of clothing, and three meals a day. The compartments had the disadvantage of being underground, the clothing was identical, and the food was relatively tasteless, but for the refugees of 12, these were minor considerations. They were safe. They were being cared for. They were alive and eagerly welcomed.

This enthusiasm was interpreted as kindness. But a man named Dalton, a District 10 refugee who'd made it to 13 on foot a few years ago, leaked the real motive to me. "They need you. Me. They need us all. Awhile back, there was some sort of pox epidemic that killed a bunch of them and left a lot more infertile. New breeding stock. That's how they see us." Back in 10, he'd worked on one of the beef ranches, maintaining the genetic diversity of the herd with the implantation of long-frozen cow embryos. He's very likely right about 13, because there don't seem to be nearly enough kids around. But so what? We're not being kept in pens, we're being trained for work, the children are being educated. Those over fourteen have been given entry-level ranks in the military and are addressed respectfully as "Soldier." Every single refugee was granted automatic citizenship by the authorities of 13.

Still, I hate them. But, of course, I hate almost everybody now. Myself more than anyone.

The surface beneath my feet hardens, and under the carpet of ash, I feel the paving stones of the square. Around the perimeter is a shallow border of refuse where the shops stood. A heap of blackened rubble has replaced the Justice Building. I walk to the approximate site of the bakery Peeta's family owned. Nothing much left but the melted lump of the oven. Peeta's parents, his two older brothers—none of them made it to 13. Fewer than a dozen of what passed for District 12's well-to-do escaped the fire. Peeta would have nothing to come home to, anyway. Except me...

I back away from the bakery and bump into something, lose my balance, and find myself sitting on a hunk of sun-heated metal. I puzzle over what it

might have been, then remember Thread's recent renovations of the square. Stocks, whipping posts, and this, the remains of the gallows. Bad. This is bad. It brings on the flood of images that torments me, awake or asleep. Peeta being tortured—drowned, burned, lacerated, shocked, maimed, beaten—as the Capitol tries to get information about the rebellion that he doesn't know. I squeeze my eyes shut and try to reach for him across the hundreds and hundreds of miles, to send my thoughts into his mind, to let him know he is not alone. But he is. And I can't help him.

Running. Away from the square and to the one place the fire did not destroy. I pass the wreckage of the mayor's house, where my friend Madge lived. No word of her or her family. Were they evacuated to the Capitol because of her father's position, or left to the flames? Ashes billow up around me, and I pull the hem of my shirt up over my mouth. It's not wondering what I breathe in, but who, that threatens to choke me.

The grass has been scorched and the gray snow fell here as well, but the twelve fine houses of the Victor's Village are unscathed. I bolt into the house I lived in for the past year, slam the door closed, and lean back against it. The place seems untouched. Clean. Eerily quiet. Why did I come back to 12? How can this visit help me answer the question I can't escape?

"What am I going to do?" I whisper to the walls. Because I really don't know.

People keep talking at me, talking, talking, talking. Plutarch Heavensbee. His calculating assistant, Fulvia Cardew. A mishmash of district leaders. Military officials. But not Alma Coin, the president of 13, who just watches. She's fifty or so, with gray hair that falls in an unbroken sheet to her shoulders. I'm somewhat fascinated by her hair, since it's so uniform, so without a flaw, a wisp, even a split end. Her eyes are gray, but not like those of people from the Seam. They're very pale, as if almost all the color has been sucked out of them. The color of slush that you wish would melt away.

What they want is for me to truly take on the role they designed for me. The symbol of the revolution. The Mockingjay. It isn't enough, what I've done in the past, defying the Capitol in the Games, providing a rallying point. I must now become the actual leader, the face, the voice, the embodiment of the revolution. The person who the districts—most of which are now openly at war with the Capitol—can count on to blaze the path to victory. I won't have to do it alone. They have a whole team of people to make me over, dress me, write my speeches, orchestrate my appearances—as if *that* doesn't

sound horribly familiar—and all I have to do is play my part. Sometimes I listen to them and sometimes I just watch the perfect line of Coin's hair and try to decide if it's a wig. Eventually, I leave the room because my head starts to ache or it's time to eat or if I don't get aboveground I might start screaming. I don't bother to say anything. I simply get up and walk out.

Yesterday afternoon, as the door was closing behind me, I heard Coin say, "I told you we should have rescued the boy first." Meaning Peeta. I couldn't agree more. He would've been an excellent mouthpiece.

And who did they fish out of the arena instead? Me, who won't cooperate. Beetee, an older inventor from 3, who I rarely see because he was pulled into weapons development the minute he could sit upright. Literally, they wheeled his hospital bed into some top secret area and now he only occasionally shows up for meals. He's very smart and very willing to help the cause, but not really firebrand material. Then there's Finnick Odair, the sex symbol from the fishing district, who kept Peeta alive in the arena when I couldn't. They want to transform Finnick into a rebel leader as well, but first they'll have to get him to stay awake for more than five minutes. Even when he is conscious, you have to say everything to him three times to get through to his brain. The doctors say it's from the electrical shock he received in the arena, but I know it's a lot more complicated than that. I know that Finnick can't focus on anything in 13 because he's trying so hard to see what's happening in the Capitol to Annie, the mad girl from his district who's the only person on earth he loves.

Despite serious reservations, I had to forgive Finnick for his role in the conspiracy that landed me here. He, at least, has some idea of what I'm going through. And it takes too much energy to stay angry with someone who cries so much.

I move through the downstairs on hunter's feet, reluctant to make any sound. I pick up a few remembrances: a photo of my parents on their wedding day, a blue hair ribbon for Prim, the family book of medicinal and edible plants. The book falls open to a page with yellow flowers and I shut it quickly because it was Peeta's brush that painted them.

What am I going to do?

Is there any point in doing anything at all? My mother, my sister, and Gale's family are finally safe. As for the rest of 12, people are either dead, which is irreversible, or protected in 13. That leaves the rebels in the districts. Of course, I hate the Capitol, but I have no confidence that my being

the Mockingjay will benefit those who are trying to bring it down. How can I help the districts when every time I make a move, it results in suffering and loss of life? The old man shot in District 11 for whistling. The crackdown in 12 after I intervened in Gale's whipping. My stylist, Cinna, being dragged, bloody and unconscious, from the Launch Room before the Games. Plutarch's sources believe he was killed during interrogation. Brilliant, enigmatic, lovely Cinna is dead because of me. I push the thought away because it's too impossibly painful to dwell on without losing my fragile hold on the situation entirely.

What am I going to do?

To become the Mockingjay...could any good I do possibly outweigh the damage? Who can I trust to answer that question? Certainly not that crew in 13. I swear, now that my family and Gale's are out of harm's way, I could run away. Except for one unfinished piece of business. Peeta. If I knew for sure that he was dead, I could just disappear into the woods and never look back. But until I do, I'm stuck.

I spin on my heel at the sound of a hiss. In the kitchen doorway, back arched, ears flattened, stands the ugliest tomcat in the world. "Buttercup," I say. Thousands of people are dead, but he has survived and even looks well fed. On what? He can get in and out of the house through a window we always left ajar in the pantry. He must have been eating field mice. I refuse to consider the alternative.

I squat down and extend a hand. "Come here, boy." Not likely. He's angry at his abandonment. Besides, I'm not offering food, and my ability to provide scraps has always been my main redeeming quality to him. For a while, when we used to meet up at the old house because we both disliked this new one, we seemed to be bonding a little. That's clearly over. He blinks those unpleasant yellow eyes.

"Want to see Prim?" I ask. Her name catches his attention. Besides his own, it's the only word that means anything to him. He gives a rusty meow and approaches me. I pick him up, stroking his fur, then go to the closet and dig out my game bag and unceremoniously stuff him in. There's no other way I'll be able to carry him on the hovercraft, and he means the world to my sister. Her goat, Lady, an animal of actual value, has unfortunately not made an appearance.

In my headset, I hear Gale's voice telling me we must go back. But the game bag has reminded me of one more thing that I want. I sling the strap of

the bag over the back of a chair and dash up the steps to my bedroom. Inside the closet hangs my father's hunting jacket. Before the Quell, I brought it here from the old house, thinking its presence might be of comfort to my mother and sister when I was dead. Thank goodness, or it'd be ash now.

The soft leather feels soothing and for a moment I'm calmed by the memories of the hours spent wrapped in it. Then, inexplicably, my palms begin to sweat. A strange sensation creeps up the back of my neck. I whip around to face the room and find it empty. Tidy. Everything in its place. There was no sound to alarm me. What, then?

My nose twitches. It's the smell. Cloying and artificial. A dab of white peeks out of a vase of dried flowers on my dresser. I approach it with cautious steps. There, all but obscured by its preserved cousins, is a fresh white rose. Perfect. Down to the last thorn and silken petal.

And I know immediately who's sent it to me.

President Snow.

When I begin to gag at the stench, I back away and clear out. How long has it been here? A day? An hour? The rebels did a security sweep of the Victor's Village before I was cleared to come here, checking for explosives, bugs, anything unusual. But perhaps the rose didn't seem noteworthy to them. Only to me.

Downstairs, I snag the game bag off the chair, bouncing it along the floor until I remember it's occupied. On the lawn, I frantically signal to the hovercraft while Buttercup thrashes. I jab him with my elbow, but this only infuriates him. A hovercraft materializes and a ladder drops down. I step on and the current freezes me until I'm lifted on board.

Gale helps me from the ladder. "You all right?"

"Yeah," I say, wiping the sweat off my face with my sleeve.

He left me a rose! I want to scream, but it's not information I'm sure I should share with someone like Plutarch looking on. First of all, because it will make me sound crazy. Like I either imagined it, which is quite possible, or I'm overreacting, which will buy me a trip back to the drug-induced dreamland I'm trying so hard to escape. No one will fully understand—how it's not just a flower, not even just President Snow's flower, but a promise of revenge—because no one else sat in the study with him when he threatened me before the Victory Tour.

Positioned on my dresser, that white-as-snow rose is a personal message to me. It speaks of unfinished business. It whispers, *I can find you. I can*

reach you. Perhaps I am watching you now.

Are there Capitol hoverplanes speeding in to blow us out of the sky? As we travel over District 12, I watch anxiously for signs of an attack, but nothing pursues us. After several minutes, when I hear an exchange between Plutarch and the pilot confirming that the airspace is clear, I begin to relax a little.

Gale nods at the howls coming from my game bag. “Now I know why you had to go back.”

“If there was even a chance of his recovery.” I dump the bag onto a seat, where the loathsome creature begins a low, deep-throated growl. “Oh, shut up,” I tell the bag as I sink into the cushioned window seat across from it.

Gale sits next to me. “Pretty bad down there?”

“Couldn’t be much worse,” I answer. I look in his eyes and see my own grief reflected there. Our hands find each other, holding fast to a part of 12 that Snow has somehow failed to destroy. We sit in silence for the rest of the trip to 13, which only takes about forty-five minutes. A mere week’s journey on foot. Bonnie and Twill, the District 8 refugees who I encountered in the woods last winter, weren’t so far from their destination after all. They apparently didn’t make it, though. When I asked about them in 13, no one seemed to know who I was talking about. Died in the woods, I guess.

From the air, 13 looks about as cheerful as 12. The rubble isn’t smoking, the way the Capitol shows it on television, but there’s next to no life aboveground. In the seventy-five years since the Dark Days—when 13 was said to have been obliterated in the war between the Capitol and the districts—almost all new construction has been beneath the earth’s surface. There was already a substantial underground facility here, developed over centuries to be either a clandestine refuge for government leaders in time of war or a last resort for humanity if life above became unlivable. Most important for the people of 13, it was the center of the Capitol’s nuclear weapons development program. During the Dark Days, the rebels in 13 wrested control from the government forces, trained their nuclear missiles on the Capitol, and then struck a bargain: They would play dead in exchange for

being left alone. The Capitol had another nuclear arsenal out west, but it couldn't attack 13 without certain retaliation. It was forced to accept 13's deal. The Capitol demolished the visible remains of the district and cut off all access from the outside. Perhaps the Capitol's leaders thought that, without help, 13 would die off on its own. It almost did a few times, but it always managed to pull through due to strict sharing of resources, strenuous discipline, and constant vigilance against any further attacks from the Capitol.

Now the citizens live almost exclusively underground. You can go outside for exercise and sunlight but only at very specific times in your schedule. You can't miss your schedule. Every morning, you're supposed to stick your right arm in this contraption in the wall. It tattoos the smooth inside of your forearm with your schedule for the day in a sickly purple ink. *7:00—Breakfast. 7:30—Kitchen Duties. 8:30—Education Center, Room 17.* And so on. The ink is indelible until *22:00—Bathing.* That's when whatever keeps it water resistant breaks down and the whole schedule rinses away. The lights-out at 22:30 signals that everyone not on the night shift should be in bed.

At first, when I was so ill in the hospital, I could forgo being imprinted. But once I moved into Compartment 307 with my mother and sister, I was expected to get with the program. Except for showing up for meals, though, I pretty much ignore the words on my arm. I just go back to our compartment or wander around 13 or fall asleep somewhere hidden. An abandoned air duct. Behind the water pipes in the laundry. There's a closet in the Education Center that's great because no one ever seems to need school supplies. They're so frugal with things here, waste is practically a criminal activity. Fortunately, the people of 12 have never been wasteful. But once I saw Fulvia Cardew crumple up a sheet of paper with just a couple of words written on it and you would've thought she'd murdered someone from the looks she got. Her face turned tomato red, making the silver flowers inlaid in her plump cheeks even more noticeable. The very portrait of excess. One of my few pleasures in 13 is watching the handful of pampered Capitol "rebels" squirming as they try to fit in.

I don't know how long I'll be able to get away with my complete disregard for the clockwork precision of attendance required by my hosts. Right now, they leave me alone because I'm classified as mentally disoriented—it says so right on my plastic medical bracelet—and everyone

has to tolerate my ramblings. But that can't last forever. Neither can their patience with the Mockingjay issue.

From the landing pad, Gale and I walk down a series of stairways to Compartment 307. We could take the elevator, only it reminds me too much of the one that lifted me into the arena. I'm having a hard time adjusting to being underground so much. But after the surreal encounter with the rose, for the first time the descent makes me feel safer.

I hesitate at the door marked 307, anticipating the questions from my family. "What am I going to tell them about Twelve?" I ask Gale.

"I doubt they'll ask for details. They saw it burn. They'll mostly be worried about how you're handling it." Gale touches my cheek. "Like I am."

I press my face against his hand for a moment. "I'll survive."

Then I take a deep breath and open the door. My mother and sister are home for 18:00—*Reflection*, a half hour of downtime before dinner. I see the concern on their faces as they try to gauge my emotional state. Before anyone can ask anything, I empty my game bag and it becomes 18:00—*Cat Adoration*. Prim just sits on the floor weeping and rocking that awful Buttercup, who interrupts his purring only for an occasional hiss at me. He gives me a particularly smug look when she ties the blue ribbon around his neck.

My mother hugs the wedding photo tightly against her chest and then places it, along with the book of plants, on our government-issued chest of drawers. I hang my father's jacket on the back of a chair. For a moment, the place almost seems like home. So I guess the trip to 12 wasn't a complete waste.

We're heading down to the dining hall for 18:30—*Dinner* when Gale's communicuff begins to beep. It looks like an oversized watch, but it receives print messages. Being granted a communicuff is a special privilege that's reserved for those important to the cause, a status Gale achieved by his rescue of the citizens of 12. "They need the two of us in Command," he says.

Trailing a few steps behind Gale, I try to collect myself before I'm thrown into what's sure to be another relentless Mockingjay session. I linger in the doorway of Command, the high-tech meeting/war council room complete with computerized talking walls, electronic maps showing the troop movements in various districts, and a giant rectangular table with control panels I'm not supposed to touch. No one notices me, though, because they're all gathered at a television screen at the far end of the room that airs

the Capitol broadcast around the clock. I'm thinking I might be able to slip away when Plutarch, whose ample frame has been blocking the television, catches sight of me and waves urgently for me to join them. I reluctantly move forward, trying to imagine how it could be of interest to me. It's always the same. War footage. Propaganda. Replaying the bombings of District 12. An ominous message from President Snow. So it's almost entertaining to see Caesar Flickerman, the eternal host of the Hunger Games, with his painted face and sparkly suit, preparing to give an interview. Until the camera pulls back and I see that his guest is Peeta.

A sound escapes me. The same combination of gasp and groan that comes from being submerged in water, deprived of oxygen to the point of pain. I push people aside until I am right in front of him, my hand resting on the screen. I search his eyes for any sign of hurt, any reflection of the agony of torture. There is nothing. Peeta looks healthy to the point of robustness. His skin is glowing, flawless, in that full-body-polish way. His manner's composed, serious. I can't reconcile this image with the battered, bleeding boy who haunts my dreams.

Caesar settles himself more comfortably in the chair across from Peeta and gives him a long look. "So...Peeta...welcome back."

Peeta smiles slightly. "I bet you thought you'd done your last interview with me, Caesar."

"I confess, I did," says Caesar. "The night before the Quarter Quell... well, who ever thought we'd see you again?"

"It wasn't part of my plan, that's for sure," says Peeta with a frown.

Caesar leans in to him a little. "I think it was clear to all of us what your plan was. To sacrifice yourself in the arena so that Katniss Everdeen and your child could survive."

"That was it. Clear and simple." Peeta's fingers trace the upholstered pattern on the arm of the chair. "But other people had plans as well."

Yes, other people had plans, I think. Has Peeta guessed, then, how the rebels used us as pawns? How my rescue was arranged from the beginning? And finally, how our mentor, Haymitch Abernathy, betrayed us both for a cause he pretended to have no interest in?

In the silence that follows, I notice the lines that have formed between Peeta's eyebrows. He has guessed or he has been told. But the Capitol has not killed or even punished him. For right now, that exceeds my wildest hopes. I drink in his wholeness, the soundness of his body and mind. It runs

through me like the morphling they give me in the hospital, dulling the pain of the last weeks.

“Why don’t you tell us about that last night in the arena?” suggests Caesar. “Help us sort a few things out.”

Peeta nods but takes his time speaking. “That last night...to tell you about that last night...well, first of all, you have to imagine how it felt in the arena. It was like being an insect trapped under a bowl filled with steaming air. And all around you, jungle...green and alive and ticking. That giant clock ticking away your life. Every hour promising some new horror. You have to imagine that in the past two days, sixteen people have died—some of them defending you. At the rate things are going, the last eight will be dead by morning. Save one. The victor. And your plan is that it won’t be you.”

My body breaks out in a sweat at the memory. My hand slides down the screen and hangs limply at my side. Peeta doesn’t need a brush to paint images from the Games. He works just as well in words.

“Once you’re in the arena, the rest of the world becomes very distant,” he continues. “All the people and things you loved or cared about almost cease to exist. The pink sky and the monsters in the jungle and the tributes who want your blood become your final reality, the only one that ever mattered. As bad as it makes you feel, you’re going to have to do some killing, because in the arena, you only get one wish. And it’s very costly.”

“It costs your life,” says Caesar.

“Oh, no. It costs a lot more than your life. To murder innocent people?” says Peeta. “It costs everything you are.”

“Everything you are,” repeats Caesar quietly.

A hush has fallen over the room, and I can feel it spreading across Panem. A nation leaning in toward its screens. Because no one has ever talked about what it’s really like in the arena before.

Peeta goes on. “So you hold on to your wish. And that last night, yes, my wish was to save Katniss. But even without knowing about the rebels, it didn’t feel right. Everything was too complicated. I found myself regretting I hadn’t run off with her earlier in the day, as she had suggested. But there was no getting out of it at that point.”

“You were too caught up in Beetee’s plan to electrify the salt lake,” says Caesar.

“Too busy playing allies with the others. I should have never let them separate us!” Peeta bursts out. “That’s when I lost her.”

“When you stayed at the lightning tree, and she and Johanna Mason took the coil of wire down to the water,” Caesar clarifies.

“I didn’t want to!” Peeta flushes in agitation. “But I couldn’t argue with Beetee without indicating we were about to break away from the alliance. When that wire was cut, everything just went insane. I can only remember bits and pieces. Trying to find her. Watching Brutus kill Chaff. Killing Brutus myself. I know she was calling my name. Then the lightning bolt hit the tree, and the force field around the arena...blew out.”

“Katniss blew it out, Peeta,” says Caesar. “You’ve seen the footage.”

“She didn’t know what she was doing. None of us could follow Beetee’s plan. You can see her trying to figure out what to do with that wire,” Peeta snaps back.

“All right. It just looks suspicious,” says Caesar. “As if she was part of the rebels’ plan all along.”

Peeta’s on his feet, leaning in to Caesar’s face, hands locked on the arms of his interviewer’s chair. “Really? And was it part of her plan for Johanna to nearly kill her? For that electric shock to paralyze her? To trigger the bombing?” He’s yelling now. “She didn’t know, Caesar! Neither of us knew anything except that we were trying to keep each other alive!”

Caesar places his hand on Peeta’s chest in a gesture that’s both self-protective and conciliatory. “Okay, Peeta, I believe you.”

“Okay.” Peeta withdraws from Caesar, pulling back his hands, running them through his hair, mussing his carefully styled blond curls. He slumps back in his chair, distraught.

Caesar waits a moment, studying Peeta. “What about your mentor, Haymitch Abernathy?”

Peeta’s face hardens. “I don’t know what Haymitch knew.”

“Could he have been part of the conspiracy?” asks Caesar.

“He never mentioned it,” says Peeta.

Caesar presses on. “What does your heart tell you?”

“That I shouldn’t have trusted him,” says Peeta. “That’s all.”

I haven’t seen Haymitch since I attacked him on the hovercraft, leaving long claw marks down his face. I know it’s been bad for him here. District 13 strictly forbids any production or consumption of intoxicating beverages, and even the rubbing alcohol in the hospital is kept under lock and key. Finally, Haymitch is being forced into sobriety, with no secret stashes or home-brewed concoctions to ease his transition. They’ve got him in

seclusion until he's dried out, as he's not deemed fit for public display. It must be excruciating, but I lost all my sympathy for Haymitch when I realized how he had deceived us. I hope he's watching the Capitol broadcast now, so he can see that Peeta has cast him off as well.

Caesar pats Peeta's shoulder. "We can stop now if you want."

"Was there more to discuss?" says Peeta wryly.

"I was going to ask your thoughts on the war, but if you're too upset..." begins Caesar.

"Oh, I'm not too upset to answer that." Peeta takes a deep breath and then looks straight into the camera. "I want everyone watching—whether you're on the Capitol or the rebel side—to stop for just a moment and think about what this war could mean. For human beings. We almost went extinct fighting one another before. Now our numbers are even fewer. Our conditions more tenuous. Is this really what we want to do? Kill ourselves off completely? In the hopes that—what? Some decent species will inherit the smoking remains of the earth?"

"I don't really...I'm not sure I'm following..." says Caesar.

"We can't fight one another, Caesar," Peeta explains. "There won't be enough of us left to keep going. If everybody doesn't lay down their weapons—and I mean, as in *very soon*—it's all over, anyway."

"So...you're calling for a cease-fire?" Caesar asks.

"Yes. I'm calling for a cease-fire," says Peeta tiredly. "Now why don't we ask the guards to take me back to my quarters so I can build another hundred card houses?"

Caesar turns to the camera. "All right. I think that wraps it up. So back to our regularly scheduled programming."

Music plays them out, and then there's a woman reading a list of expected shortages in the Capitol—fresh fruit, solar batteries, soap. I watch her with uncharacteristic absorption, because I know everyone will be waiting for my reaction to the interview. But there's no way I can process it all so quickly—the joy of seeing Peeta alive and unharmed, his defense of my innocence in collaborating with the rebels, and his undeniable complicity with the Capitol now that he's called for a cease-fire. Oh, he made it sound as if he were condemning both sides in the war. But at this point, with only minor victories for the rebels, a cease-fire could only result in a return to our previous status. Or worse.

Behind me, I can hear the accusations against Peeta building. The words *traitor*, *liar*, and *enemy* bounce off the walls. Since I can neither join in the rebels' outrage nor counter it, I decide the best thing to do is clear out. As I reach the door, Coin's voice rises above the others. "You have not been dismissed, Soldier Everdeen."

One of Coin's men lays a hand on my arm. It's not an aggressive move, really, but after the arena, I react defensively to any unfamiliar touch. I jerk my arm free and take off running down the halls. Behind me, there's the sound of a scuffle, but I don't stop. My mind does a quick inventory of my odd little hiding places, and I wind up in the supply closet, curled up against a crate of chalk.

"You're alive," I whisper, pressing my palms against my cheeks, feeling the smile that's so wide it must look like a grimace. Peeta's alive. And a traitor. But at the moment, I don't care. Not what he says, or who he says it for, only that he is still capable of speech.

After a while, the door opens and someone slips in. Gale slides down beside me, his nose trickling blood.

"What happened?" I ask.

"I got in Boggs's way," he answers with a shrug. I use my sleeve to wipe his nose. "Watch it!"

I try to be gentler. Patting, not wiping. "Which one is he?"

"Oh, you know. Coin's right-hand lackey. The one who tried to stop you." He pushes my hand away. "Quit! You'll bleed me to death."

The trickle has turned to a steady stream. I give up on the first-aid attempts. "You fought with Boggs?"

"No, just blocked the doorway when he tried to follow you. His elbow caught me in the nose," says Gale.

"They'll probably punish you," I say.

"Already have." He holds up his wrist. I stare at it uncomprehendingly. "Coin took back my communicuff."

I bite my lip, trying to remain serious. But it seems so ridiculous. "I'm sorry, Soldier Gale Hawthorne."

"Don't be, Soldier Katniss Everdeen." He grins. "I felt like a jerk walking around with it anyway." We both start laughing. "I think it was quite a demotion."

This is one of the few good things about 13. Getting Gale back. With the pressure of the Capitol's arranged marriage between Peeta and me gone,

we've managed to regain our friendship. He doesn't push it any further—try to kiss me or talk about love. Either I've been too sick, or he's willing to give me space, or he knows it's just too cruel with Peeta in the hands of the Capitol. Whatever the case, I've got someone to tell my secrets to again.

"Who are these people?" I say.

"They're us. If we'd had nukes instead of a few lumps of coal," he answers.

"I like to think Twelve wouldn't have abandoned the rest of the rebels back in the Dark Days," I say.

"We might have. If it was that, surrender, or start a nuclear war," says Gale. "In a way, it's remarkable they survived at all."

Maybe it's because I still have the ashes of my own district on my shoes, but for the first time, I give the people of 13 something I have withheld from them: credit. For staying alive against all odds. Their early years must have been terrible, huddled in the chambers beneath the ground after their city was bombed to dust. Population decimated, no possible ally to turn to for aid. Over the past seventy-five years, they've learned to be self-sufficient, turned their citizens into an army, and built a new society with no help from anyone. They would be even more powerful if that pox epidemic hadn't flattened their birthrate and made them so desperate for a new gene pool and breeders. Maybe they are militaristic, overly programmed, and somewhat lacking in a sense of humor. They're here. And willing to take on the Capitol.

"Still, it took them long enough to show up," I say.

"It wasn't simple. They had to build up a rebel base in the Capitol, get some sort of underground organized in the districts," he says. "Then they needed someone to set the whole thing in motion. They needed you."

"They needed Peeta, too, but they seem to have forgotten that," I say.

Gale's expression darkens. "Peeta might have done a lot of damage tonight. Most of the rebels will dismiss what he said immediately, of course. But there are districts where the resistance is shakier. The cease-fire's clearly President Snow's idea. But it seems so reasonable coming out of Peeta's mouth."

I'm afraid of Gale's answer, but I ask anyway. "Why do you think he said it?"

"He might have been tortured. Or persuaded. My guess is he made some kind of deal to protect you. He'd put forth the idea of the cease-fire if Snow let him present you as a confused pregnant girl who had no idea what was

going on when she was taken prisoner by the rebels. This way, if the districts lose, there's still a chance of leniency for you. If you play it right." I must still look perplexed because Gale delivers the next line very slowly. "Katniss...he's still trying to keep you alive."

To keep me alive? And then I understand. The Games are still on. We have left the arena, but since Peeta and I weren't killed, his last wish to preserve my life still stands. His idea is to have me lie low, remain safe and imprisoned, while the war plays out. Then neither side will really have cause to kill me. And Peeta? If the rebels win, it will be disastrous for him. If the Capitol wins, who knows? Maybe we'll both be allowed to live—if I play it right—to watch the Games go on....

Images flash through my mind: the spear piercing Rue's body in the arena, Gale hanging senseless from the whipping post, the corpse-littered wasteland of my home. And for what? For what? As my blood turns hot, I remember other things. My first glimpse of an uprising in District 8. The victors locked hand in hand the night before the Quarter Quell. And how it was no accident, my shooting that arrow into the force field in the arena. How badly I wanted it to lodge deep in the heart of my enemy.

I spring up, upsetting a box of a hundred pencils, sending them scattering around the floor.

"What is it?" Gale asks.

"There can't be a cease-fire." I lean down, fumbling as I shove the sticks of dark gray graphite back into the box. "We can't go back."

"I know." Gale sweeps up a handful of pencils and taps them on the floor into perfect alignment.

"Whatever reason Peeta had for saying those things, he's wrong." The stupid sticks won't go in the box and I snap several in my frustration.

"I know. Give it here. You're breaking them to bits." He pulls the box from my hands and refills it with swift, concise motions.

"He doesn't know what they did to Twelve. If he could've seen what was on the ground—" I start.

"Katniss, I'm not arguing. If I could hit a button and kill every living soul working for the Capitol, I would do it. Without hesitation." He slides the last pencil into the box and flips the lid closed. "The question is, what are you going to do?"

It turns out the question that's been eating away at me has only ever had one possible answer. But it took Peeta's ploy for me to recognize it.

What am I going to do?

I take a deep breath. My arms rise slightly—as if recalling the black-and-white wings Cinna gave me—then come to rest at my sides.

“I’m going to be the Mockingjay.”

Buttercup's eyes reflect the faint glow of the safety light over the door as he lies in the crook of Prim's arm, back on the job, protecting her from the night. She's snuggled close to my mother. Asleep, they look just as they did the morning of the reaping that landed me in my first Games. I have a bed to myself because I'm recuperating and because no one can sleep with me anyway, what with the nightmares and the thrashing around.

After tossing and turning for hours, I finally accept that it will be a wakeful night. Under Buttercup's watchful eye, I tiptoe across the cold tiled floor to the dresser.

The middle drawer contains my government-issued clothes. Everyone wears the same gray pants and shirt, the shirt tucked in at the waist. Underneath the clothes, I keep the few items I had on me when I was lifted from the arena. My mockingjay pin. Peeta's token, the gold locket with photos of my mother and Prim and Gale inside. A silver parachute that holds a spile for tapping trees, and the pearl Peeta gave me a few hours before I blew out the force field. District 13 confiscated my tube of skin ointment for use in the hospital, and my bow and arrows because only guards have clearance to carry weapons. They're in safekeeping in the armory.

I feel around for the parachute and slide my fingers inside until they close around the pearl. I sit back on my bed cross-legged and find myself rubbing the smooth iridescent surface of the pearl back and forth against my lips. For some reason, it's soothing. A cool kiss from the giver himself.

"Katniss?" Prim whispers. She's awake, peering at me through the darkness. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Just a bad dream. Go back to sleep." It's automatic. Shutting Prim and my mother out of things to shield them.

Careful not to rouse my mother, Prim eases herself from the bed, scoops up Buttercup, and sits beside me. She touches the hand that has curled around the pearl. "You're cold." Taking a spare blanket from the foot of the bed, she wraps it around all three of us, enveloping me in her warmth and Buttercup's

furry heat as well. “You could tell me, you know. I’m good at keeping secrets. Even from Mother.”

She’s really gone, then. The little girl with the back of her shirt sticking out like a duck tail, the one who needed help reaching the dishes, and who begged to see the frosted cakes in the bakery window. Time and tragedy have forced her to grow too quickly, at least for my taste, into a young woman who stitches bleeding wounds and knows our mother can hear only so much.

“Tomorrow morning, I’m going to agree to be the Mockingjay,” I tell her.

“Because you want to or because you feel forced into it?” she asks.

I laugh a little. “Both, I guess. No, I want to. I have to, if it will help the rebels defeat Snow.” I squeeze the pearl more tightly in my fist. “It’s just... Peeta. I’m afraid if we do win, the rebels will execute him as a traitor.”

Prim thinks this over. “Katniss, I don’t think you understand how important you are to the cause. Important people usually get what they want. If you want to keep Peeta safe from the rebels, you can.”

I guess I’m important. They went to a lot of trouble to rescue me. They took me to 12. “You mean...I could demand that they give Peeta immunity? And they’d have to agree to it?”

“I think you could demand almost anything and they’d have to agree to it.” Prim wrinkles her brow. “Only how do you know they’ll keep their word?”

I remember all of the lies Haymitch told Peeta and me to get us to do what he wanted. What’s to keep the rebels from reneging on the deal? A verbal promise behind closed doors, even a statement written on paper—these could easily evaporate after the war. Their existence or validity denied. Any witnesses in Command will be worthless. In fact, they’d probably be the ones writing out Peeta’s death warrant. I’ll need a much larger pool of witnesses. I’ll need everyone I can get.

“It will have to be public,” I say. Buttercup gives a flick of his tail that I take as agreement. “I’ll make Coin announce it in front of the entire population of Thirteen.”

Prim smiles. “Oh, that’s good. It’s not a guarantee, but it will be much harder for them to back out of their promise.”

I feel the kind of relief that follows an actual solution. “I should wake you up more often, little duck.”

“I wish you would,” says Prim. She gives me a kiss. “Try and sleep now, all right?” And I do.

In the morning, I see that 7:00—*Breakfast* is directly followed by 7:30—*Command*, which is fine since I may as well start the ball rolling. At the dining hall, I flash my schedule, which includes some kind of ID number, in front of a sensor. As I slide my tray along the metal shelf before the vats of food, I see breakfast is its usual dependable self—a bowl of hot grain, a cup of milk, and a small scoop of fruit or vegetables. Today, mashed turnips. All of it comes from 13's underground farms. I sit at the table assigned to the Everdeens and the Hawthornes and some other refugees, and shovel my food down, wishing for seconds, but there are never seconds here. They have nutrition down to a science. You leave with enough calories to take you to the next meal, no more, no less. Serving size is based on your age, height, body type, health, and amount of physical labor required by your schedule. The people from 12 are already getting slightly larger portions than the natives of 13 in an effort to bring us up to weight. I guess bony soldiers tire too quickly. It's working, though. In just a month, we're starting to look healthier, particularly the kids.

Gale sets his tray beside me and I try not to stare at his turnips too pathetically, because I really want more, and he's already too quick to slip me his food. Even though I turn my attention to neatly folding my napkin, a spoonful of turnips slops into my bowl.

"You've got to stop that," I say. But since I'm already scooping up the stuff, it's not too convincing. "Really. It's probably illegal or something." They have very strict rules about food. For instance, if you don't finish something and want to save it for later, you can't take it from the dining hall. Apparently, in the early days, there was some incident of food hoarding. For a couple of people like Gale and me, who've been in charge of our families' food supply for years, it doesn't sit well. We know how to be hungry, but not how to be told how to handle what provisions we have. In some ways, District 13 is even more controlling than the Capitol.

"What can they do? They've already got my communicuff," says Gale.

As I scrape my bowl clean, I have an inspiration. "Hey, maybe I should make that a condition of being the Mockingjay."

"That I can feed you turnips?" he says.

"No, that we can hunt." That gets his attention. "We'd have to give everything to the kitchen. But still, we could..." I don't have to finish because he knows. We could be aboveground. Out in the woods. We could be ourselves again.

“Do it,” he says. “Now’s the time. You could ask for the moon and they’d have to find some way to get it.”

He doesn’t know that I’m already asking for the moon by demanding they spare Peeta’s life. Before I can decide whether or not to tell him, a bell signals the end of our eating shift. The thought of facing Coin alone makes me nervous. “What are you scheduled for?”

Gale checks his arm. “Nuclear History class. Where, by the way, your absence has been noted.”

“I have to go to Command. Come with me?” I ask.

“All right. But they might throw me out after yesterday.” As we go to drop off our trays, he says, “You know, you better put Buttercup on your list of demands, too. I don’t think the concept of useless pets is well known here.”

“Oh, they’ll find him a job. Tattoo it on his paw every morning,” I say. But I make a mental note to include him for Prim’s sake.

By the time we get to Command, Coin, Plutarch, and all their people have already assembled. The sight of Gale raises some eyebrows, but no one throws him out. My mental notes have become too jumbled, so I ask for a piece of paper and a pencil right off. My apparent interest in the proceedings—the first I’ve shown since I’ve been here—takes them by surprise. Several looks are exchanged. Probably they had some extra-special lecture planned for me. But instead, Coin personally hands me the supplies, and everyone waits in silence while I sit at the table and scrawl out my list. *Buttercup. Hunting. Peeta’s immunity. Announced in public.*

This is it. Probably my only chance to bargain. *Think. What else do you want?* I feel him, standing at my shoulder. *Gale*, I add to the list. I don’t think I can do this without him.

The headache’s coming on and my thoughts begin to tangle. I shut my eyes and start to recite silently.

My name is Katniss Everdeen. I am seventeen years old. My home is District 12. I was in the Hunger Games. I escaped. The Capitol hates me. Peeta was taken prisoner. He is alive. He is a traitor but alive. I have to keep him alive....

The list. It still seems too small. I should try to think bigger, beyond our current situation where I am of the utmost importance, to the future where I may be worth nothing. Shouldn’t I be asking for more? For my family? For the remainder of my people? My skin itches with the ashes of the dead. I feel

the sickening impact of the skull against my shoe. The scent of blood and roses stings my nose.

The pencil moves across the page on its own. I open my eyes and see the wobbly letters. *I KILL SNOW*. If he's captured, I want the privilege.

Plutarch gives a discreet cough. "About done there?" I glance up and notice the clock. I've been sitting here for twenty minutes. Finnick isn't the only one with attention problems.

"Yeah," I say. My voice sounds hoarse, so I clear my throat. "Yeah, so this is the deal. I'll be your Mockingjay."

I wait so they can make their sounds of relief, congratulate, slap one another on the back. Coin stays as impassive as ever, watching me, unimpressed.

"But I have some conditions." I smooth out the list and begin. "My family gets to keep our cat." My tiniest request sets off an argument. The Capitol rebels see this as a nonissue—of course, I can keep my pet—while those from 13 spell out what extreme difficulties this presents. Finally it's worked out that we'll be moved to the top level, which has the luxury of an eight-inch window aboveground. Buttercup may come and go to do his business. He will be expected to feed himself. If he misses curfew, he will be locked out. If he causes any security problems, he'll be shot immediately.

That sounds okay. Not so different from how he's been living since we left. Except for the shooting part. If he looks too thin, I can slip him a few entrails, provided my next request is allowed.

"I want to hunt. With Gale. Out in the woods," I say. This gives everyone pause.

"We won't go far. We'll use our own bows. You can have the meat for the kitchen," adds Gale.

I hurry on before they can say no. "It's just...I can't breathe shut up here like a...I would get better, faster, if...I could hunt."

Plutarch begins to explain the drawbacks here—the dangers, the extra security, the risk of injury—but Coin cuts him off. "No. Let them. Give them two hours a day, deducted from their training time. A quarter-mile radius. With communication units and tracker anklets. What's next?"

I skim my list. "Gale. I'll need him with me to do this."

"With you how? Off camera? By your side at all times? Do you want him presented as your new lover?" Coin asks.

She hasn't said this with any particular malice—quite the contrary, her words are very matter-of-fact. But my mouth still drops open in shock. “What?”

“I think we should continue the current romance. A quick defection from Peeta could cause the audience to lose sympathy for her,” says Plutarch. “Especially since they think she’s pregnant with his child.”

“Agreed. So, on-screen, Gale can simply be portrayed as a fellow rebel. Is that all right?” says Coin. I just stare at her. She repeats herself impatiently. “For Gale. Will that be sufficient?”

“We can always work him in as your cousin,” says Fulvia.

“We’re not cousins,” Gale and I say together.

“Right, but we should probably keep that up for appearances’ sake on camera,” says Plutarch. “Off camera, he’s all yours. Anything else?”

I’m rattled by the turn in the conversation. The implications that I could so readily dispose of Peeta, that I’m in love with Gale, that the whole thing has been an act. My cheeks begin to burn. The very notion that I’m devoting any thought to who I want presented as my lover, given our current circumstances, is demeaning. I let my anger propel me into my greatest demand. “When the war is over, if we’ve won, Peeta will be pardoned.”

Dead silence. I feel Gale’s body tense. I guess I should have told him before, but I wasn’t sure how he’d respond. Not when it involved Peeta.

“No form of punishment will be inflicted,” I continue. A new thought occurs to me. “The same goes for the other captured tributes, Johanna and Enobaria.” Frankly, I don’t care about Enobaria, the vicious District 2 tribute. In fact, I dislike her, but it seems wrong to leave her out.

“No,” says Coin flatly.

“Yes,” I shoot back. “It’s not their fault you abandoned them in the arena. Who knows what the Capitol’s doing to them?”

“They’ll be tried with other war criminals and treated as the tribunal sees fit,” she says.

“They’ll be granted immunity!” I feel myself rising from my chair, my voice full and resonant. “You will personally pledge this in front of the entire population of District Thirteen and the remainder of Twelve. Soon. Today. It will be recorded for future generations. You will hold yourself and your government responsible for their safety, or you’ll find yourself another Mockingjay!”

My words hang in the air for a long moment.

“That’s her!” I hear Fulvia hiss to Plutarch. “Right there. With the costume, gunfire in the background, just a hint of smoke.”

“Yes, that’s what we want,” says Plutarch under his breath.

I want to glare at them, but I feel it would be a mistake to turn my attention from Coin. I can see her tallying the cost of my ultimatum, weighing it against my possible worth.

“What do you say, President?” asks Plutarch. “You could issue an official pardon, given the circumstances. The boy...he’s not even of age.”

“All right,” Coin says finally. “But you’d better perform.”

“I’ll perform when you’ve made the announcement,” I say.

“Call a national security assembly during Reflection today,” she orders. “I’ll make the announcement then. Is there anything left on your list, Katniss?”

My paper’s crumpled into a ball in my right fist. I flatten the sheet against the table and read the rickety letters. “Just one more thing. I kill Snow.”

For the first time ever, I see the hint of a smile on the president’s lips. “When the time comes, I’ll flip you for it.”

Maybe she’s right. I certainly don’t have the sole claim against Snow’s life. And I think I can count on her getting the job done. “Fair enough.”

Coin’s eyes have flickered to her arm, the clock. She, too, has a schedule to adhere to. “I’ll leave her in your hands, then, Plutarch.” She exits the room, followed by her team, leaving only Plutarch, Fulvia, Gale, and myself.

“Excellent. Excellent.” Plutarch sinks down, elbows on the table, rubbing his eyes. “You know what I miss? More than anything? Coffee. I ask you, would it be so unthinkable to have something to wash down the gruel and turnips?”

“We didn’t think it would be quite so rigid here,” Fulvia explains to us as she massages Plutarch’s shoulders. “Not in the higher ranks.”

“Or at least there’d be the option of a little side action,” says Plutarch. “I mean, even Twelve had a black market, right?”

“Yeah, the Hob,” says Gale. “It’s where we traded.”

“There, you see? And look how moral you two are! Virtually incorruptible.” Plutarch sighs. “Oh, well, wars don’t last forever. So, glad to have you on the team.” He reaches a hand out to the side, where Fulvia is already extending a large sketchbook bound in black leather. “You know in general what we’re asking of you, Katniss. I’m aware you have mixed feelings about participating. I hope this will help.”

Plutarch slides the sketchbook across to me. For a moment, I look at it suspiciously. Then curiosity gets the better of me. I open the cover to find a picture of myself, standing straight and strong, in a black uniform. Only one person could have designed the outfit, at first glance utterly utilitarian, at second a work of art. The swoop of the helmet, the curve to the breastplate, the slight fullness of the sleeves that allows the white folds under the arms to show. In his hands, I am again a mockingjay.

“Cinna,” I whisper.

“Yes. He made me promise not to show you this book until you’d decided to be the Mockingjay on your own. Believe me, I was very tempted,” says Plutarch. “Go on. Flip through.”

I turn the pages slowly, seeing each detail of the uniform. The carefully tailored layers of body armor, the hidden weapons in the boots and belt, the special reinforcements over my heart. On the final page, under a sketch of my mockingjay pin, Cinna’s written, *I’m still betting on you*.

“When did he...” My voice fails me.

“Let’s see. Well, after the Quarter Quell announcement. A few weeks before the Games maybe? There are not only the sketches. We have your uniforms. Oh, and Beetee’s got something really special waiting for you down in the armory. I won’t spoil it by hinting,” says Plutarch.

“You’re going to be the best-dressed rebel in history,” says Gale with a smile. Suddenly, I realize he’s been holding out on me. Like Cinna, he’s wanted me to make this decision all along.

“Our plan is to launch an Airtime Assault,” says Plutarch. “To make a series of what we call propos—which is short for ‘propaganda spots’—featuring you, and broadcast them to the entire population of Panem.”

“How? The Capitol has sole control of the broadcasts,” says Gale.

“But we have Beetee. About ten years ago, he essentially redesigned the underground network that transmits all the programming. He thinks there’s a reasonable chance it can be done. Of course, we’ll need something to air. So, Katniss, the studio awaits your pleasure.” Plutarch turns to his assistant. “Fulvia?”

“Plutarch and I have been talking about how on earth we can pull this off. We think that it might be best to build you, our rebel leader, from the outside...*in*. That is to say, let’s find the most stunning Mockingjay look possible, and then work your personality up to deserving it!” she says brightly.

“You already have her uniform,” says Gale.

“Yes, but is she scarred and bloody? Is she glowing with the fire of rebellion? Just how grimy can we make her without disgusting people? At any rate, she has to be something. I mean, obviously this”—Fulvia moves in on me quickly, framing my face with her hands—“won’t cut it.” I jerk my head back reflexively but she’s already busy gathering her things. “So, with that in mind, we have another little surprise for you. Come, come.”

Fulvia gives us a wave, and Gale and I follow her and Plutarch out into the hall.

“So well intended, and yet so insulting,” Gale whispers in my ear.

“Welcome to the Capitol,” I mouth back. But Fulvia’s words have no effect on me. I wrap my arms tightly around the sketchbook and allow myself to feel hopeful. This must be the right decision. If Cinna wanted it.

We board an elevator, and Plutarch checks his notes. “Let’s see. It’s Compartment Three-Nine-Oh-Eight.” He presses a button marked 39, but nothing happens.

“You must have to key it,” says Fulvia.

Plutarch pulls a key attached to a thin chain from under his shirt and inserts it into a slot I hadn’t noticed before. The doors slide shut. “Ah, there we are.”

The elevator descends ten, twenty, thirty-plus levels, farther down than I even knew District 13 went. It opens on a wide white corridor lined with red doors, which look almost decorative compared to the gray ones on the upper floors. Each is plainly marked with a number. 3901, 3902, 3903...

As we step out, I glance behind me to watch the elevator close and see a metallic grate slide into place over the regular doors. When I turn, a guard has materialized from one of the rooms at the far end of the corridor. A door swings silently shut behind him as he strides toward us.

Plutarch moves to meet him, raising a hand in greeting, and the rest of us follow behind him. Something feels very wrong down here. It’s more than the reinforced elevator, or the claustrophobia of being so far underground, or the caustic smell of antiseptic. One look at Gale’s face and I can tell he senses it as well.

“Good morning, we were just looking for—” Plutarch begins.

“You have the wrong floor,” says the guard abruptly.

“Really?” Plutarch double-checks his notes. “I’ve got Three-Nine-Oh-Eight written right here. I wonder if you could just give a call up to—”

“I’m afraid I have to ask you to leave now. Assignment discrepancies can be addressed at the Head Office,” says the guard.

It’s right ahead of us. Compartment 3908. Just a few steps away. The door—in fact, all the doors—seem incomplete. No knobs. They must swing free on hinges like the one the guard appeared through.

“Where is that again?” asks Fulvia.

“You’ll find the Head Office on Level Seven,” says the guard, extending his arms to corral us back to the elevator.

From behind door 3908 comes a sound. Just a tiny whimper. Like something a cowed dog might make to avoid being struck, only all too human and familiar. My eyes meet Gale’s for just a moment, but it’s long enough for two people who operate the way we do. I let Cinna’s sketchbook fall at the guard’s feet with a loud bang. A second after he leans down to retrieve it, Gale leans down, too, intentionally bumping heads. “Oh, I’m sorry,” he says with a light laugh, catching the guard’s arms as if to steady himself, turning him slightly away from me.

That’s my chance. I dart around the distracted guard, push open the door marked 3908, and find them. Half-naked, bruised, and shackled to the wall.

My prep team.

The stink of unwashed bodies, stale urine, and infection breaks through the cloud of antiseptic. The three figures are only just recognizable by their most striking fashion choices: Venia's gold facial tattoos. Flavius's orange corkscrew curls. Octavia's light evergreen skin, which now hangs too loosely, as if her body were a slowly deflating balloon.

On seeing me, Flavius and Octavia shrink back against the tiled walls like they're anticipating an attack, even though I have never hurt them. Unkind thoughts were my worst offense against them, and those I kept to myself, so why do they recoil?

The guard's ordering me out, but by the shuffling that follows, I know Gale has somehow detained him. For answers, I cross to Venia, who was always the strongest. I crouch down and take her icy hands, which clutch mine like vises.

"What happened, Venia?" I ask. "What are you doing here?"

"They took us. From the Capitol," she says hoarsely.

Plutarch enters behind me. "What on earth is going on?"

"Who took you?" I press her.

"People," she says vaguely. "The night you broke out."

"We thought it might be comforting for you to have your regular team," Plutarch says behind me. "Cinna requested it."

"Cinna requested *this*?" I snarl at him. Because if there's one thing I know, it's that Cinna would never have approved the abuse of these three, who he managed with gentleness and patience. "Why are they being treated like criminals?"

"I honestly don't know." There's something in his voice that makes me believe him, and the pallor on Fulvia's face confirms it. Plutarch turns to the guard, who's just appeared in the doorway with Gale right behind him. "I was only told they were being confined. Why are they being punished?"

"For stealing food. We had to restrain them after an altercation over some bread," says the guard.

Venia's brows come together as if she's still trying to make sense of it. "No one would tell us anything. We were so hungry. It was just one slice she took."

Octavia begins to sob, muffling the sound in her ragged tunic. I think of how, the first time I survived the arena, Octavia sneaked me a roll under the table because she couldn't bear my hunger. I crawl across to her shaking form. "Octavia?" I touch her and she flinches. "Octavia? It's going to be all right. I'll get you out of here, okay?"

"This seems extreme," says Plutarch.

"It's because they took a slice of bread?" asks Gale.

"There were repeated infractions leading up to that. They were warned. Still they took more bread." The guard pauses a moment, as if puzzled by our density. "You can't take bread."

I can't get Octavia to uncover her face, but she lifts it slightly. The shackles on her wrists shift down a few inches, revealing raw sores beneath them. "I'm bringing you to my mother." I address the guard. "Unchain them."

The guard shakes his head. "It's not authorized."

"Unchain them! Now!" I yell.

This breaks his composure. Average citizens don't address him this way. "I have no release orders. And you have no authority to—"

"Do it on my authority," says Plutarch. "We came to collect these three anyway. They're needed for Special Defense. I'll take full responsibility."

The guard leaves to make a call. He returns with a set of keys. The preps have been forced into cramped body positions for so long that even once the shackles are removed, they have trouble walking. Gale, Plutarch, and I have to help them. Flavius's foot catches on a metal grate over a circular opening in the floor, and my stomach contracts when I think of why a room would need a drain. The stains of human misery that must have been hosed off these white tiles...

In the hospital, I find my mother, the only one I trust to care for them. It takes her a minute to place the three, given their current condition, but already she wears a look of consternation. And I know it's not a result of seeing abused bodies, because they were her daily fare in District 12, but the realization that this sort of thing goes on in 13 as well.

My mother was welcomed into the hospital, but she's viewed as more of a nurse than a doctor, despite her lifetime of healing. Still, no one interferes when she guides the trio into an examination room to assess their injuries. I

plant myself on a bench in the hall outside the hospital entrance, waiting to hear her verdict. She will be able to read in their bodies the pain inflicted upon them.

Gale sits next to me and puts an arm around my shoulder. “She’ll fix them up.” I give a nod, wondering if he’s thinking about his own brutal flogging back in 12.

Plutarch and Fulvia take the bench across from us but don’t offer any comments on the state of my prep team. If they had no knowledge of the mistreatment, then what do they make of this move on President Coin’s part? I decide to help them out.

“I guess we’ve all been put on notice,” I say.

“What? No. What do you mean?” asks Fulvia.

“Punishing my prep team’s a warning,” I tell her. “Not just to me. But to you, too. About who’s really in control and what happens if she’s not obeyed. If you had any delusions about having power, I’d let them go now. Apparently, a Capitol pedigree is no protection here. Maybe it’s even a liability.”

“There is no comparison between Plutarch, who masterminded the rebel breakout, and those three beauticians,” says Fulvia icily.

I shrug. “If you say so, Fulvia. But what would happen if you got on Coin’s bad side? My prep team was kidnapped. They can at least hope to one day return to the Capitol. Gale and I can live in the woods. But you? Where would you two run?”

“Perhaps we’re a little more necessary to the war effort than you give us credit for,” says Plutarch, unconcerned.

“Of course you are. The tributes were necessary to the Games, too. Until they weren’t,” I say. “And then we were very disposable—right, Plutarch?”

That ends the conversation. We wait in silence until my mother finds us. “They’ll be all right,” she reports. “No permanent physical injuries.”

“Good. Splendid,” says Plutarch. “How soon can they be put to work?”

“Probably tomorrow,” she answers. “You’ll have to expect some emotional instability, after what they’ve been through. They were particularly ill prepared, coming from their life in the Capitol.”

“Weren’t we all?” says Plutarch.

Either because the prep team’s incapacitated or I’m too on edge, Plutarch releases me from Mockingjay duties for the rest of the day. Gale and I head down to lunch, where we’re served bean and onion stew, a thick slice of

bread, and a cup of water. After Venia's story, the bread sticks in my throat, so I slide the rest of it onto Gale's tray. Neither of us speaks much during lunch, but when our bowls are clean, Gale pulls up his sleeve, revealing his schedule. "I've got training next."

I tug up my sleeve and hold my arm next to his. "Me, too." I remember that training equals hunting now.

My eagerness to escape into the woods, if only for two hours, overrides my current concerns. An immersion into greenery and sunlight will surely help me sort out my thoughts. Once off the main corridors, Gale and I race like schoolchildren for the armory, and by the time we arrive, I'm breathless and dizzy. A reminder that I'm not fully recovered. The guards provide our old weapons, as well as knives and a burlap sack that's meant for a game bag. I tolerate having the tracker clamped to my ankle, try to look as if I'm listening when they explain how to use the handheld communicator. The only thing that sticks in my head is that it has a clock, and we must be back inside 13 by the designated hour or our hunting privileges will be revoked. This is one rule I think I will make an effort to abide.

We go outside into the large, fenced-in training area beside the woods. Guards open the well-oiled gates without comment. We would be hard-pressed to get past this fence on our own—thirty feet high and always buzzing with electricity, topped with razor-sharp curls of steel. We move through the woods until the view of the fence has been obscured. In a small clearing, we pause and drop back our heads to bask in the sunlight. I turn in a circle, my arms extended at my sides, revolving slowly so as not to set the world spinning.

The lack of rain I saw in 12 has damaged the plants here as well, leaving some with brittle leaves, building a crunchy carpet under our feet. We take off our shoes. Mine don't fit right anyway, since in the spirit of waste-not-want-not that rules 13, I was issued a pair someone had outgrown. Apparently, one of us walks funny, because they're broken in all wrong.

We hunt, like in the old days. Silent, needing no words to communicate, because here in the woods we move as two parts of one being. Anticipating each other's movements, watching each other's backs. How long has it been? Eight months? Nine? Since we had this freedom? It's not exactly the same, given all that's happened and the trackers on our ankles and the fact that I have to rest so often. But it's about as close to happiness as I think I can currently get.

The animals here are not nearly suspicious enough. That extra moment it takes to place our unfamiliar scent means their death. In an hour and a half, we've got a mixed dozen—rabbits, squirrels, and turkeys—and decide to knock off to spend the remaining time by a pond that must be fed by an underground spring, since the water's cool and sweet.

When Gale offers to clean the game, I don't object. I stick a few mint leaves on my tongue, close my eyes, and lean back against a rock, soaking in the sounds, letting the scorching afternoon sun burn my skin, almost at peace until Gale's voice interrupts me. "Katniss, why do you care so much about your prep team?"

I open my eyes to see if he's joking, but he's frowning down at the rabbit he's skinning. "Why shouldn't I?"

"Hm. Let's see. Because they've spent the last year prettying you up for slaughter?" he suggests.

"It's more complicated than that. I know them. They're not evil or cruel. They're not even smart. Hurting them, it's like hurting children. They don't see...I mean, they don't know..." I get knotted up in my words.

"They don't know what, Katniss?" he says. "That tributes—who are the actual children involved here, not your trio of freaks—are forced to fight to the death? That you were going into that arena for people's amusement? Was that a big secret in the Capitol?"

"No. But they don't view it the way we do," I say. "They're raised on it and—"

"Are you actually defending them?" He slips the skin from the rabbit in one quick move.

That stings, because, in fact, I am, and it's ridiculous. I struggle to find a logical position. "I guess I'm defending anyone who's treated like that for taking a slice of bread. Maybe it reminds me too much of what happened to you over a turkey!"

Still, he's right. It does seem strange, my level of concern over the prep team. I should hate them and want to see them strung up. But they're so clueless, and they belonged to Cinna, and he was on my side, right?

"I'm not looking for a fight," Gale says. "But I don't think Coin was sending you some big message by punishing them for breaking the rules here. She probably thought you'd see it as a favor." He stuffs the rabbit in the sack and rises. "We better get going if we want to make it back on time."

I ignore his offer of a hand up and get to my feet unsteadily. “Fine.” Neither of us talks on the way back, but once we’re inside the gate, I think of something else. “During the Quarter Quell, Octavia and Flavius had to quit because they couldn’t stop crying over me going back in. And Venia could barely say good-bye.”

“I’ll try and keep that in mind as they...remake you,” says Gale.

“Do,” I say.

We hand the meat over to Greasy Sae in the kitchen. She likes District 13 well enough, even though she thinks the cooks are somewhat lacking in imagination. But a woman who came up with a palatable wild dog and rhubarb stew is bound to feel as if her hands are tied here.

Exhausted from hunting and my lack of sleep, I go back to my compartment to find it stripped bare, only to remember we’ve been moved because of Buttercup. I make my way up to the top floor and find Compartment E. It looks exactly like Compartment 307, except for the window—two feet wide, eight inches high—centered at the top of the outside wall. There’s a heavy metal plate that fastens over it, but right now it’s propped open, and a certain cat is nowhere to be seen. I stretch out on my bed, and a shaft of afternoon sunlight plays on my face. The next thing I know, my sister is waking me for *18:00—Reflection*.

Prim tells me they’ve been announcing the assembly since lunch. The entire population, except those needed for essential jobs, is required to attend. We follow directions to the Collective, a huge room that easily holds the thousands who show up. You can tell it was built for a larger gathering, and perhaps it held one before the pox epidemic. Prim quietly points out the widespread fallout from that disaster—the pox scars on people’s bodies, the slightly disfigured children. “They’ve suffered a lot here,” she says.

After this morning, I’m in no mood to feel sorry for 13. “No more than we did in Twelve,” I say. I see my mother lead in a group of mobile patients, still wearing their hospital nightgowns and robes. Finnick stands among them, looking dazed but gorgeous. In his hands he holds a piece of thin rope, less than a foot in length, too short for even him to fashion into a usable noose. His fingers move rapidly, automatically tying and unraveling various knots as he gazes about. Probably part of his therapy. I cross to him and say, “Hey, Finnick.” He doesn’t seem to notice, so I nudge him to get his attention. “Finnick! How are you doing?”

“Katniss,” he says, gripping my hand. Relieved to see a familiar face, I think. “Why are we meeting here?”

“I told Coin I’d be her Mockingjay. But I made her promise to give the other tributes immunity if the rebels won,” I tell him. “In public, so there are plenty of witnesses.”

“Oh. Good. Because I worry about that with Annie. That she’ll say something that could be construed as traitorous without knowing it,” says Finnick.

Annie. Uh-oh. Totally forgot her. “Don’t worry, I took care of it.” I give Finnick’s hand a squeeze and head straight for the podium at the front of the room. Coin, who is glancing over her statement, raises her eyebrows at me. “I need you to add Annie Cresta to the immunity list,” I tell her.

The president frowns slightly. “Who’s that?”

“She’s Finnick Odair’s—” What? I don’t really know what to call her. “She’s Finnick’s friend. From District Four. Another victor. She was arrested and taken to the Capitol when the arena blew up.”

“Oh, the mad girl. That’s not really necessary,” she says. “We don’t make a habit of punishing anyone that frail.”

I think of the scene I walked in on this morning. Of Octavia huddled against the wall. Of how Coin and I must have vastly different definitions of frailty. But I only say, “No? Then it shouldn’t be a problem to add Annie.”

“All right,” says the president, penciling in Annie’s name. “Do you want to be up here with me for the announcement?” I shake my head. “I didn’t think so. Better hurry and lose yourself in the crowd. I’m about to begin.” I make my way back to Finnick.

Words are another thing not wasted in 13. Coin calls the audience to attention and tells them I have consented to be the Mockingjay, provided the other victors—Peeta, Johanna, Enobaria, and Annie—will be granted full pardon for any damage they do to the rebel cause. In the rumbling of the crowd, I hear the dissent. I suppose no one doubted I would want to be the Mockingjay. So naming a price—one that spares possible enemies—angers them. I stand indifferent to the hostile looks thrown my way.

The president allows a few moments of unrest, and then continues in her brisk fashion. Only now the words coming out of her mouth are news to me. “But in return for this unprecedented request, Soldier Everdeen has promised to devote herself to our cause. It follows that any deviance from her mission, in either motive or deed, will be viewed as a break in this agreement. The

immunity would be terminated and the fate of the four victors determined by the law of District Thirteen. As would her own. Thank you.”

In other words, I step out of line and we’re all dead.

Another force to contend with. Another power player who has decided to use me as a piece in her games, although things never seem to go according to plan. First there were the Gamemakers, making me their star and then scrambling to recover from that handful of poisonous berries. Then President Snow, trying to use me to put out the flames of rebellion, only to have my every move become inflammatory. Next, the rebels ensnaring me in the metal claw that lifted me from the arena, designating me to be their Mockingjay, and then having to recover from the shock that I might not want the wings. And now Coin, with her fistful of precious nukes and her well-oiled machine of a district, finding it's even harder to groom a Mockingjay than to catch one. But she has been the quickest to determine that I have an agenda of my own and am therefore not to be trusted. She has been the first to publicly brand me as a threat.

I run my fingers through the thick layer of bubbles in my tub. Cleaning me up is just a preliminary step to determining my new look. With my acid-damaged hair, sunburned skin, and ugly scars, the prep team has to make me pretty and *then* damage, burn, and scar me in a more attractive way.

"Remake her to Beauty Base Zero," Fulvia ordered first thing this morning. "We'll work from there." Beauty Base Zero turns out to be what a person would look like if they stepped out of bed looking flawless but natural. It means my nails are perfectly shaped but not polished. My hair soft and shiny but not styled. My skin smooth and clear but not painted. Wax the body hair and erase the dark circles, but don't make any noticeable enhancements. I suppose Cinna gave the same instructions the first day I arrived as a tribute in the Capitol. Only that was different, since I was a contestant. As a rebel, I thought I'd get to look more like myself. But it seems a televised rebel has her own standards to live up to.

After I rinse the lather from my body, I turn to find Octavia waiting with a towel. She is so altered from the woman I knew in the Capitol, stripped of the gaudy clothing, the heavy makeup, the dyes and jewelry and knickknacks she adorned her hair with. I remember how one day she showed up with

bright pink tresses studded with blinking colored lights shaped like mice. She told me she had several mice at home as pets. The thought repulsed me at the time, since we consider mice vermin, unless cooked. But perhaps Octavia liked them because they were small, soft, and squeaky. Like her. As she pats me dry, I try to become acquainted with the District 13 Octavia. Her real hair turns out to be a nice auburn. Her face is ordinary but has an undeniable sweetness. She's younger than I thought. Maybe early twenties. Devoid of the three-inch decorative nails, her fingers appear almost stubby, and they can't stop trembling. I want to tell her it's okay, that I'll see that Coin never hurts her again. But the multicolored bruises flowering under her green skin only remind me how impotent I am.

Flavius, too, appears washed out without his purple lipstick and bright clothes. He's managed to get his orange ringlets back in some sort of order, though. It's Venia who's the least changed. Her aqua hair lies flat instead of in spikes and you can see the roots growing in gray. However, the tattoos were always her most striking characteristic, and they're as golden and shocking as ever. She comes and takes the towel from Octavia's hands.

"Katniss is not going to hurt us," she says quietly but firmly to Octavia. "Katniss did not even know we were here. Things will be better now." Octavia gives a slight nod but doesn't dare look me in the eye.

It's no simple job getting me back to Beauty Base Zero, even with the elaborate arsenal of products, tools, and gadgets Plutarch had the foresight to bring from the Capitol. My preps do pretty well until they try to address the spot on my arm where Johanna dug out the tracker. None of the medical team was focusing on looks when they patched up the gaping hole. Now I have a lumpy, jagged scar that ripples out over a space the size of an apple. Usually, my sleeve covers it, but the way Cinna's Mockingjay costume is designed, the sleeves stop just above the elbow. It's such a concern that Fulvia and Plutarch are called in to discuss it. I swear, the sight of it triggers Fulvia's gag reflex. For someone who works with a Gamemaker, she's awfully sensitive. But I guess she's used to seeing unpleasant things only on a screen.

"Everyone knows I have a scar here," I say sullenly.

"Knowing it and seeing it are two different things," says Fulvia. "It's positively repulsive. Plutarch and I will think of something during lunch."

"It'll be fine," says Plutarch with a dismissive wave of his hand. "Maybe an armband or something."

Disgusted, I get dressed so I can head to the dining hall. My prep team huddles in a little group by the door. “Are they bringing your food here?” I ask.

“No,” says Venia. “We’re supposed to go to a dining hall.”

I sigh inwardly as I imagine walking into the dining hall, trailed by these three. But people always stare at me anyway. This will be more of the same. “I’ll show you where it is,” I say. “Come on.”

The covert glances and quiet murmurs I usually evoke are nothing compared to the reaction brought on by the sight of my bizarre-looking prep team. The gaping mouths, the finger pointing, the exclamations. “Just ignore them,” I tell my prep team. Eyes downcast, with mechanical movements, they follow me through the line, accepting bowls of grayish fish and okra stew and cups of water.

We take seats at my table, beside a group from the Seam. They show a little more restraint than the people from 13 do, although it may just be from embarrassment. Leevy, who was my neighbor back in 12, gives a cautious hello to the preps, and Gale’s mother, Hazelle, who must know about their imprisonment, holds up a spoonful of the stew. “Don’t worry,” she says. “Tastes better than it looks.”

But it’s Posy, Gale’s five-year-old sister, who helps the most. She scoots along the bench to Octavia and touches her skin with a tentative finger. “You’re green. Are you sick?”

“It’s a fashion thing, Posy. Like wearing lipstick,” I say.

“It’s meant to be pretty,” whispers Octavia, and I can see the tears threatening to spill over her lashes.

Posy considers this and says matter-of-factly, “I think you’d be pretty in any color.”

The tiniest of smiles forms on Octavia’s lips. “Thank you.”

“If you really want to impress Posy, you’ll have to dye yourself bright pink,” says Gale, thumping his tray down beside me. “That’s her favorite color.” Posy giggles and slides back down to her mother. Gale nods at Flavius’s bowl. “I wouldn’t let that get cold. It doesn’t improve the consistency.”

Everyone gets down to eating. The stew doesn’t taste bad, but there’s a certain sliminess that’s hard to get around. Like you have to swallow every bite three times before it really goes down.

Gale, who's not usually much of a talker during meals, makes an effort to keep the conversation going, asking about the makeover. I know it's his attempt at smoothing things over. We argued last night after he suggested I'd left Coin no choice but to counter my demand for the victors' safety with one of her own. "Katniss, she's running this district. She can't do it if it seems like she's caving in to your will."

"You mean she can't stand any dissent, even if it's fair," I'd countered.

"I mean you put her in a bad position. Making her give Peeta and the others immunity when we don't even know what sort of damage they might cause," Gale had said.

"So I should've just gone with the program and let the other tributes take their chances? Not that it matters, because that's what we're all doing anyway!" That was when I'd slammed the door in his face. I hadn't sat with him at breakfast, and when Plutarch had sent him down to training this morning, I'd let him go without a word. I know he only spoke out of concern for me, but I really need him to be on my side, not Coin's. How can he not know that?

After lunch, Gale and I are scheduled to go down to Special Defense to meet Beetee. As we ride the elevator, Gale finally says, "You're still angry."

"And you're still not sorry," I reply.

"I still stand by what I said. Do you want me to lie about it?" he asks.

"No, I want you to rethink it and come up with the right opinion," I tell him. But this just makes him laugh. I have to let it go. There's no point in trying to dictate what Gale thinks. Which, if I'm honest, is one reason I trust him.

The Special Defense level is situated almost as far down as the dungeons where we found the prep team. It's a beehive of rooms full of computers, labs, research equipment, and testing ranges.

When we ask for Beetee, we're directed through the maze until we reach an enormous plate-glass window. Inside is the first beautiful thing I've seen in the District 13 compound: a replication of a meadow, filled with real trees and flowering plants, and alive with hummingbirds. Beetee sits motionless in a wheelchair at the center of the meadow, watching a spring-green bird hover in midair as it sips nectar from a large orange blossom. His eyes follow the bird as it darts away, and he catches sight of us. He gives a friendly wave for us to join him inside.

The air's cool and breathable, not humid and muggy as I'd expected. From all sides comes the whir of tiny wings, which I used to confuse with the sound of insects in our woods at home. I have to wonder what sort of fluke allowed such a pleasing place to be built here.

Beetee still has the pallor of someone in convalescence, but behind those ill-fitting glasses, his eyes are alight with excitement. "Aren't they magnificent? Thirteen has been studying their aerodynamics here for years. Forward and backward flight, and speeds up to sixty miles per hour. If only I could build you wings like these, Katniss!"

"Doubt I could manage them, Beetee," I laugh.

"Here one second, gone the next. Can you bring a hummingbird down with an arrow?" he asks.

"I've never tried. Not much meat on them," I answer.

"No. And you're not one to kill for sport," he says. "I bet they'd be hard to shoot, though."

"You could snare them maybe," Gale says. His face takes on that distant look it wears when he's working something out. "Take a net with a very fine mesh. Enclose an area and leave a mouth of a couple square feet. Bait the inside with nectar flowers. While they're feeding, snap the mouth shut. They'd fly away from the noise but only encounter the far side of the net."

"Would that work?" asks Beetee.

"I don't know. Just an idea," says Gale. "They might outsmart it."

"They might. But you're playing on their natural instincts to flee danger. Thinking like your prey...that's where you find their vulnerabilities," says Beetee.

I remember something I don't like to think about. In preparation for the Quell, I saw a tape where Beetee, who was still a boy, connected two wires that electrocuted a pack of kids who were hunting him. The convulsing bodies, the grotesque expressions. Beetee, in the moments that led up to his victory in those long-ago Hunger Games, watched the others die. Not his fault. Only self-defense. We were all acting only in self-defense....

Suddenly, I want to leave the hummingbird room before somebody starts setting up a snare. "Beetee, Plutarch said you had something for me."

"Right. I do. Your new bow." He presses a hand control on the arm of the chair and wheels out of the room. As we follow him through the twists and turns of Special Defense, he explains about the chair. "I can walk a little

now. It's just that I tire so quickly. It's easier for me to get around this way. How's Finnick doing?"

"He's...he's having concentration problems," I answer. I don't want to say he had a complete mental meltdown.

"Concentration problems, eh?" Beetee smiles grimly. "If you knew what Finnick's been through the last few years, you'd know how remarkable it is he's still with us at all. Tell him I've been working on a new trident for him, though, will you? Something to distract him a little." Distraction seems to be the last thing Finnick needs, but I promise to pass on the message.

Four soldiers guard the entrance to the hall marked Special Weaponry. Checking the schedules printed on our forearms is just a preliminary step. We also have fingerprint, retinal, and DNA scans, and have to step through special metal detectors. Beetee has to leave his wheelchair outside, although they provide him with another once we're through security. I find the whole thing bizarre because I can't imagine anyone raised in District 13 being a threat the government would have to guard against. Have these precautions been put in place because of the recent influx of immigrants?

At the door of the armory, we encounter a second round of identification checks—as if my DNA might have changed in the time it took to walk twenty yards down the hallway—and are finally allowed to enter the weapons collection. I have to admit the arsenal takes my breath away. Row upon row of firearms, launchers, explosives, armored vehicles. "Of course, the Airborne Division is housed separately," Beetee tells us.

"Of course," I say, as if this would be self-evident. I don't know where a simple bow and arrow could possibly find a place in all this high-tech equipment, but then we come upon a wall of deadly archery weapons. I've played with a lot of the Capitol's weapons in training, but none designed for military combat. I focus my attention on a lethal-looking bow so loaded down with scopes and gadgetry, I'm certain I can't even lift it, let alone shoot it.

"Gale, maybe you'd like to try out a few of these," says Beetee.

"Seriously?" Gale asks.

"You'll be issued a gun eventually for battle, of course. But if you appear as part of Katniss's team in the propos, one of these would look a little showier. I thought you might like to find one that suits you," says Beetee.

"Yeah, I would." Gale's hands close around the very bow that caught my attention a moment ago, and he hefts it onto his shoulder. He points it around

the room, peering through the scope.

"That doesn't seem very fair to the deer," I say.

"Wouldn't be using it on deer, would I?" he answers.

"I'll be right back," says Beetee. He presses a code into a panel, and a small doorway opens. I watch until he's disappeared and the door's shut.

"So, it'd be easy for you? Using that on people?" I ask.

"I didn't say that." Gale drops the bow to his side. "But if I'd had a weapon that could've stopped what I saw happen in Twelve...if I'd had a weapon that could have kept you out of the arena...I'd have used it."

"Me, too," I admit. But I don't know what to tell him about the aftermath of killing a person. About how they never leave you.

Beetee wheels back in with a tall, black rectangular case awkwardly positioned between his footrest and his shoulder. He comes to a halt and tilts it toward me. "For you."

I set the case flat on the floor and undo the latches along one side. The top opens on silent hinges. Inside the case, on a bed of crushed maroon velvet, lies a stunning black bow. "Oh," I whisper in admiration. I lift it carefully into the air to admire the exquisite balance, the elegant design, and the curve of the limbs that somehow suggests the wings of a bird extended in flight. There's something else. I have to hold very still to make sure I'm not imagining it. No, the bow is alive in my hands. I press it against my cheek and feel the slight hum travel through the bones of my face. "What's it doing?" I ask.

"Saying hello," explains Beetee with a grin. "It heard your voice."

"It recognizes my voice?" I ask.

"*Only* your voice," he tells me. "You see, they wanted me to design a bow based purely on looks. As part of your costume, you know? But I kept thinking, *What a waste*. I mean, what if you do need it sometime? As more than a fashion accessory? So I left the outside simple, and left the inside to my imagination. Best explained in practice, though. Want to try those out?"

We do. A target range has already been prepared for us. The arrows that Beetee designed are no less remarkable than the bow. Between the two, I can shoot with accuracy over one hundred yards. The variety of arrows—razor sharp, incendiary, explosive—turn the bow into a multipurpose weapon. Each one is recognizable by a distinctive colored shaft. I have the option of voice override at any time, but have no idea why I would use it. To

deactivate the bow's special properties, I need only tell it "Good night." Then it goes to sleep until the sound of my voice wakes it again.

I'm in good spirits by the time I get back to the prep team, leaving Beetee and Gale behind. I sit patiently through the rest of the paint job and don my costume, which now includes a bloody bandage over the scar on my arm to indicate I've been in recent combat. Venia affixes my mockingjay pin over my heart. I take up my bow and the sheath of normal arrows that Beetee made, knowing they would never let me walk around with the loaded ones. Then we're out on the soundstage, where I seem to stand for hours while they adjust makeup and lighting and smoke levels. Eventually, the commands coming via intercom from the invisible people in the mysterious glassed-in booth become fewer and fewer. Fulvia and Plutarch spend more time studying and less time adjusting me. Finally, there's quiet on the set. For a full five minutes I am simply considered. Then Plutarch says, "I think that does it."

I'm beckoned over to a monitor. They play back the last few minutes of taping and I watch the woman on the screen. Her body seems larger in stature, more imposing than mine. Her face smudged but sexy. Her brows black and drawn in an angle of defiance. Wisps of smoke—suggesting she has either just been extinguished or is about to burst into flames—rise from her clothes. I do not know who this person is.

Finnick, who's been wandering around the set for a few hours, comes up behind me and says with a hint of his old humor, "They'll either want to kill you, kiss you, or be you."

Everyone's so excited, so pleased with their work. It's nearly time to break for dinner, but they insist we continue. Tomorrow we'll focus on speeches and interviews and have me pretend to be in rebel battles. Today they want just one slogan, just one line that they can work into a short propo to show to Coin.

"People of Panem, we fight, we dare, we end our hunger for justice!" That's the line. I can tell by the way they present it that they've spent months, maybe years, working it out and are really proud of it. It seems like a mouthful to me, though. And stiff. I can't imagine actually saying it in real life—unless I was using a Capitol accent and making fun of it. Like when Gale and I used to imitate Effie Trinket's "May the odds be *ever* in your favor!" But Fulvia's right in my face, describing a battle I've just been in, and how

my comrades-in-arms are all lying dead around me, and how, to rally the living, I must turn to the camera and shout out the line!

I'm hustled back to my place, and the smoke machine kicks in. Someone calls for quiet, the cameras start rolling, and I hear "Action!" So I hold my bow over my head and yell with all the anger I can muster, "*People of Panem, we fight, we dare, we end our hunger for justice!*"

There's dead silence on the set. It goes on. And on.

Finally, the intercom crackles and Haymitch's acerbic laugh fills the studio. He contains himself just long enough to say, "And that, my friends, is how a revolution dies."

The shock of hearing Haymitch's voice yesterday, of learning that he was not only functional but had some measure of control over my life again, enraged me. I left the studio directly and refused to acknowledge his comments from the booth today. Even so, I knew immediately he was right about my performance.

It took the whole of this morning for him to convince the others of my limitations. That I can't pull it off. I can't stand in a television studio wearing a costume and makeup in a cloud of fake smoke and rally the districts to victory. It's amazing, really, how long I have survived the cameras. The credit for that, of course, goes to Peeta. Alone, I can't be the Mockingjay.

We gather around the huge table in Command. Coin and her people. Plutarch, Fulvia, and my prep team. A group from 12 that includes Haymitch and Gale, but also a few others I can't explain, like Leevy and Greasy Sae. At the last minute, Finnick wheels Beetee in, accompanied by Dalton, the cattle expert from 10. I suppose that Coin has assembled this strange assortment of people as witnesses to my failure.

However, it's Haymitch who welcomes everyone, and by his words I understand that they have come at his personal invitation. This is the first time we've been in a room together since I clawed him. I avoid looking at him directly, but I catch a glimpse of his reflection in one of the shiny control consoles along the wall. He looks slightly yellow and has lost a lot of weight, giving him a shrunken appearance. For a second, I'm afraid he's dying. I have to remind myself that I don't care.

The first thing Haymitch does is to show the footage we've just shot. I seem to have reached some new low under Plutarch and Fulvia's guidance. Both my voice and body have a jerky, disjointed quality, like a puppet being manipulated by unseen forces.

"All right," Haymitch says when it's over. "Would anyone like to argue that this is of use to us in winning the war?" No one does. "That saves time. So, let's all be quiet for a minute. I want everyone to think of one incident where Katniss Everdeen genuinely moved you. Not where you were jealous

of her hairstyle, or her dress went up in flames or she made a halfway decent shot with an arrow. Not where Peeta was making you like her. I want to hear one moment where *she* made you feel something real.”

Quiet stretches out and I’m beginning to think it will never end, when Leevy speaks up. “When she volunteered to take Prim’s place at the reaping. Because I’m sure she thought she was going to die.”

“Good. Excellent example,” says Haymitch. He takes a purple marker and writes on a notepad. “Volunteered for sister at reaping.” Haymitch looks around the table. “Somebody else.”

I’m surprised that the next speaker is Boggs, who I think of as a muscular robot that does Coin’s bidding. “When she sang the song. While the little girl died.” Somewhere in my head an image surfaces of Boggs with a young boy perched up on his hip. In the dining hall, I think. Maybe he’s not a robot after all.

“Who didn’t get choked up at that, right?” says Haymitch, writing it down.

“I cried when she drugged Peeta so she could go get him medicine and when she kissed him good-bye!” blurts out Octavia. Then she covers her mouth, like she’s sure this was a bad mistake.

But Haymitch only nods. “Oh, yeah. Drugs Peeta to save his life. Very nice.”

The moments begin to come thick and fast and in no particular order. When I took Rue on as an ally. Extended my hand to Chaff on interview night. Tried to carry Mags. And again and again when I held out those berries that meant different things to different people. Love for Peeta. Refusal to give in under impossible odds. Defiance of the Capitol’s inhumanity.

Haymitch holds up the notepad. “So, the question is, what do all of these have in common?”

“They were Katniss’s,” says Gale quietly. “No one told her what to do or say.”

“Unscripted, yes!” says Beetee. He reaches over and pats my hand. “So we should just leave you alone, right?”

People laugh. I even smile a little.

“Well, that’s all very nice but not very helpful,” says Fulvia peevishly. “Unfortunately, her opportunities for being wonderful are rather limited here in Thirteen. So unless you’re suggesting we toss her into the middle of combat—”

“That’s *exactly* what I’m suggesting,” says Haymitch. “Put her out in the field and just keep the cameras rolling.”

“But people think she’s pregnant,” Gale points out.

“We’ll spread the word that she lost the baby from the electrical shock in the arena,” Plutarch replies. “Very sad. Very unfortunate.”

The idea of sending me into combat is controversial. But Haymitch has a pretty tight case. If I perform well only in real-life circumstances, then into them I should go. “Every time we coach her or give her lines, the best we can hope for is okay. It has to come from her. That’s what people are responding to.”

“Even if we’re careful, we can’t guarantee her safety,” says Boggs. “She’ll be a target for every—”

“I want to go,” I break in. “I’m no help to the rebels here.”

“And if you’re killed?” asks Coin.

“Make sure you get some footage. You can use that, anyway,” I answer.

“Fine,” says Coin. “But let’s take it one step at a time. Find the least dangerous situation that can evoke some spontaneity in you.” She walks around Command, studying the illuminated district maps that show the ongoing troop positions in the war. “Take her into Eight this afternoon. There was heavy bombing this morning, but the raid seems to have run its course. I want her armed with a squad of bodyguards. Camera crew on the ground. Haymitch, you’ll be airborne and in contact with her. Let’s see what happens there. Does anyone have any other comments?”

“Wash her face,” says Dalton. Everyone turns to him. “She’s still a girl and you made her look thirty-five. Feels wrong. Like something the Capitol would do.”

As Coin adjourns the meeting, Haymitch asks her if he can speak to me privately. The others leave except for Gale, who lingers uncertainly by my side. “What are you worried about?” Haymitch asks him. “I’m the one who needs the bodyguard.”

“It’s okay,” I tell Gale, and he goes. Then there’s just the hum of the instruments, the purr of the ventilation system.

Haymitch takes the seat across from me. “We’re going to have to work together again. So, go ahead. Just say it.”

I think of the snarling, cruel exchange back on the hovercraft. The bitterness that followed. But all I say is “I can’t believe you didn’t rescue Peeta.”

“I know,” he replies.

There’s a sense of incompleteness. And not because he hasn’t apologized. But because we were a team. We had a deal to keep Peeta safe. A drunken, unrealistic deal made in the dark of night, but a deal just the same. And in my heart of hearts, I know we both failed.

“Now you say it,” I tell him.

“I can’t believe you let him out of your sight that night,” says Haymitch.

I nod. That’s it. “I play it over and over in my head. What I could have done to keep him by my side without breaking the alliance. But nothing comes to me.”

“You didn’t have a choice. And even if I could’ve made Plutarch stay and rescue him that night, the whole hovercraft would’ve gone down. We barely got out as it was.” I finally meet Haymitch’s eyes. Seam eyes. Gray and deep and ringed with the circles of sleepless nights. “He’s not dead yet, Katniss.”

“We’re still in the game.” I try to say this with optimism, but my voice cracks.

“Still in. And I’m still your mentor.” Haymitch points his marker at me. “When you’re on the ground, remember I’m airborne. I’ll have the better view, so do what I tell you.”

“We’ll see,” I answer.

I return to the Remake Room and watch the streaks of makeup disappear down the drain as I scrub my face clean. The person in the mirror looks ragged, with her uneven skin and tired eyes, but she looks like me. I rip the armband off, revealing the ugly scar from the tracker. There. That looks like me, too.

Since I’ll be in a combat zone, Beetee helps me with armor Cinna designed. A helmet of some interwoven metal that fits close to my head. The material’s supple, like fabric, and can be drawn back like a hood in case I don’t want it up full-time. A vest to reinforce the protection over my vital organs. A small white earpiece that attaches to my collar by a wire. Beetee secures a mask to my belt that I don’t have to wear unless there’s a gas attack. “If you see anyone dropping for reasons you can’t explain, put it on immediately,” he says. Finally, he straps a sheath divided into three cylinders of arrows to my back. “Just remember: Right side, fire. Left side, explosive. Center, regular. You shouldn’t need them, but better safe than sorry.”

Boggs shows up to escort me down to the Airborne Division. Just as the elevator arrives, Finnick appears in a state of agitation. “Katniss, they won’t

let me go! I told them I'm fine, but they won't even let me ride in the hovercraft!"

I take in Finnick—his bare legs showing between his hospital gown and slippers, his tangle of hair, the half-knotted rope twisted around his fingers, the wild look in his eyes—and know any plea on my part will be useless. Even I don't think it's a good idea to bring him. So I smack my hand on my forehead and say, "Oh, I forgot. It's this stupid concussion. I was supposed to tell you to report to Beetee in Special Weaponry. He's designed a new trident for you."

At the word *trident*, it's as if the old Finnick surfaces. "Really? What's it do?"

"I don't know. But if it's anything like my bow and arrows, you're going to love it," I say. "You'll need to train with it, though."

"Right. Of course. I guess I better get down there," he says.

"Finnick?" I say. "Maybe some pants?"

He looks down at his legs as if noticing his outfit for the first time. Then he whips off his hospital gown, leaving him in just his underwear. "Why? Do you find this"—he strikes a ridiculously provocative pose—"distracting?"

I can't help laughing because it's funny, and it's extra funny because it makes Boggs look so uncomfortable, and I'm happy because Finnick actually sounds like the guy I met at the Quarter Quell.

"I'm only human, Odair." I get in before the elevator doors close. "Sorry," I say to Boggs.

"Don't be. I thought you...handled that well," he says. "Better than my having to arrest him, anyway."

"Yeah," I say. I sneak a sidelong glance at him. He's probably in his mid-forties, with close-cropped gray hair and blue eyes. Incredible posture. He's spoken out twice today in ways that make me think he would rather be friends than enemies. Maybe I should give him a chance. But he just seems so in step with Coin....

There's a series of loud clicks. The elevator comes to a slight pause and then begins to move laterally to the left. "It goes sideways?" I ask.

"Yes. There's a whole network of elevator paths under Thirteen," he answers. "This one lies just above the transport spoke to the fifth airlift platform. It's taking us to the Hangar."

The Hangar. The dungeons. Special Defense. Somewhere food is grown. Power generated. Air and water purified. "Thirteen is even larger than I

thought.”

“Can’t take credit for much of it,” says Boggs. “We basically inherited the place. It’s been all we can do to keep it running.”

The clicks resume. We drop down again briefly—just a couple of levels—and the doors open on the Hangar.

“Oh,” I let out involuntarily at the sight of the fleet. Row after row of different kinds of hovercraft. “Did you inherit these, too?”

“Some we manufactured. Some were part of the Capitol’s air force. They’ve been updated, of course,” says Boggs.

I feel that twinge of hatred against 13 again. “So, you had all this, and you left the rest of the districts defenseless against the Capitol.”

“It’s not that simple,” he shoots back. “We were in no position to launch a counterattack until recently. We could barely stay alive. After we’d overthrown and executed the Capitol’s people, only a handful of us even knew how to pilot. We could’ve nuked them with missiles, yes. But there’s always the larger question: If we engage in that type of war with the Capitol, would there be any human life left?”

“That sounds like what Peeta said. And you all called him a traitor,” I counter.

“Because he called for a cease-fire,” says Boggs. “You’ll notice neither side has launched nuclear weapons. We’re working it out the old-fashioned way. Over here, Soldier Everdeen.” He indicates one of the smaller hovercraft.

I mount the stairs and find it packed with the television crew and equipment. Everyone else is dressed in 13’s dark gray military jumpsuits, even Haymitch, although he seems unhappy about the snugness of his collar.

Fulvia Cardew hustles over and makes a sound of frustration when she sees my clean face. “All that work, down the drain. I’m not blaming you, Katniss. It’s just that very few people are born with camera-ready faces. Like him.” She snags Gale, who’s in a conversation with Plutarch, and spins him toward us. “Isn’t he handsome?”

Gale does look striking in the uniform, I guess. But the question just embarrasses us both, given our history. I’m trying to think of a witty comeback, when Boggs says brusquely, “Well, don’t expect us to be too impressed. We just saw Finnick Odair in his underwear.” I decide to go ahead and like Boggs.

There's a warning of the upcoming takeoff and I strap myself into a seat next to Gale, facing off with Haymitch and Plutarch. We glide through a maze of tunnels that opens out onto a platform. Some sort of elevator device lifts the craft slowly up through the levels. All at once we're outside in a large field surrounded by woods, then we rise off the platform and become wrapped in clouds.

Now that the flurry of activity leading up to this mission is over, I realize I have no idea what I'm facing on this trip to District 8. In fact, I know very little about the actual state of the war. Or what it would take to win it. Or what would happen if we did.

Plutarch tries to lay it out in simple terms for me. First of all, every district is currently at war with the Capitol except 2, which has always had a favored relationship with our enemies despite its participation in the Hunger Games. They get more food and better living conditions. After the Dark Days and the supposed destruction of 13, District 2 became the Capitol's new center of defense, although it's publicly presented as the home of the nation's stone quarries, in the same way that 13 was known for graphite mining. District 2 not only manufactures weaponry, it trains and even supplies Peacekeepers.

"You mean...some of the Peacekeepers are born in Two?" I ask. "I thought they all came from the Capitol."

Plutarch nods. "That's what you're supposed to think. And some do come from the Capitol. But its population could never sustain a force that size. Then there's the problem of recruiting Capitol-raised citizens for a dull life of deprivation in the districts. A twenty-year commitment to the Peacekeepers, no marriage, no children allowed. Some buy into it for the honor of the thing, others take it on as an alternative to punishment. For instance, join the Peacekeepers and your debts are forgiven. Many people are swamped in debt in the Capitol, but not all of them are fit for military duty. So District Two is where we turn for additional troops. It's a way for their people to escape poverty and a life in the quarries. They're raised with a warrior mind-set. You've seen how eager their children are to volunteer to be tributes."

Cato and Clove. Brutus and Enobaria. I've seen their eagerness and their bloodlust, too. "But all the other districts are on our side?" I ask.

"Yes. Our goal is to take over the districts one by one, ending with District Two, thus cutting off the Capitol's supply chain. Then, once it's

weakened, we invade the Capitol itself,” says Plutarch. “That will be a whole other type of challenge. But we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it.”

“If we win, who would be in charge of the government?” Gale asks.

“Everyone,” Plutarch tells him. “We’re going to form a republic where the people of each district and the Capitol can elect their own representatives to be their voice in a centralized government. Don’t look so suspicious; it’s worked before.”

“In books,” Haymitch mutters.

“In history books,” says Plutarch. “And if our ancestors could do it, then we can, too.”

Frankly, our ancestors don’t seem much to brag about. I mean, look at the state they left us in, with the wars and the broken planet. Clearly, they didn’t care about what would happen to the people who came after them. But this republic idea sounds like an improvement over our current government.

“And if we lose?” I ask.

“If we lose?” Plutarch looks out at the clouds, and an ironic smile twists his lips. “Then I would expect next year’s Hunger Games to be quite unforgettable. That reminds me.” He takes a vial from his vest, shakes a few deep violet pills into his hand, and holds them out to us. “We named them *nightlock* in your honor, Katniss. The rebels can’t afford for any of us to be captured now. But I promise, it will be completely painless.”

I take hold of a capsule, unsure of where to put it. Plutarch taps a spot on my shoulder at the front of my left sleeve. I examine it and find a tiny pocket that both secures and conceals the pill. Even if my hands were tied, I could lean my head forward and bite it free.

Cinna, it seems, has thought of everything.

The hovercraft makes a quick, spiral descent onto a wide road on the outskirts of 8. Almost immediately, the door opens, the stairs slide into place, and we're spit out onto the asphalt. The moment the last person disembarks, the equipment retracts. Then the craft lifts off and vanishes. I'm left with a bodyguard made up of Gale, Boggs, and two other soldiers. The TV crew consists of a pair of burly Capitol cameramen with heavy mobile cameras encasing their bodies like insect shells, a woman director named Cressida who has a shaved head tattooed with green vines, and her assistant, Messalla, a slim young man with several sets of earrings. On careful observation, I see his tongue has been pierced, too, and he wears a stud with a silver ball the size of a marble.

Boggs hustles us off the road toward a row of warehouses as a second hovercraft comes in for a landing. This one brings crates of medical supplies and a crew of six medics—I can tell by their distinctive white outfits. We all follow Boggs down an alley that runs between two dull gray warehouses. Only the occasional access ladder to the roof interrupts the scarred metal walls. When we emerge onto the street, it's like we've entered another world.

The wounded from this morning's bombing are being brought in. On homemade stretchers, in wheelbarrows, on carts, slung across shoulders, and clenched tight in arms. Bleeding, limbless, unconscious. Propelled by desperate people to a warehouse with a sloppily painted *H* above the doorway. It's a scene from my old kitchen, where my mother treated the dying, multiplied by ten, by fifty, by a hundred. I had expected bombed-out buildings and instead find myself confronted with broken human bodies.

This is where they plan on filming me? I turn to Boggs. "This won't work," I say. "I won't be good here."

He must see the panic in my eyes, because he stops a moment and places his hands on my shoulders. "You will. Just let them see you. That will do more for them than any doctor in the world could."

A woman directing the incoming patients catches sight of us, does a sort of double take, and then strides over. Her dark brown eyes are puffy with fatigue and she smells of metal and sweat. A bandage around her throat needed changing about three days ago. The strap of the automatic weapon slung across her back digs into her neck and she shifts her shoulder to reposition it. With a jerk of her thumb, she orders the medics into the warehouse. They comply without question.

“This is Commander Paylor of Eight,” says Boggs. “Commander, Soldier Katniss Everdeen.”

She looks young to be a commander. Early thirties. But there’s an authoritative tone to her voice that makes you feel her appointment wasn’t arbitrary. Beside her, in my spanking-new outfit, scrubbed and shiny, I feel like a recently hatched chick, untested and only just learning how to navigate the world.

“Yeah, I know who she is,” says Paylor. “You’re alive, then. We weren’t sure.” Am I wrong or is there a note of accusation in her voice?

“I’m still not sure myself,” I answer.

“Been in recovery.” Boggs taps his head. “Bad concussion.” He lowers his voice a moment. “Miscarriage. But she insisted on coming by to see your wounded.”

“Well, we’ve got plenty of those,” says Paylor.

“You think this is a good idea?” says Gale, frowning at the hospital. “Assembling your wounded like this?”

I don’t. Any sort of contagious disease would spread through this place like wildfire.

“I think it’s slightly better than leaving them to die,” says Paylor.

“That’s not what I meant,” Gale tells her.

“Well, currently that’s my other option. But if you come up with a third and get Coin to back it, I’m all ears.” Paylor waves me toward the door. “Come on in, Mockingjay. And by all means, bring your friends.”

I glance back at the freak show that is my crew, steel myself, and follow her into the hospital. Some sort of heavy, industrial curtain hangs the length of the building, forming a sizable corridor. Corpses lie side by side, curtain brushing their heads, white cloths concealing their faces. “We’ve got a mass grave started a few blocks west of here, but I can’t spare the manpower to move them yet,” says Paylor. She finds a slit in the curtain and opens it wide.

My fingers wrap around Gale's wrist. "Do not leave my side," I say under my breath.

"I'm right here," he answers quietly.

I step through the curtain and my senses are assaulted. My first impulse is to cover my nose to block out the stench of soiled linen, putrefying flesh, and vomit, all ripening in the heat of the warehouse. They've propped open skylights that crisscross the high metal roof, but any air that's managing to get in can't make a dent in the fog below. The thin shafts of sunlight provide the only illumination, and as my eyes adjust, I can make out row upon row of wounded, in cots, on pallets, on the floor because there are so many to claim the space. The drone of black flies, the moaning of people in pain, and the sobs of their attending loved ones have combined into a wrenching chorus.

We have no real hospitals in the districts. We die at home, which at the moment seems a far desirable alternative to what lies in front of me. Then I remember that many of these people probably lost their homes in the bombings.

Sweat begins to run down my back, fill my palms. I breathe through my mouth in an attempt to diminish the smell. Black spots swim across my field of vision, and I think there's a really good chance I could faint. But then I catch sight of Paylor, who's watching me so closely, waiting to see what I am made of, and if any of them have been right to think they can count on me. So I let go of Gale and force myself to move deeper into the warehouse, to walk into the narrow strip between two rows of beds.

"Katniss?" a voice croaks out from my left, breaking apart from the general din. "Katniss?" A hand reaches for me out of the haze. I cling to it for support. Attached to the hand is a young woman with an injured leg. Blood has seeped through the heavy bandages, which are crawling with flies. Her face reflects her pain, but something else, too, something that seems completely incongruous with her situation. "Is it really you?"

"Yeah, it's me," I get out.

Joy. That's the expression on her face. At the sound of my voice, it brightens, erases the suffering momentarily.

"You're alive! We didn't know. People said you were, but we didn't know!" she says excitedly.

"I got pretty banged up. But I got better," I say. "Just like you will."

"I've got to tell my brother!" The woman struggles to sit up and calls to someone a few beds down. "Eddy! Eddy! She's here! It's Katniss Everdeen!"

A boy, probably about twelve years old, turns to us. Bandages obscure half of his face. The side of his mouth I can see opens as if to utter an exclamation. I go to him, push his damp brown curls back from his forehead. Murmur a greeting. He can't speak, but his one good eye fixes on me with such intensity, as if he's trying to memorize every detail of my face.

I hear my name rippling through the hot air, spreading out into the hospital. "Katniss! Katniss Everdeen!" The sounds of pain and grief begin to recede, to be replaced by words of anticipation. From all sides, voices beckon me. I begin to move, clasping the hands extended to me, touching the sound parts of those unable to move their limbs, saying hello, how are you, good to meet you. Nothing of importance, no amazing words of inspiration. But it doesn't matter. Boggs is right. It's the sight of me, alive, that is the inspiration.

Hungry fingers devour me, wanting to feel my flesh. As a stricken man clutches my face between his hands, I send a silent thank-you to Dalton for suggesting I wash off the makeup. How ridiculous, how perverse I would feel presenting that painted Capitol mask to these people. The damage, the fatigue, the imperfections. That's how they recognize me, why I belong to them.

Despite his controversial interview with Caesar, many ask about Peeta, assure me that they know he was speaking under duress. I do my best to sound positive about our future, but people are truly devastated when they learn I've lost the baby. I want to come clean and tell one weeping woman that it was all a hoax, a move in the game, but to present Peeta as a liar now would not help his image. Or mine. Or the cause.

I begin to fully understand the lengths to which people have gone to protect me. What I mean to the rebels. My ongoing struggle against the Capitol, which has so often felt like a solitary journey, has not been undertaken alone. I have had thousands upon thousands of people from the districts at my side. I was their Mockingjay long before I accepted the role.

A new sensation begins to germinate inside me. But it takes until I am standing on a table, waving my final goodbyes to the hoarse chanting of my name, to define it. Power. I have a kind of power I never knew I possessed. Snow knew it, as soon as I held out those berries. Plutarch knew when he rescued me from the arena. And Coin knows now. So much so that she must publicly remind her people that I am not in control.

When we're outside again, I lean against the warehouse, catching my breath, accepting the canteen of water from Boggs. "You did great," he says.

Well, I didn't faint or throw up or run out screaming. Mostly, I just rode the wave of emotion rolling through the place.

"We got some nice stuff in there," says Cressida. I look at the insect cameramen, perspiration pouring from under their equipment. Messalla scribbling notes. I had forgotten they were even filming me.

"I didn't do much, really," I say.

"You have to give yourself some credit for what you've done in the past," says Boggs.

What I've done in the past? I think of the trail of destruction in my wake—my knees weaken and I slide down to a sitting position. "That's a mixed bag."

"Well, you're not perfect by a long shot. But times being what they are, you'll have to do," says Boggs.

Gale squats down beside me, shaking his head. "I can't believe you let all those people touch you. I kept expecting you to make a break for the door."

"Shut up," I say with a laugh.

"Your mother's going to be very proud when she sees the footage," he says.

"My mother won't even notice me. She'll be too appalled by the conditions in there." I turn to Boggs and ask, "Is it like this in every district?"

"Yes. Most are under attack. We're trying to get in aid wherever we can, but it's not enough." He stops a minute, distracted by something in his earpiece. I realize I haven't heard Haymitch's voice once, and fiddle with mine, wondering if it's broken. "We're to get to the airstrip. Immediately," Boggs says, lifting me to my feet with one hand. "There's a problem."

"What kind of problem?" asks Gale.

"Incoming bombers," says Boggs. He reaches behind my neck and yanks Cinna's helmet up onto my head. "Let's move!"

Unsure of what's going on, I take off running along the front of the warehouse, heading for the alley that leads to the airstrip. But I don't sense any immediate threat. The sky's an empty, cloudless blue. The street's clear except for the people hauling the wounded to the hospital. There's no enemy, no alarm. Then the sirens begin to wail. Within seconds, a low-flying V-shaped formation of Capitol hoverplanes appears above us, and the bombs

begin to fall. I'm blown off my feet, into the front wall of the warehouse. There's a searing pain just above the back of my right knee. Something has struck my back as well, but doesn't seem to have penetrated my vest. I try to get up, but Boggs pushes me back down, shielding my body with his own. The ground ripples under me as bomb after bomb drops from the planes and detonates.

It's a horrifying sensation being pinned against the wall as the bombs rain down. What was that expression my father used for easy kills? *Like shooting fish in a barrel*. We are the fish, the street the barrel.

"Katniss!" I'm startled by Haymitch's voice in my ear.

"What? Yes, what? I'm here!" I answer.

"Listen to me. We can't land during the bombing, but it's imperative you're not spotted," he says.

"So they don't know I'm here?" I assumed, as usual, it was my presence that brought on punishment.

"Intelligence thinks no. That this raid was already scheduled," says Haymitch.

Now Plutarch's voice comes up, calm but forceful. The voice of a Head Gamemaker used to calling the shots under pressure. "There's a light blue warehouse three down from you. It has a bunker in the far north corner. Can you get there?"

"We'll do our best," says Boggs. Plutarch must be in everyone's ear, because my bodyguards and crew are getting up. My eye instinctively searches for Gale and sees he's on his feet, apparently unharmed.

"You've got maybe forty-five seconds to the next wave," says Plutarch.

I give a grunt of pain as my right leg takes the weight of my body, but I keep moving. No time to examine the injury. Better not to look now, anyway. Fortunately, I have on shoes that Cinna designed. They grip the asphalt on contact and spring free of it on release. I'd be hopeless in that ill-fitting pair that 13 assigned to me. Boggs has the lead, but no one else passes me. Instead they match my pace, protecting my sides, my back. I force myself into a sprint as the seconds tick away. We pass the second gray warehouse and run along a dirt brown building. Up ahead, I see a faded blue facade. Home of the bunker. We have just reached another alley, need only to cross it to arrive at the door, when the next wave of bombs begins. I instinctively dive into the alley and roll toward the blue wall. This time it's Gale who throws himself

over me to provide one more layer of protection from the bombing. It seems to go on longer this time, but we are farther away.

I shift onto my side and find myself looking directly into Gale's eyes. For an instant the world recedes and there is just his flushed face, his pulse visible at his temple, his lips slightly parted as he tries to catch his breath.

"You all right?" he asks, his words nearly drowned out by an explosion.

"Yeah. I don't think they've seen me," I answer. "I mean, they're not following us."

"No, they've targeted something else," says Gale.

"I know, but there's nothing back there but—" The realization hits us at the same time.

"The hospital." Instantly, Gale's up and shouting to the others. "They're targeting the hospital!"

"Not your problem," says Plutarch firmly. "Get to the bunker."

"But there's nothing there but the wounded!" I say.

"Katniss." I hear the warning note in Haymitch's voice and know what's coming. "Don't you even think about—!" I yank the earpiece free and let it hang from its wire. With that distraction gone, I hear another sound. Machine gun fire coming from the roof of the dirt brown warehouse across the alley. Someone is returning fire. Before anyone can stop me, I make a dash for an access ladder and begin to scale it. Climbing. One of the things I do best.

"Don't stop!" I hear Gale say behind me. Then there's the sound of his boot on someone's face. If it belongs to Boggs, Gale's going to pay for it dearly later on. I make the roof and drag myself onto the tar. I stop long enough to pull Gale up beside me, and then we take off for the row of machine gun nests on the street side of the warehouse. Each looks to be manned by a few rebels. We skid into a nest with a pair of soldiers, hunching down behind the barrier.

"Boggs know you're up here?" To my left I see Paylor behind one of the guns, looking at us quizzically.

I try to be evasive without flat-out lying. "He knows where we are, all right."

Paylor laughs. "I bet he does. You been trained in these?" She slaps the stock of her gun.

"I have. In Thirteen," says Gale. "But I'd rather use my own weapons."

"Yes, we've got our bows." I hold mine up, then realize how decorative it must seem. "It's more deadly than it looks."

“It would have to be,” says Paylor. “All right. We expect at least three more waves. They have to drop their sight shields before they release the bombs. That’s our chance. Stay low!” I position myself to shoot from one knee.

“Better start with fire,” says Gale.

I nod and pull an arrow from my right sheath. If we miss our targets, these arrows will land somewhere—probably the warehouses across the street. A fire can be put out, but the damage an explosive can do may be irreparable.

Suddenly, they appear in the sky, two blocks down, maybe a hundred yards above us. Seven small bombers in a V formation. “Geese!” I yell at Gale. He’ll know exactly what I mean. During migration season, when we hunt fowl, we’ve developed a system of dividing the birds so we don’t both target the same ones. I get the far side of the V, Gale takes the near, and we alternate shots at the front bird. There’s no time for further discussion. I estimate the lead time on the hoverplanes and let my arrow fly. I catch the inside wing of one, causing it to burst into flames. Gale just misses the point plane. A fire blooms on an empty warehouse roof across from us. He swears under his breath.

The hoverplane I hit swerves out of formation, but still releases its bombs. It doesn’t disappear, though. Neither does one other I assume was hit by gunfire. The damage must prevent the sight shield from reactivating.

“Good shot,” says Gale.

“I wasn’t even aiming for that one,” I mutter. I’d set my sights on the plane in front of it. “They’re faster than we think.”

“Positions!” Paylor shouts. The next wave of hoverplanes is appearing already.

“Fire’s no good,” Gale says. I nod and we both load explosive-tipped arrows. Those warehouses across the way look deserted anyway.

As the planes sweep silently in, I make another decision. “I’m standing!” I shout to Gale, and rise to my feet. This is the position I get the best accuracy from. I lead earlier and score a direct hit on the point plane, blasting a hole in its belly. Gale blows the tail off a second. It flips and crashes into the street, setting off a series of explosions as its cargo goes off.

Without warning, a third V formation unveils. This time, Gale squarely hits the point plane. I take the wing off the second bomber, causing it to spin into the one behind it. Together they collide into the roof of the warehouse across from the hospital. A fourth goes down from gunfire.

“All right, that’s it,” Paylor says.

Flames and heavy black smoke from the wreckage obscure our view. “Did they hit the hospital?”

“Must have,” she says grimly.

As I hurry toward the ladders at the far end of the warehouse, the sight of Messalla and one of the insects emerging from behind an air duct surprises me. I thought they’d still be hunkered down in the alley.

“They’re growing on me,” says Gale.

I scramble down a ladder. When my feet hit the ground, I find a bodyguard, Cressida, and the other insect waiting. I expect resistance, but Cressida just waves me toward the hospital. She’s yelling, “I don’t care, Plutarch! Just give me five more minutes!” Not one to question a free pass, I take off into the street.

“Oh, no,” I whisper as I catch sight of the hospital. What used to be the hospital. I move past the wounded, past the burning plane wrecks, fixated on the disaster ahead of me. People screaming, running about frantically, but unable to help. The bombs have collapsed the hospital roof and set the building on fire, effectively trapping the patients within. A group of rescuers has assembled, trying to clear a path to the inside. But I already know what they will find. If the crushing debris and the flames didn’t get them, the smoke did.

Gale’s at my shoulder. The fact that he does nothing only confirms my suspicions. Miners don’t abandon an accident until it’s hopeless.

“Come on, Katniss. Haymitch says they can get a hovercraft in for us now,” he tells me. But I can’t seem to move.

“Why would they do that? Why would they target people who were already dying?” I ask him.

“Scare others off. Prevent the wounded from seeking help,” says Gale. “Those people you met, they were expendable. To Snow, anyway. If the Capitol wins, what will it do with a bunch of damaged slaves?”

I remember all those years in the woods, listening to Gale rant against the Capitol. Me, not paying close attention. Wondering why he even bothered to dissect its motives. Why thinking like our enemy would ever matter. Clearly, it could have mattered today. When Gale questioned the existence of the hospital, he was not thinking of disease, but this. Because he never underestimates the cruelty of those we face.

I slowly turn my back to the hospital and find Cressida, flanked by the insects, standing a couple of yards in front of me. Her manner's unrattled. Cool even. "Katniss," she says, "President Snow just had them air the bombing live. Then he made an appearance to say that this was his way of sending a message to the rebels. What about you? Would you like to tell the rebels anything?"

"Yes," I whisper. The red blinking light on one of the cameras catches my eye. I know I'm being recorded. "Yes," I say more forcefully. Everyone is drawing away from me—Gale, Cressida, the insects—giving me the stage. But I stay focused on the red light. "I want to tell the rebels that I am alive. That I'm right here in District Eight, where the Capitol has just bombed a hospital full of unarmed men, women, and children. There will be no survivors." The shock I've been feeling begins to give way to fury. "I want to tell people that if you think for one second the Capitol will treat us fairly if there's a cease-fire, you're deluding yourself. Because you know who they are and what they do." My hands go out automatically, as if to indicate the whole horror around me. "*This* is what they do! And we must fight back!"

I'm moving in toward the camera now, carried forward by my rage. "President Snow says he's sending us a message? Well, I have one for him. You can torture us and bomb us and burn our districts to the ground, but do you see that?" One of the cameras follows as I point to the planes burning on the roof of the warehouse across from us. The Capitol seal on a wing glows clearly through the flames. "Fire is catching!" I am shouting now, determined that he will not miss a word. "And if we burn, you burn with us!"

My last words hang in the air. I feel suspended in time. Held aloft in a cloud of heat that generates not from my surroundings, but from my own being.

"Cut!" Cressida's voice snaps me back to reality, extinguishes me. She gives me a nod of approval. "That's a wrap."

Boggs appears and gets a firm lock on my arm, but I'm not planning on running now. I look over at the hospital—just in time to see the rest of the structure give way—and the fight goes out of me. All those people, the hundreds of wounded, the relatives, the medics from 13, are no more. I turn back to Boggs, see the swelling on his face left by Gale's boot. I'm no expert, but I'm pretty sure his nose is broken. His voice is more resigned than angry, though. "Back to the landing strip." I obediently take a step forward and wince as I become aware of the pain behind my right knee. The adrenaline rush that overrode the sensation has passed and my body parts join in a chorus of complaints. I'm banged up and bloody and someone seems to be hammering on my left temple from inside my skull. Boggs quickly examines my face, then scoops me up and jogs for the runway. Halfway there, I puke on his bulletproof vest. It's hard to tell because he's short of breath, but I think he sighs.

A small hovercraft, different from the one that transported us here, waits on the runway. The second my team's on board, we take off. No comfy seats and windows this time. We seem to be in some sort of cargo craft. Boggs does emergency first aid on people to hold them until we get back to 13. I want to take off my vest, since I got a fair amount of vomit on it as well, but it's too cold to think about it. I lie on the floor with my head in Gale's lap. The last thing I remember is Boggs spreading a couple of burlap sacks over me.

When I wake up, I'm warm and patched up in my old bed in the hospital. My mother's there, checking my vital signs. "How do you feel?"

"A little beat-up, but all right," I say.

"No one even told us you were going until you were gone," she says.

I feel a pang of guilt. When your family's had to send you off twice to the Hunger Games, this isn't the kind of detail you should overlook. "I'm sorry. They weren't expecting the attack. I was just supposed to be visiting the patients," I explain. "Next time, I'll have them clear it with you."

"Katniss, no one clears anything with me," she says.

It's true. Even I don't. Not since my father died. Why pretend? "Well, I'll have them...notify you anyway."

On the bedside table is a piece of shrapnel they removed from my leg. The doctors are more concerned with the damage my brain might have suffered from the explosions, since my concussion hadn't fully healed to begin with. But I don't have double vision or anything and I can think clearly enough. I've slept right through the late afternoon and night, and I'm starving. My breakfast is disappointingly small. Just a few cubes of bread soaking in warm milk. I've been called down to an early morning meeting at Command. I start to get up and then realize they plan to roll my hospital bed directly there. I want to walk, but that's out, so I negotiate my way into a wheelchair. I feel fine, really. Except for my head, and my leg, and the soreness from the bruises, and the nausea that hit a couple minutes after I ate. Maybe the wheelchair's a good idea.

As they wheel me down, I begin to get uneasy about what I will face. Gale and I directly disobeyed orders yesterday, and Boggs has the injury to prove it. Surely, there will be repercussions, but will they go so far as Coin annulling our agreement for the victors' immunity? Have I stripped Peeta of what little protection I could give him?

When I get to Command, the only ones who've arrived are Cressida, Messalla, and the insects. Messalla beams and says, "There's our little star!" and the others are smiling so genuinely that I can't help but smile in return. They impressed me in 8, following me onto the roof during the bombing, making Plutarch back off so they could get the footage they wanted. They more than do their work, they take pride in it. Like Cinna.

I have a strange thought that if we were in the arena together, I would pick them as allies. Cressida, Messalla, and—and—"I have to stop calling you 'the insects,'" I blurt out to the cameramen. I explain how I didn't know their names, but their suits suggested the shelled creatures. The comparison doesn't seem to bother them. Even without the camera shells, they strongly resemble each other. Same sandy hair, red beards, and blue eyes. The one with close-bitten nails introduces himself as Castor and the other, who's his brother, as Pollux. I wait for Pollux to say hello, but he just nods. At first I think he's shy or a man of few words. But something tugs on me—the position of his lips, the extra effort he takes to swallow—and I know before Castor tells me. Pollux is an Avox. They have cut out his tongue and he will

never speak again. And I no longer have to wonder what made him risk everything to help bring down the Capitol.

As the room fills, I brace myself for a less congenial reception. But the only people who register any kind of negativity are Haymitch, who's always out of sorts, and a sour-faced Fulvia Cardew. Boggs wears a flesh-colored plastic mask from his upper lip to his brow—I was right about the broken nose—so his expression's hard to read. Coin and Gale are in the midst of some exchange that seems positively chummy.

When Gale slides into the seat next to my wheelchair, I say, "Making new friends?"

His eyes flicker to the president and back. "Well, one of us has to be accessible." He touches my temple gently. "How do you feel?"

They must have served stewed garlic and squash for the breakfast vegetable. The more people who gather, the stronger the fumes are. My stomach turns and the lights suddenly seem too bright. "Kind of rocky," I say. "How are you?"

"Fine. They dug out a couple of pieces of shrapnel. No big deal," he says.

Coin calls the meeting to order. "Our Airtime Assault has officially launched. For any of you who missed yesterday's twenty-hundred broadcast of our first propo—or the seventeen reruns Beetee has managed to air since—we will begin by replaying it." Replaying it? So they not only got usable footage, they've already slapped together a propo and aired it repeatedly. My palms grow moist in anticipation of seeing myself on television. What if I'm still awful? What if I'm as stiff and pointless as I was in the studio and they've just given up on getting anything better? Individual screens slide up from the table, the lights dim slightly, and a hush falls over the room.

At first, my screen is black. Then a tiny spark flickers in the center. It blossoms, spreads, silently eating up the blackness until the entire frame is ablaze with a fire so real and intense, I imagine I feel the heat emanating from it. The image of my mockingjay pin emerges, glowing red-gold. The deep, resonant voice that haunts my dreams begins to speak. Claudius Templesmith, the official announcer of the Hunger Games, says, "Katniss Everdeen, the girl who was on fire, burns on."

Suddenly, there I am, replacing the mockingjay, standing before the real flames and smoke of District 8. *"I want to tell the rebels that I am alive. That I'm right here in District Eight, where the Capitol has just bombed a*

hospital full of unarmed men, women, and children. There will be no survivors.” Cut to the hospital collapsing in on itself, the desperation of the onlookers as I continue in voice-over. *“I want to tell people that if you think for one second the Capitol will treat us fairly if there’s a cease-fire, you’re deluding yourself. Because you know who they are and what they do.”* Back to me now, my hands lifting up to indicate the outrage around me. *“This is what they do! And we must fight back!”* Now comes a truly fantastic montage of the battle. The initial bombs falling, us running, being blown to the ground—a close-up of my wound, which looks good and bloody—scaling the roof, diving into the nests, and then some amazing shots of the rebels, Gale, and mostly me, me, me knocking those planes out of the sky. Smash-cut back to me moving in on the camera. *“President Snow says he’s sending us a message? Well, I have one for him. You can torture us and bomb us and burn our districts to the ground, but do you see that?”* We’re with the camera, tracking to the planes burning on the roof of the warehouse. Tight on the Capitol seal on a wing, which melts back into the image of my face, shouting at the president. *“Fire is catching! And if we burn, you burn with us!”* Flames engulf the screen again. Superimposed on them in black, solid letters are the words:

IF WE BURN YOU
BURN WITH US

The words catch fire and the whole screen burns to blackness.

There’s a moment of silent relish, then applause followed by demands to see it again. Coin indulgently hits the replay button, and this time, since I know what will happen, I try to pretend that I’m watching this on my television at home in the Seam. An anti-Capitol statement. There’s never been anything like it on television. Not in my lifetime, anyway.

By the time the screen burns to black a second time, I need to know more. “Did it play all over Panem? Did they see it in the Capitol?”

“Not in the Capitol,” says Plutarch. “We couldn’t override their system, although Beetee’s working on it. But in all the districts. We even got it on in Two, which may be more valuable than the Capitol at this point in the game.”

“Is Claudius Templesmith with us?” I ask.

This gives Plutarch a good laugh. “Only his voice. But that’s ours for the taking. We didn’t even have to do any special editing. He said that actual line in your first Games.” He slaps his hand on the table. “What say we give another round of applause to Cressida, her amazing team, and, of course, our on-camera talent!”

I clap, too, until I realize I’m the on-camera talent and maybe it’s obnoxious that I’m applauding for myself, but no one’s paying attention. I can’t help noticing the strain on Fulvia’s face, though. I think how hard this must be for her, watching Haymitch’s idea succeed under Cressida’s direction, when Fulvia’s studio approach was such a flop.

Coin seems to have reached the end of her tolerance for self-congratulation. “Yes, well deserved. The result is more than we had hoped for. But I do have to question the wide margin of risk that you were willing to operate within. I know the raid was unforeseen. However, given the circumstances, I think we should discuss the decision to send Katniss into actual combat.”

The decision? To send me into combat? Then she doesn’t know that I flagrantly disregarded orders, ripped out my earpiece, and gave my bodyguards the slip? What else have they kept from her?

“It was a tough call,” says Plutarch, furrowing his brow. “But the general consensus was that we weren’t going to get anything worth using if we locked her in a bunker somewhere every time a gun went off.”

“And you’re all right with that?” asks the president.

Gale has to kick me under the table before I realize that she’s talking to me. “Oh! Yeah, I’m completely all right with that. It felt good. Doing something for a change.”

“Well, let’s be just a little more judicious with her exposure. Especially now that the Capitol knows what she can do,” says Coin. There’s a rumble of assent from around the table.

No one has ratted out Gale and me. Not Plutarch, whose authority we ignored. Not Boggs with his broken nose. Not the insects we led into fire. Not Haymitch—no, wait a minute. Haymitch is giving me a deadly smile and saying sweetly, “Yeah, we wouldn’t want to lose our little Mockingjay when she’s finally begun to sing.” I make a note to myself not to end up alone in a room with him, because he’s clearly having vengeful thoughts over that stupid earpiece.

“So, what else do you have planned?” asks the president.

Plutarch nods to Cressida, who consults a clipboard. “We have some terrific footage of Katniss at the hospital in Eight. There should be another propo in that with the theme ‘Because you know who they are and what they do.’ We’ll focus on Katniss interacting with the patients, particularly the children, the bombing of the hospital, and the wreckage. Messalla’s cutting that together. We’re also thinking about a Mockingjay piece. Highlight some of Katniss’s best moments intercut with scenes of rebel uprisings and war footage. We call that one ‘Fire is catching.’ And then Fulvia came up with a really brilliant idea.”

Fulvia’s mouthful-of-sour-grapes expression is startled right off her face, but she recovers. “Well, I don’t know how brilliant it is, but I was thinking we could do a series of propos called *We Remember*. In each one, we would feature one of the dead tributes. Little Rue from Eleven or old Mags from Four. The idea being that we could target each district with a very personal piece.”

“A tribute to your tributes, as it were,” says Plutarch.

“That *is* brilliant, Fulvia,” I say sincerely. “It’s the perfect way to remind people why they’re fighting.”

“I think it could work,” she says. “I thought we might use Finnick to intro and narrate the spots. If there was interest in them.”

“Frankly, I don’t see how we could have too many *We Remember* propos,” says Coin. “Can you start producing them today?”

“Of course,” says Fulvia, obviously mollified by the response to her idea.

Cressida has smoothed everything over in the creative department with her gesture. Praised Fulvia for what is, in fact, a really good idea, and cleared the way to continue her own on-air depiction of the Mockingjay. What’s interesting is that Plutarch seems to have no need to share in the credit. All he wants is for the Airtime Assault to work. I remember that Plutarch is a Head Gamemaker, not a member of the crew. Not a piece in the Games. Therefore, his worth is not defined by a single element, but by the overall success of the production. If we win the war, that’s when Plutarch will take his bow. And expect his reward.

The president sends everyone off to get to work, so Gale wheels me back to the hospital. We laugh a little about the cover-up. Gale says no one wanted to look bad by admitting they couldn’t control us. I’m kinder, saying they probably didn’t want to jeopardize the chance of taking us out again now that

they've gotten some decent footage. Both things are probably true. Gale has to go meet Beetee down in Special Weaponry, so I doze off.

It seems like I've only shut my eyes for a few minutes, but when I open them, I flinch at the sight of Haymitch sitting a couple of feet from my bed. Waiting. Possibly for several hours if the clock is right. I think about hollering for a witness, but I'm going to have to face him sooner or later.

Haymitch leans forward and dangles something on a thin white wire in front of my nose. It's hard to focus on, but I'm pretty sure what it is. He drops it to the sheets. "That is your earpiece. I will give you exactly one more chance to wear it. If you remove it from your ear again, I'll have you fitted with this." He holds up some sort of metal headgear that I instantly name *the head shackle*. "It's an alternative audio unit that locks around your skull and under your chin until it's opened with a key. And I'll have the only key. If for some reason you're clever enough to disable it"—Haymitch dumps the head shackle on the bed and whips out a tiny silver chip—"I'll authorize them to surgically implant this transmitter into your ear so that I may speak to you twenty-four hours a day."

Haymitch in my head full-time. Horrifying. "I'll keep the earpiece in," I mutter.

"Excuse me?" he says.

"I'll keep the earpiece in!" I say, loud enough to wake up half the hospital.

"You sure? Because I'm equally happy with any of the three options," he tells me.

"I'm sure," I say. I scrunch up the earpiece wire protectively in my fist and fling the head shackle back in his face with my free hand, but he catches it easily. Probably was expecting me to throw it. "Anything else?"

Haymitch rises to go. "While I was waiting...I ate your lunch."

My eyes take in the empty stew bowl and tray on my bed table. "I'm going to report you," I mumble into my pillow.

"You do that, sweetheart." He goes out, safe in the knowledge that I'm not the reporting kind.

I want to go back to sleep, but I'm restless. Images from yesterday begin to flood into the present. The bombing, the fiery plane crashes, the faces of the wounded who no longer exist. I imagine death from all sides. The last moment before seeing a shell hit the ground, feeling the wing blown from my plane and the dizzying nosedive into oblivion, the warehouse roof falling

down at me while I'm pinned helplessly to my cot. Things I saw, in person or on the tape. Things I caused with a pull of my bowstring. Things I will never be able to erase from my memory.

At dinner, Finnick brings his tray to my bed so we can watch the newest propo together on television. He was assigned quarters on my old floor, but he has so many mental relapses, he still basically lives in the hospital. The rebels air the "Because you know who they are and what they do" propo that Messalla edited. The footage is intercut with short studio clips of Gale, Boggs, and Cressida describing the incident. It's hard to watch my reception in the hospital in 8 since I know what's coming. When the bombs rain down on the roof, I bury my face in my pillow, looking up again at a brief clip of me at the end, after all the victims are dead.

At least Finnick doesn't applaud or act all happy when it's done. He just says, "People should know that happened. And now they do."

"Let's turn it off, Finnick, before they run it again," I urge him. But as Finnick's hand moves toward the remote control, I cry, "Wait!" The Capitol is introducing a special segment and something about it looks familiar. Yes, it's Caesar Flickerman. And I can guess who his guest will be.

Peeta's physical transformation shocks me. The healthy, clear-eyed boy I saw a few days ago has lost at least fifteen pounds and developed a nervous tremor in his hands. They've still got him groomed. But underneath the paint that cannot cover the bags under his eyes, and the fine clothes that cannot conceal the pain he feels when he moves, is a person badly damaged.

My mind reels, trying to make sense of it. I just saw him! Four—no, five—I think it was five days ago. How has he deteriorated so rapidly? What could they possibly have done to him in such a short time? Then it hits me. I replay in my mind as much as I can of his first interview with Caesar, searching for anything that would place it in time. There is nothing. They could have taped that interview a day or two after I blew up the arena, then done whatever they wanted to do to him ever since. "Oh, Peeta..." I whisper.

Caesar and Peeta have a few empty exchanges before Caesar asks him about rumors that I'm taping propos for the districts. "They're using her, obviously," says Peeta. "To whip up the rebels. I doubt she even really knows what's going on in the war. What's at stake."

"Is there anything you'd like to tell her?" asks Caesar.

"There is," says Peeta. He looks directly into the camera, right into my eyes. "Don't be a fool, Katniss. Think for yourself. They've turned you into a

weapon that could be instrumental in the destruction of humanity. If you've got any real influence, use it to put the brakes on this thing. Use it to stop the war before it's too late. Ask yourself, do you really trust the people you're working with? Do you really know what's going on? And if you don't...find out."

Black screen. Seal of Panem. Show over.

Finnick presses the button on the remote that kills the power. In a minute, people will be here to do damage control on Peeta's condition and the words that came out of his mouth. I will need to repudiate them. But the truth is, I don't trust the rebels or Plutarch or Coin. I'm not confident that they tell me the truth. I won't be able to conceal this. Footsteps are approaching.

Finnick grips me hard by the arms. "We didn't see it."

"What?" I ask.

"We didn't see Peeta. Only the propo on Eight. Then we turned the set off because the images upset you. Got it?" he asks. I nod. "Finish your dinner." I pull myself together enough so that when Plutarch and Fulvia enter, I have a mouthful of bread and cabbage. Finnick is talking about how well Gale came across on camera. We congratulate them on the propo. Make it clear it was so powerful, we tuned out right afterward. They look relieved. They believe us.

No one mentions Peeta.

I stop trying to sleep after my first few attempts are interrupted by unspeakable nightmares. After that, I just lie still and do fake breathing whenever someone checks on me. In the morning, I'm released from the hospital and instructed to take it easy. Cressida asks me to record a few lines for a new Mockingjay propo. At lunch, I keep waiting for people to bring up Peeta's appearance, but no one does. Someone must have seen it besides Finnick and me.

I have training, but Gale's scheduled to work with Beetee on weapons or something, so I get permission to take Finnick to the woods. We wander around awhile and then ditch our communicators under a bush. When we're a safe distance away, we sit and discuss Peeta's broadcast.

"I haven't heard one word about it. No one's told you anything?" Finnick says. I shake my head. He pauses before he asks, "Not even Gale?" I'm clinging to a shred of hope that Gale honestly knows nothing about Peeta's message. But I have a bad feeling he does. "Maybe he's trying to find a time to tell you privately."

"Maybe," I say.

We stay silent so long that a buck wanders into range. I take it down with an arrow. Finnick hauls it back to the fence.

For dinner, there's minced venison in the stew. Gale walks me back to Compartment E after we eat. When I ask him what's been going on, again there's no mention of Peeta. As soon as my mother and sister are asleep, I slip the pearl from the drawer and spend a second sleepless night clutching it in my hand, replaying Peeta's words in my head. *"Ask yourself, do you really trust the people you're working with? Do you really know what's going on? And if you don't...find out."* Find out. What? From who? And how can Peeta know anything except what the Capitol tells him? It's just a Capitol propo. More noise. But if Plutarch thinks it's just the Capitol line, why didn't he tell me about it? Why hasn't anyone let me or Finnick know?

Under this debate lies the real source of my distress: Peeta. What have they done to him? And what are they doing to him right now? Clearly, Snow

did not buy the story that Peeta and I knew nothing about the rebellion. And his suspicions have been reinforced, now that I have come out as the Mockingjay. Peeta can only guess about the rebel tactics or make up things to tell his torturers. Lies, once discovered, would be severely punished. How abandoned by me he must feel. In his first interview, he tried to protect me from the Capitol and rebels alike, and not only have I failed to protect him, I've brought down more horrors upon him.

Come morning, I stick my forearm in the wall and stare groggily at the day's schedule. Immediately after breakfast, I am slated for Production. In the dining hall, as I down my hot grain and milk and mushy beets, I spot a communicuff on Gale's wrist. "When did you get that back, Soldier Hawthorne?" I ask.

"Yesterday. They thought if I'm going to be in the field with you, it could be a backup system of communication," says Gale.

No one has ever offered me a communicuff. I wonder, if I asked for one, would I get it? "Well, I guess one of us has to be accessible," I say with an edge to my voice.

"What's that mean?" he says.

"Nothing. Just repeating what you said," I tell him. "And I totally agree that the accessible one should be you. I just hope I still have access to you as well."

Our eyes lock, and I realize how furious I am with Gale. That I don't believe for a second that he didn't see Peeta's propo. That I feel completely betrayed that he didn't tell me about it. We know each other too well for him not to read my mood and guess what has caused it.

"Katniss—" he begins. Already the admission of guilt is in his tone.

I grab my tray, cross to the deposit area, and slam the dishes onto the rack. By the time I'm in the hallway, he's caught up with me.

"Why didn't you say something?" he asks, taking my arm.

"Why didn't *I*?" I jerk my arm free. "Why didn't *you*, Gale? And I did, by the way, when I asked you last night about what had been going on!"

"I'm sorry. All right? I didn't know what to do. I wanted to tell you, but everyone was afraid that seeing Peeta's propo would make you sick," he says.

"They were right. It did. But not quite as sick as you lying to me for Coin." At that moment, his communicuff starts beeping. "There she is. Better run. You have things to tell her."

For a moment, real hurt registers on his face. Then cold anger replaces it. He turns on his heel and goes. Maybe I have been too spiteful, not given him enough time to explain. Maybe everyone is just trying to protect me by lying to me. I don't care. I'm sick of people lying to me for my own good. Because really it's mostly for their own good. Lie to Katniss about the rebellion so she doesn't do anything crazy. Send her into the arena without a clue so we can fish her out. Don't tell her about Peeta's propo because it might make her sick, and it's hard enough to get a decent performance out of her as it is.

I do feel sick. Heartsick. And too tired for a day of production. But I'm already at Remake, so I go in. Today, I discover, we will be returning to District 12. Cressida wants to do unscripted interviews with Gale and me throwing light on our demolished city.

"If you're both up for that," says Cressida, looking closely at my face.

"Count me in," I say. I stand, uncommunicative and stiff, a mannequin, as my prep team dresses me, does my hair, and dabs makeup on my face. Not enough to show, only enough to take the edge off the circles under my sleepless eyes.

Boggs escorts me down to the Hangar, but we don't talk beyond a preliminary greeting. I'm grateful to be spared another exchange about my disobedience in 8, especially since his mask looks so uncomfortable.

At the last moment, I remember to send a message to my mother about my leaving 13, and stress that it won't be dangerous. We board a hovercraft for the short ride to 12 and I'm directed to a seat at a table where Plutarch, Gale, and Cressida are poring over a map. Plutarch's brimming with satisfaction as he shows me the before/after effects of the first couple of propos. The rebels, who were barely maintaining a foothold in several districts, have rallied. They have actually taken 3 and 11—the latter so crucial since it's Panem's main food supplier—and have made inroads in several other districts as well.

"Hopeful. Very hopeful indeed," says Plutarch. "Fulvia's going to have the first round of *We Remember* spots ready tonight, so we can target the individual districts with their dead. Finnick's absolutely marvelous."

"It's painful to watch, actually," says Cressida. "He knew so many of them personally."

"That's what makes it so effective," says Plutarch. "Straight from the heart. You're all doing beautifully. Coin could not be more pleased."

Gale didn't tell them, then. About my pretending not to see Peeta and my anger at their cover-up. But I guess it's too little, too late, because I still can't let it go. It doesn't matter. He's not speaking to me, either.

It's not until we land in the Meadow that I realize Haymitch isn't among our company. When I ask Plutarch about his absence, he just shakes his head and says, "He couldn't face it."

"Haymitch? Not able to face something? Wanted a day off, more likely," I say.

"I think his actual words were 'I couldn't face it without a bottle,'" says Plutarch.

I roll my eyes, long out of patience with my mentor, his weakness for drink, and what he can or can't confront. But about five minutes after my return to 12, I'm wishing I had a bottle myself. I thought I'd come to terms with 12's demise—heard of it, seen it from the air, and wandered through its ashes. So why does everything bring on a fresh pang of grief? Was I simply too out of it before to fully register the loss of my world? Or is it the look on Gale's face as he takes in the destruction on foot that makes the atrocity feel brand-new?

Cressida directs the team to start with me at my old house. I ask her what she wants me to do. "Whatever you feel like," she says. Standing back in my kitchen, I don't feel like doing anything. In fact, I find myself focusing up at the sky—the only roof left—because too many memories are drowning me. After a while, Cressida says, "That's fine, Katniss. Let's move on."

Gale doesn't get off so easily at his old address. Cressida films him in silence for a few minutes, but just as he pulls the one remnant of his previous life from the ashes—a twisted metal poker—she starts to question him about his family, his job, life in the Seam. She makes him go back to the night of the firebombing and reenact it, starting at his house, working his way down across the Meadow and through the woods to the lake. I straggle behind the film crew and the bodyguards, feeling their presence to be a violation of my beloved woods. This is a private place, a sanctuary, already corrupted by the Capitol's evil. Even after we've left behind the charred stumps near the fence, we're still tripping over decomposing bodies. Do we have to record it for everyone to see?

By the time we reach the lake, Gale seems to have lost his ability to speak. Everyone's dripping in sweat—especially Castor and Pollux in their insect shells—and Cressida calls for a break. I scoop up handfuls of water

from the lake, wishing I could dive in and surface alone and naked and unobserved. I wander around the perimeter for a while. When I come back around to the little concrete house beside the lake, I pause in the doorway and see Gale propping the crooked poker he salvaged against the wall by the hearth. For a moment I have an image of a lone stranger, sometime far in the future, wandering lost in the wilderness and coming upon this small place of refuge, with the pile of split logs, the hearth, the poker. Wondering how it came to be. Gale turns and meets my eyes and I know he's thinking about our last meeting here. When we fought over whether or not to run away. If we had, would District 12 still be there? I think it would. But the Capitol would still be in control of Panem as well.

Cheese sandwiches are passed around and we eat them in the shade of the trees. I intentionally sit at the far edge of the group, next to Pollux, so I don't have to talk. No one's talking much, really. In the relative quiet, the birds take back the woods. I nudge Pollux with my elbow and point out a small black bird with a crown. It hops to a new branch, momentarily opening its wings, showing off its white patches. Pollux gestures to my pin and raises his eyebrows questioningly. I nod, confirming it's a mockingjay. I hold up one finger to say *Wait, I'll show you*, and whistle a birdcall. The mockingjay cocks its head and whistles the call right back at me. Then, to my surprise, Pollux whistles a few notes of his own. The bird answers him immediately. Pollux's face breaks into an expression of delight and he has a series of melodic exchanges with the mockingjay. My guess is it's the first conversation he's had in years. Music draws mockingjays like blossoms do bees, and in a short while he's got half a dozen of them perched in the branches over our heads. He taps me on the arm and uses a twig to write a word in the dirt. *SING?*

Usually, I'd decline, but it's kind of impossible to say no to Pollux, given the circumstances. Besides, the mockingjays' song voices are different from their whistles, and I'd like him to hear them. So, before I actually think about what I'm doing, I sing Rue's four notes, the ones she used to signal the end of the workday in 11. The notes that ended up as the background music to her murder. The birds don't know that. They pick up the simple phrase and bounce it back and forth between them in sweet harmony. Just as they did in the Hunger Games before the muttations broke through the trees, chased us onto the Cornucopia, and slowly gnawed Cato to a bloody pulp—

“Want to hear them do a real song?” I burst out. Anything to stop those memories. I’m on my feet, moving back into the trees, resting my hand on the rough trunk of a maple where the birds perch. I have not sung “The Hanging Tree” out loud for ten years, because it’s forbidden, but I remember every word. I begin softly, sweetly, as my father did.

*“Are you, are you
Coming to the tree
Where they strung up a man they say murdered three.
Strange things did happen here
No stranger would it be
If we met up at midnight in the hanging tree.”*

The mockingjays begin to alter their songs as they become aware of my new offering.

*“Are you, are you
Coming to the tree
Where the dead man called out for his love to flee.
Strange things did happen here
No stranger would it be
If we met up at midnight in the hanging tree.”*

I have the birds’ attention now. In one more verse, surely they will have captured the melody, as it’s simple and repeats four times with little variation.

*“Are you, are you
Coming to the tree
Where I told you to run, so we’d both be free.
Strange things did happen here
No stranger would it be
If we met up at midnight in the hanging tree.”*

A hush in the trees. Just the rustle of leaves in the breeze. But no birds, mockingjay or other. Peeta's right. They do fall silent when I sing. Just as they did for my father.

*"Are you, are you
Coming to the tree
Wear a necklace of rope, side by side with me.
Strange things did happen here
No stranger would it be
If we met up at midnight in the hanging tree."*

The birds are waiting for me to continue. But that's it. Last verse. In the stillness I remember the scene. I was home from a day in the woods with my father. Sitting on the floor with Prim, who was just a toddler, singing "The Hanging Tree." Making us necklaces out of scraps of old rope like it said in the song, not knowing the real meaning of the words. The tune was simple and easy to harmonize to, though, and back then I could memorize almost anything set to music after a round or two. Suddenly, my mother snatched the rope necklaces away and was yelling at my father. I started to cry because my mother never yelled, and then Prim was wailing and I ran outside to hide. As I had exactly one hiding spot—in the Meadow under a honeysuckle bush—my father found me immediately. He calmed me down and told me everything was fine, only we'd better not sing that song anymore. My mother just wanted me to forget it. So, of course, every word was immediately, irrevocably branded into my brain.

We didn't sing it anymore, my father and I, or even speak of it. After he died, it used to come back to me a lot. Being older, I began to understand the lyrics. At the beginning, it sounds like a guy is trying to get his girlfriend to secretly meet up with him at midnight. But it's an odd place for a tryst, a hanging tree, where a man was hung for murder. The murderer's lover must have had something to do with the killing, or maybe they were just going to punish her anyway, because his corpse called out for her to flee. That's weird obviously, the talking-corpse bit, but it's not until the third verse that "The Hanging Tree" begins to get unnerving. You realize the singer of the song is the dead murderer. He's still in the hanging tree. And even though he told his lover to flee, he keeps asking if she's coming to meet him. The

phrase *Where I told you to run, so we'd both be free* is the most troubling because at first you think he's talking about when he told her to flee, presumably to safety. But then you wonder if he meant for her to run to him. To death. In the final stanza, it's clear that that's what he's waiting for. His lover, with her rope necklace, hanging dead next to him in the tree.

I used to think the murderer was the creepiest guy imaginable. Now, with a couple of trips to the Hunger Games under my belt, I decide not to judge him without knowing more details. Maybe his lover was already sentenced to death and he was trying to make it easier. To let her know he'd be waiting. Or maybe he thought the place he was leaving her was really worse than death. Didn't I want to kill Peeta with that syringe to save him from the Capitol? Was that really my only option? Probably not, but I couldn't think of another at the time.

I guess my mother thought the whole thing was too twisted for a seven-year-old, though. Especially one who made her own rope necklaces. It wasn't like hanging was something that only happened in a story. Plenty of people were executed that way in 12. You can bet she didn't want me singing it in front of my music class. She probably wouldn't like me doing it here for Pollux even, but at least I'm not—wait, no, I'm wrong. As I glance sideways, I see Castor has been taping me. Everyone is watching me intently. And Pollux has tears running down his cheeks because no doubt my freaky song has dredged up some terrible incident in his life. Great. I sigh and lean back against the trunk. That's when the mockingjays begin their rendition of "The Hanging Tree." In their mouths, it's quite beautiful. Conscious of being filmed, I stand quietly until I hear Cressida call, "Cut!"

Plutarch crosses to me, laughing. "Where do you come up with this stuff? No one would believe it if we made it up!" He throws an arm around me and kisses me on the top of my head with a loud smack. "You're golden!"

"I wasn't doing it for the cameras," I say.

"Lucky they were on, then," he says. "Come on, everybody, back to town!"

As we trudge back through the woods, we reach a boulder, and both Gale and I turn our heads in the same direction, like a pair of dogs catching a scent on the wind. Cressida notices and asks what lies that way. We admit, without acknowledging each other, it's our old hunting rendezvous place. She wants to see it, even after we tell her it's nothing really.

Nothing but a place where I was happy, I think.

Our rock ledge overlooking the valley. Perhaps a little less green than usual, but the blackberry bushes hang heavy with fruit. Here began countless days of hunting and snaring, fishing and gathering, roaming together through the woods, unloading our thoughts while we filled our game bags. This was the doorway to both sustenance and sanity. And we were each other's key.

There's no District 12 to escape from now, no Peacekeepers to trick, no hungry mouths to feed. The Capitol took away all of that, and I'm on the verge of losing Gale as well. The glue of mutual need that bonded us so tightly together for all those years is melting away. Dark patches, not light, show in the spaces between us. How can it be that today, in the face of 12's horrible demise, we are too angry to even speak to each other?

Gale as good as lied to me. That was unacceptable, even if he was concerned about my well-being. His apology seemed genuine, though. And I threw it back in his face with an insult to make sure it stung. What is happening to us? Why are we always at odds now? It's all a muddle, but I somehow feel that if I went back to the root of our troubles, my actions would be at the heart of it. Do I really want to drive him away?

My fingers encircle a blackberry and pluck it from its stem. I roll it gently between my thumb and forefinger. Suddenly, I turn to him and toss it in his direction. "And may the odds—" I say. I throw it high so he has plenty of time to decide whether to knock it aside or accept it.

Gale's eyes train on me, not the berry, but at the last moment, he opens his mouth and catches it. He chews, swallows, and there's a long pause before he says "—be *ever* in your favor." But he does say it.

Cressida has us sit in the nook in the rocks, where it's impossible not to be touching, and coaxes us into talking about hunting. What drove us out into the woods, how we met, favorite moments. We thaw, begin to laugh a little, as we relate mishaps with bees and wild dogs and skunks. When the conversation turns to how it felt to translate our skill with weapons to the bombing in 8, I stop talking. Gale just says, "Long overdue."

By the time we reach the town square, afternoon's sinking into evening. I take Cressida to the rubble of the bakery and ask her to film something. The only emotion I can muster is exhaustion. "Peeta, this is your home. None of your family has been heard of since the bombing. Twelve is gone. And you're calling for a cease-fire?" I look across the emptiness. "There's no one left to hear you."

As we stand before the lump of metal that was the gallows, Cressida asks if either of us has ever been tortured. In answer, Gale pulls off his shirt and turns his back to the camera. I stare at the lash marks, and again hear the whistling of the whip, see his bloody figure hanging unconscious by his wrists.

“I’m done,” I announce. “I’ll meet you at the Victor’s Village. Something for...my mother.”

I guess I walked here, but the next thing I’m conscious of is sitting on the floor in front of the kitchen cabinets of our house in the Victor’s Village. Meticulously lining ceramic jars and glass bottles into a box. Placing clean cotton bandages between them to prevent breaking. Wrapping bunches of dried flowers.

Suddenly, I remember the rose on my dresser. Was it real? If so, is it still up there? I have to resist the temptation to check. If it’s there, it will only frighten me all over again. I hurry with my packing.

When the cabinets are empty, I rise to find that Gale has materialized in my kitchen. It’s disturbing how soundlessly he can appear. He’s leaning on the table, his fingers spread wide against the wood grain. I set the box between us. “Remember?” he asks. “This is where you kissed me.”

So the heavy dose of morphling administered after the whipping wasn’t enough to erase that from his consciousness. “I didn’t think you’d remember that,” I say.

“Have to be dead to forget. Maybe even not then,” he tells me. “Maybe I’ll be like that man in ‘The Hanging Tree.’ Still waiting for an answer.” Gale, who I have never seen cry, has tears in his eyes. To keep them from spilling over, I reach forward and press my lips against his. We taste of heat, ashes, and misery. It’s a surprising flavor for such a gentle kiss. He pulls away first and gives me a wry smile. “I knew you’d kiss me.”

“How?” I say. Because I didn’t know myself.

“Because I’m in pain,” he says. “That’s the only way I get your attention.” He picks up the box. “Don’t worry, Katniss. It’ll pass.” He leaves before I can answer.

I’m too weary to work through his latest charge. I spend the short ride back to 13 curled up in a seat, trying to ignore Plutarch going on about one of his favorite subjects—weapons mankind no longer has at its disposal. High-flying planes, military satellites, cell disintegrators, drones, biological weapons with expiration dates. Brought down by the destruction of the

atmosphere or lack of resources or moral squeamishness. You can hear the regret of a Head Gamemaker who can only dream of such toys, who must make do with hovercraft and land-to-land missiles and plain old guns.

After dropping off my Mockingjay suit, I go straight to bed without eating. Even so, Prim has to shake me to get me up in the morning. After breakfast, I ignore my schedule and take a nap in the supply closet. When I come to, crawling out from between the boxes of chalk and pencils, it's dinnertime again. I get an extra-large portion of pea soup and am headed back to Compartment E when Boggs intercepts me.

"There's a meeting in Command. Disregard your current schedule," he says.

"Done," I say.

"Did you follow it at all today?" he asks in exasperation.

"Who knows? I'm mentally disoriented." I hold up my wrist to show my medical bracelet and realize it's gone. "See? I can't even remember they took my bracelet. Why do they want me in Command? Did I miss something?"

"I think Cressida wanted to show you the Twelve propos. But I guess you'll see them when they air," he says.

"That's what I need a schedule of. When the propos air," I say. He shoots me a look but doesn't comment further.

People have crowded into Command, but they've saved me a seat between Finnick and Plutarch. The screens are already up on the table, showing the regular Capitol feed.

"What's going on? Aren't we seeing the Twelve propos?" I ask.

"Oh, no," says Plutarch. "I mean, possibly. I don't know exactly what footage Beetee plans to use."

"Beetee thinks he's found a way to break into the feed nationwide," says Finnick. "So that our propos will air in the Capitol, too. He's down working on it in Special Defense now. There's live programming tonight. Snow's making an appearance or something. I think it's starting."

The Capitol seal appears, underscored by the anthem. Then I'm staring directly into President Snow's snake eyes as he greets the nation. He seems barricaded behind his podium, but the white rose in his lapel is in full view. The camera pulls back to include Peeta, off to one side in front of a projected map of Panem. He's sitting in an elevated chair, his shoes supported by a metal rung. The foot of his prosthetic leg taps out a strange irregular beat. Beads of sweat have broken through the layer of powder on his upper lip and

forehead. But it's the look in his eyes—angry yet unfocused—that frightens me the most.

"He's worse," I whisper. Finnick grasps my hand, to give me an anchor, and I try to hang on.

Peeta begins to speak in a frustrated tone about the need for the cease-fire. He highlights the damage done to key infrastructure in various districts, and as he speaks, parts of the map light up, showing images of the destruction. A broken dam in 7. A derailed train with a pool of toxic waste spilling from the tank cars. A granary collapsing after a fire. All of these he attributes to rebel action.

Bam! Without warning, I'm suddenly on television, standing in the rubble of the bakery.

Plutarch jumps to his feet. "He did it! Beetee broke in!"

The room's buzzing with reaction when Peeta's back, distracted. He has seen me on the monitor. He tries to pick up his speech by moving on to the bombing of a water purification plant, when a clip of Finnick talking about Rue replaces him. And then the whole thing breaks down into a broadcast battle, as the Capitol tech masters try to fend off Beetee's attack. But they are unprepared, and Beetee, apparently anticipating he would not hold on to control, has an arsenal of five- to ten-second clips to work with. We watch the official presentation deteriorate as it's peppered with choice shots from the propos.

Plutarch's in spasms of delight and most everybody is cheering Beetee on, but Finnick remains still and speechless beside me. I meet Haymitch's eyes from across the room and see my own dread mirrored back. The recognition that with every cheer, Peeta slips even farther from our grasp.

The Capitol seal's back up, accompanied by a flat audio tone. This lasts about twenty seconds before Snow and Peeta return. The set is in turmoil. We're hearing frantic exchanges from their booth. Snow plows forward, saying that clearly the rebels are now attempting to disrupt the dissemination of information they find incriminating, but both truth and justice will reign. The full broadcast will resume when security has been reinstated. He asks Peeta if, given tonight's demonstration, he has any parting thoughts for Katniss Everdeen.

At the mention of my name, Peeta's face contorts in effort. "Katniss... how do you think this will end? What will be left? No one is safe. Not in the

Capitol. Not in the districts. And you...in Thirteen..." He inhales sharply, as if fighting for air; his eyes look insane. "Dead by morning!"

Off camera, Snow orders, "End it!" Beetee throws the whole thing into chaos by flashing a still shot of me standing in front of the hospital at three-second intervals. But between the images, we are privy to the real-life action being played out on the set. Peeta's attempt to continue speaking. The camera knocked down to record the white tiled floor. The scuffle of boots. The impact of the blow that's inseparable from Peeta's cry of pain.

And his blood as it splatters the tiles.

PART II

“THE ASSAULT”

The scream begins in my lower back and works its way up through my body only to jam in my throat. I am Avox mute, choking on my grief. Even if I could release the muscles in my neck, let the sound tear into space, would anyone notice it? The room's in an uproar. Questions and demands ring out as they try to decipher Peeta's words. "*And you...in Thirteen...dead by morning!*" Yet no one is asking about the messenger whose blood has been replaced by static.

A voice calls the others to attention. "Shut up!" Every pair of eyes falls on Haymitch. "It's not some big mystery! The boy's telling us we're about to be attacked. Here. In Thirteen."

"How would he have that information?"

"Why should we trust him?"

"How do you know?"

Haymitch gives a growl of frustration. "They're beating him bloody while we speak. What more do you need? Katniss, help me out here!"

I have to give myself a shake to free my words. "Haymitch's right. I don't know where Peeta got the information. Or if it's true. But he believes it is. And they're—" I can't say aloud what Snow's doing to him.

"You don't know him," Haymitch says to Coin. "We do. Get your people ready."

The president doesn't seem alarmed, only somewhat perplexed, by this turn in events. She mulls over the words, tapping one finger lightly on the rim of the control board in front of her. When she speaks, she addresses Haymitch in an even voice. "Of course, we have prepared for such a scenario. Although we have decades of support for the assumption that further direct attacks on Thirteen would be counterproductive to the Capitol's cause. Nuclear missiles would release radiation into the atmosphere, with incalculable environmental results. Even routine bombing could badly damage our military compound, which we know they hope to regain. And, of course, they invite a counterstrike. It is conceivable that, given our current alliance with the rebels, those would be viewed as acceptable risks."

“You think so?” says Haymitch. It’s a shade too sincere, but the subtleties of irony are often wasted in 13.

“I do. At any rate, we’re overdue for a Level Five security drill,” says Coin. “Let’s proceed with the lockdown.” She begins to type rapidly on her keyboard, authorizing her decision. The moment she raises her head, it begins.

There have been two low-level drills since I arrived in 13. I don’t remember much about the first. I was in intensive care in the hospital and I think the patients were exempted, as the complications of removing us for a practice drill outweighed the benefits. I was vaguely aware of a mechanical voice instructing people to congregate in yellow zones. During the second, a Level Two drill meant for minor crises—such as a temporary quarantine while citizens were tested for contagion during a flu outbreak—we were supposed to return to our living quarters. I stayed behind a pipe in the laundry room, ignored the pulsating beeps coming over the audio system, and watched a spider construct a web. Neither experience has prepared me for the wordless, eardrum-piercing, fear-inducing sirens that now permeate 13. There would be no disregarding this sound, which seems designed to throw the whole population into a frenzy. But this is 13 and that doesn’t happen.

Boggs guides Finnick and me out of Command, along the hall to a doorway, and onto a wide stairway. Streams of people are converging to form a river that flows only downward. No one shrieks or tries to push ahead. Even the children don’t resist. We descend, flight after flight, speechless, because no word could be heard above this sound. I look for my mother and Prim, but it’s impossible to see anyone but those immediately around me. They’re both working in the hospital tonight, though, so there’s no way they can miss the drill.

My ears pop and my eyes feel heavy. We are coal-mine deep. The only plus is that the farther we retreat into the earth, the less shrill the sirens become. It’s as if they were meant to physically drive us away from the surface, which I suppose they are. Groups of people begin to peel off into marked doorways and still Boggs directs me downward, until finally the stairs end at the edge of an enormous cavern. I start to walk straight in and Boggs stops me, shows me that I must wave my schedule in front of a scanner so that I’m accounted for. No doubt the information’s going to some computer somewhere to make sure no one’s gone astray.

The place seems unable to decide if it's natural or man-made. Certain areas of the walls are stone, while steel beams and concrete heavily reinforce others. Sleeping bunks are hewn right into the rock walls. There's a kitchen, bathrooms, a first-aid station. This place was designed for an extended stay.

White signs with letters or numbers are placed at intervals around the cavern. As Boggs tells Finnick and me to report to the area that matches our assigned quarters—in my case E for Compartment E—Plutarch strolls up. “Ah, here you are,” he says. Recent events have had little effect on Plutarch's mood. He still has a happy glow from Beetee's success on the Airtime Assault. Eyes on the forest, not on the trees. Not on Peeta's punishment or 13's imminent blasting. “Katniss, obviously this is a bad moment for you, what with Peeta's setback, but you need to be aware that others will be watching you.”

“What?” I say. I can't believe he actually just downgraded Peeta's dire circumstances to a setback.

“The other people in the bunker, they'll be taking their cue on how to react from you. If you're calm and brave, others will try to be as well. If you panic, it could spread like wildfire,” explains Plutarch. I just stare at him. “Fire is catching, so to speak,” he continues, as if I'm being slow on the uptake.

“Why don't I just pretend I'm on camera, Plutarch?” I say.

“Yes! Perfect. One is always much braver with an audience,” he says. “Look at the courage Peeta just displayed!”

It's all I can do not to slap him.

“I've got to get back to Coin before lockdown. You keep up the good work!” he says, and then heads off.

I cross to the big letter *E* posted on the wall. Our space consists of a twelve-by-twelve-foot square of stone floor delineated by painted lines. Carved into the wall are two bunks—one of us will be sleeping on the floor—and a ground-level cube space for storage. A piece of white paper, coated in clear plastic, reads *BUNKER PROTOCOL*. I stare fixedly at the little black specks on the sheet. For a while, they're obscured by the residual blood droplets that I can't seem to wipe from my vision. Slowly, the words come into focus. The first section is entitled “On Arrival.”

1. Make sure all members of your Compartment are accounted for.

My mother and Prim haven't arrived, but I was one of the first people to reach the bunker. Both of them are probably helping to relocate hospital patients.

2. Go to the Supply Station and secure one pack for each member of your Compartment. Ready your Living Area. Return pack(s).

I scan the cavern until I locate the Supply Station, a deep room set off by a counter. People wait behind it, but there's not a lot of activity there yet. I walk over, give our compartment letter, and request three packs. A man checks a sheet, pulls the specified packs from shelving, and swings them up onto the counter. After sliding one on my back and getting a grip on the other two with my hands, I turn to find a group rapidly forming behind me. "Excuse me," I say as I carry my supplies through the others. Is it a matter of timing? Or is Plutarch right? Are these people modeling their behavior on mine?

Back at our space, I open one of the packs to find a thin mattress, bedding, two sets of gray clothing, a toothbrush, a comb, and a flashlight. On examining the contents of the other packs, I find the only discernible difference is that they contain both gray and white outfits. The latter will be for my mother and Prim, in case they have medical duties. After I make up the beds, store the clothes, and return the backpacks, I've got nothing to do but observe the last rule.

3. Await further instructions.

I sit cross-legged on the floor to await. A steady flow of people begins to fill the room, claiming spaces, collecting supplies. It won't take long until the place is full up. I wonder if my mother and Prim are going to stay the night at wherever the hospital patients have been taken. But, no, I don't think so. They were on the list here. I'm starting to get anxious, when my mother appears. I look behind her into a sea of strangers. "Where's Prim?" I ask.

"Isn't she here?" she replies. "She was supposed to come straight down from the hospital. She left ten minutes before I did. Where is she? Where

could she have gone?"

I squeeze my lids shut tight for a moment, to track her as I would prey on a hunt. See her react to the sirens, rush to help the patients, nod as they gesture for her to descend to the bunker, and then hesitate with her on the stairs. Torn for a moment. But why?

My eyes fly open. "The cat! She went back for him!"

"Oh, no," my mother says. We both know I'm right. We're pushing against the incoming tide, trying to get out of the bunker. Up ahead, I can see them preparing to shut the thick metal doors. Slowly rotating the metal wheels on either side inward. Somehow I know that once they have been sealed, nothing in the world will convince the soldiers to open them. Perhaps it will even be beyond their control. I'm indiscriminately shoving people aside as I shout for them to wait. The space between the doors shrinks to a yard, a foot; there are only a few inches left when I jam my hand through the crack.

"Open it! Let me out!" I cry.

Consternation shows on the soldiers' faces as they reverse the wheels a bit. Not enough to let me pass, but enough to avoid crushing my fingers. I take the opportunity to wedge my shoulder into the opening. "Prim!" I holler up the stairs. My mother pleads with the guards as I try to wriggle my way out. "Prim!"

Then I hear it. The faint sound of footsteps on the stairs. "We're coming!" I hear my sister call.

"Hold the door!" That was Gale.

"They're coming!" I tell the guards, and they slide the doors open about a foot. But I don't dare move—afraid they'll lock us all out—until Prim appears, her cheeks flushed with running, hauling Buttercup. I pull her inside and Gale follows, twisting an armload of baggage sideways to get it into the bunker. The doors are closed with a loud and final clank.

"What were you thinking?" I give Prim an angry shake and then hug her, squashing Buttercup between us.

Prim's explanation is already on her lips. "I couldn't leave him behind, Katniss. Not twice. You should have seen him pacing the room and howling. He'd come back to protect us."

"Okay. Okay." I take a few breaths to calm myself, step back, and lift Buttercup by the scruff of the neck. "I should've drowned you when I had the chance." His ears flatten and he raises a paw. I hiss before he gets a chance, which seems to annoy him a little, since he considers hissing his own

personal sound of contempt. In retaliation, he gives a helpless kitten mew that brings my sister immediately to his defense.

“Oh, Katniss, don’t tease him,” she says, folding him back in her arms. “He’s already so upset.”

The idea that I’ve wounded the brute’s tiny cat feelings just invites further taunting. But Prim’s genuinely distressed for him. So instead, I visualize Buttercup’s fur lining a pair of gloves, an image that has helped me deal with him over the years. “Okay, sorry. We’re under the big *E* on the wall. Better get him settled in before he loses it.” Prim hurries off, and I find myself face-to-face with Gale. He’s holding the box of medical supplies from our kitchen in 12. Site of our last conversation, kiss, fallout, whatever. My game bag’s slung across his shoulder.

“If Peeta’s right, these didn’t stand a chance,” he says.

Peeta. Blood like raindrops on the window. Like wet mud on boots.

“Thanks for...everything.” I take our stuff. “What were you doing up in our rooms?”

“Just double-checking,” he says. “We’re in Forty-Seven if you need me.”

Practically everyone withdrew to their spaces when the doors shut, so I get to cross to our new home with at least five hundred people watching me. I try to appear extra calm to make up for my frantic crashing through the crowd. Like that’s fooling anyone. So much for setting an example. Oh, who cares? They all think I’m nuts anyway. One man, who I think I knocked to the floor, catches my eye and rubs his elbow resentfully. I almost hiss at him, too.

Prim has Buttercup installed on the lower bunk, draped in a blanket so that only his face pokes out. This is how he likes to be when there’s thunder, the one thing that actually frightens him. My mother puts her box carefully in the cube. I crouch, my back supported by the wall, to check what Gale managed to rescue in my hunting bag. The plant book, the hunting jacket, my parents’ wedding photo, and the personal contents of my drawer. My mockingjay pin now lives with Cinna’s outfit, but there’s the gold locket and the silver parachute with the spile and Peeta’s pearl. I knot the pearl into the corner of the parachute, bury it deep in the recesses of the bag, as if it’s Peeta’s life and no one can take it away as long as I guard it.

The faint sound of the sirens cuts off sharply. Coin’s voice comes over the district audio system, thanking us all for an exemplary evacuation of the upper levels. She stresses that this is not a drill, as Peeta Mellark, the

District 12 victor, has possibly made a televised reference to an attack on 13 tonight.

That's when the first bomb hits. There's an initial sense of impact followed by an explosion that resonates in my innermost parts, the lining of my intestines, the marrow of my bones, the roots of my teeth. *We're all going to die*, I think. My eyes turn upward, expecting to see giant cracks race across the ceiling, massive chunks of stone raining down on us, but the bunker itself gives only a slight shudder. The lights go out and I experience the disorientation of total darkness. Speechless human sounds—spontaneous shrieks, ragged breaths, baby whimpers, one musical bit of insane laughter—dance around in the charged air. Then there's a hum of a generator, and a dim wavering glow replaces the stark lighting that is the norm in 13. It's closer to what we had in our homes in 12, when the candles and fire burned low on a winter's night.

I reach for Prim in the twilight, clamp my hand on her leg, and pull myself over to her. Her voice remains steady as she croons to Buttercup. "It's all right, baby, it's all right. We'll be okay down here."

My mother wraps her arms around us. I allow myself to feel young for a moment and rest my head on her shoulder. "That was nothing like the bombs in Eight," I say.

"Probably a bunker missile," says Prim, keeping her voice soothing for the cat's sake. "We learned about them during the orientation for new citizens. They're designed to penetrate deep in the ground before they go off. Because there's no point in bombing Thirteen on the surface anymore."

"Nuclear?" I ask, feeling a chill run through me.

"Not necessarily," says Prim. "Some just have a lot of explosives in them. But...it could be either kind, I guess."

The gloom makes it hard to see the heavy metal doors at the end of the bunker. Would they be any protection against a nuclear attack? And even if they were one hundred percent effective at sealing out the radiation, which is really unlikely, would we ever be able to leave this place? The thought of spending whatever remains of my life in this stone vault horrifies me. I want to run madly for the door and demand to be released into whatever lies above. It's pointless. They would never let me out, and I might start some kind of stampede.

"We're so far down, I'm sure we're safe," says my mother wanly. Is she thinking of my father's being blown to nothingness in the mines? "It was a

close call, though. Thank goodness Peeta had the wherewithal to warn us.”

The wherewithal. A general term that somehow includes everything that was needed for him to sound the alarm. The knowledge, the opportunity, the courage. And something else I can’t define. Peeta seemed to have been waging a sort of battle in his mind, fighting to get the message out. Why? The ease with which he manipulates words is his greatest talent. Was his difficulty a result of his torture? Something more? Like madness?

Coin’s voice, perhaps a shade grimmer, fills the bunker, the volume level flickering with the lights. “Apparently, Peeta Mellark’s information was sound and we owe him a great debt of gratitude. Sensors indicate the first missile was not nuclear, but very powerful. We expect more will follow. For the duration of the attack, citizens are to stay in their assigned areas unless otherwise notified.”

A soldier alerts my mother that she’s needed in the first-aid station. She’s reluctant to leave us, even though she’ll only be thirty yards away.

“We’ll be fine, really,” I tell her. “Do you think anything could get past him?” I point to Buttercup, who gives me such a halfhearted hiss, we all have to laugh a little. Even I feel sorry for him. After my mother goes, I suggest, “Why don’t you climb in with him, Prim?”

“I know it’s silly...but I’m afraid the bunk might collapse on us during the attack,” she says.

If the bunks collapse, the whole bunker will have given way and buried us, but I decide this kind of logic won’t actually be helpful. Instead, I clean out the storage cube and make Buttercup a bed inside. Then I pull a mattress in front of it for my sister and me to share.

We’re given clearance in small groups to use the bathroom and brush our teeth, although showering has been canceled for the day. I curl up with Prim on the mattress, double layering the blankets because the cavern emits a dank chill. Buttercup, miserable even with Prim’s constant attention, huddles in the cube and exhales cat breath in my face.

Despite the disagreeable conditions, I’m glad to have time with my sister. My extreme preoccupation since I came here—no, since the first Games, really—has left little attention for her. I haven’t been watching over her the way I should, the way I used to. After all, it was Gale who checked our compartment, not me. Something to make up for.

I realize I’ve never even bothered to ask her about how she’s handling the shock of coming here. “So, how are you liking Thirteen, Prim?” I offer.

“Right now?” she asks. We both laugh. “I miss home badly sometimes. But then I remember there’s nothing left to miss anymore. I feel safer here. We don’t have to worry about you. Well, not the same way.” She pauses, and then a shy smile crosses her lips. “I think they’re going to train me to be a doctor.”

It’s the first I’ve heard of it. “Well, of course, they are. They’d be stupid not to.”

“They’ve been watching me when I help out in the hospital. I’m already taking the medic courses. It’s just beginner’s stuff. I know a lot of it from home. Still, there’s plenty to learn,” she tells me.

“That’s great,” I say. Prim a doctor. She couldn’t even dream of it in 12. Something small and quiet, like a match being struck, lights up the gloom inside me. This is the sort of future a rebellion could bring.

“What about you, Katniss? How are you managing?” Her fingertip moves in short, gentle strokes between Buttercup’s eyes. “And don’t say you’re fine.”

It’s true. Whatever the opposite of fine is, that’s what I am. So I go ahead and tell her about Peeta, his deterioration on-screen, and how I think they must be killing him at this very moment. Buttercup has to rely on himself for a while, because now Prim turns her attention to me. Pulling me closer, brushing the hair back behind my ears with her fingers. I’ve stopped talking because there’s really nothing left to say and there’s this piercing sort of pain where my heart is. Maybe I’m even having a heart attack, but it doesn’t seem worth mentioning.

“Katniss, I don’t think President Snow will kill Peeta,” she says. Of course, she says this; it’s what she thinks will calm me. But her next words come as a surprise. “If he does, he won’t have anyone left you want. He won’t have any way to hurt you.”

Suddenly, I am reminded of another girl, one who had seen all the evil the Capitol had to offer. Johanna Mason, the tribute from District 7, in the last arena. I was trying to prevent her from going into the jungle where the jabberjays mimicked the voices of loved ones being tortured, but she brushed me off, saying, *“They can’t hurt me. I’m not like the rest of you. There’s no one left I love.”*

Then I know Prim is right, that Snow cannot afford to waste Peeta’s life, especially now, while the Mockingjay causes so much havoc. He’s killed

Cinna already. Destroyed my home. My family, Gale, and even Haymitch are out of his reach. Peeta's all he has left.

"So, what do you think they'll do to him?" I ask.

Prim sounds about a thousand years old when she speaks.

"Whatever it takes to break you."

What will break me?

This is the question that consumes me over the next three days as we wait to be released from our prison of safety. What will break me into a million pieces so that I am beyond repair, beyond usefulness? I mention it to no one, but it devours my waking hours and weaves itself throughout my nightmares.

Four more bunker missiles fall over this period, all massive, all very damaging, but there's no urgency to the attack. The bombs are spread out over the long hours so that just when you think the raid is over, another blast sends shock waves through your guts. It feels more designed to keep us in lockdown than to decimate 13. Cripple the district, yes. Give the people plenty to do to get the place running again. But destroy it? No. Coin was right on that point. You don't destroy what you want to acquire in the future. I assume what they really want, in the short term, is to stop the Airtime Assaults and keep me off the televisions of Panem.

We receive next to no information about what is happening. Our screens never come on, and we get only brief audio updates from Coin about the nature of the bombs. Certainly, the war is still being waged, but as to its status, we're in the dark.

Inside the bunker, cooperation is the order of the day. We adhere to a strict schedule for meals and bathing, exercise and sleep. Small periods of socialization are granted to alleviate the tedium. Our space becomes very popular because both children and adults have a fascination with Buttercup. He attains celebrity status with his evening game of Crazy Cat. I created this by accident a few years ago, during a winter blackout. You simply wiggle a flashlight beam around on the floor, and Buttercup tries to catch it. I'm petty enough to enjoy it because I think it makes him look stupid. Inexplicably, everyone here thinks he's clever and delightful. I'm even issued a special set of batteries—an enormous waste—to be used for this purpose. The citizens of 13 are truly starved for entertainment.

It's on the third night, during our game, that I answer the question eating away at me. Crazy Cat becomes a metaphor for my situation. I am Buttercup.

Peeta, the thing I want so badly to secure, is the light. As long as Buttercup feels he has the chance of catching the elusive light under his paws, he's bristling with aggression. (That's how I've been since I left the arena, with Peeta alive.) When the light goes out completely, Buttercup's temporarily distraught and confused, but he recovers and moves on to other things. (That's what would happen if Peeta died.) But the one thing that sends Buttercup into a tailspin is when I leave the light on but put it hopelessly out of his reach, high on the wall, beyond even his jumping skills. He paces below the wall, wails, and can't be comforted or distracted. He's useless until I shut the light off. (That's what Snow is trying to do to me now, only I don't know what form his game takes.)

Maybe this realization on my part is all Snow needs. Thinking that Peeta was in his possession and being tortured for rebel information was bad. But thinking that he's being tortured specifically to incapacitate me is unendurable. And it's under the weight of this revelation that I truly begin to break.

After Crazy Cat, we're directed to bed. The power's been coming and going; sometimes the lamps burn at full brightness, other times we squint at one another in the brownouts. At bedtime they turn the lamps to near darkness and activate safety lights in each space. Prim, who's decided the walls will hold up, snuggles with Buttercup on the lower bunk. My mother's on the upper. I offer to take a bunk, but they make me keep to the floor mattress since I flail around so much when I'm sleeping.

I'm not flailing now, as my muscles are rigid with the tension of holding myself together. The pain over my heart returns, and from it I imagine tiny fissures spreading out into my body. Through my torso, down my arms and legs, over my face, leaving it crisscrossed with cracks. One good jolt of a bunker missile and I could shatter into strange, razor-sharp shards.

When the restless, wiggling majority has settled into sleep, I carefully extricate myself from my blanket and tiptoe through the cavern until I find Finnick, feeling for some unspecified reason that he will understand. He sits under the safety light in his space, knotting his rope, not even pretending to rest. As I whisper my discovery of Snow's plan to break me, it dawns on me. This strategy is very old news to Finnick. It's what broke him.

"This is what they're doing to you with Annie, isn't it?" I ask.

"Well, they didn't arrest her because they thought she'd be a wealth of rebel information," he says. "They know I'd never have risked telling her

anything like that. For her own protection.”

“Oh, Finnick. I’m so sorry,” I say.

“No, I’m sorry. That I didn’t warn you somehow,” he tells me.

Suddenly, a memory surfaces. I’m strapped to my bed, mad with rage and grief after the rescue. Finnick is trying to console me about Peeta. *“They’ll figure out he doesn’t know anything pretty fast. And they won’t kill him if they think they can use him against you.”*

“You did warn me, though. On the hovercraft. Only when you said they’d use Peeta against me, I thought you meant like bait. To lure me into the Capitol somehow,” I say.

“I shouldn’t have said even that. It was too late for it to be of any help to you. Since I hadn’t warned you before the Quarter Quell, I should’ve shut up about how Snow operates.” Finnick yanks on the end of his rope, and an intricate knot becomes a straight line again. “It’s just that I didn’t understand when I met you. After your first Games, I thought the whole romance was an act on your part. We all expected you’d continue that strategy. But it wasn’t until Peeta hit the force field and nearly died that I—” Finnick hesitates.

I think back to the arena. How I sobbed when Finnick revived Peeta. The quizzical look on Finnick’s face. The way he excused my behavior, blaming it on my pretend pregnancy. “That you what?”

“That I knew I’d misjudged you. That you do love him. I’m not saying in what way. Maybe you don’t know yourself. But anyone paying attention could see how much you care about him,” he says gently.

Anyone? On Snow’s visit before the Victory Tour, he challenged me to erase any doubts of my love for Peeta. *“Convince me,”* Snow said. It seems, under that hot pink sky with Peeta’s life in limbo, I finally did. And in doing so, I gave him the weapon he needed to break me.

Finnick and I sit for a long time in silence, watching the knots bloom and vanish, before I can ask, “How do you bear it?”

Finnick looks at me in disbelief. “I don’t, Katniss! Obviously, I don’t. I drag myself out of nightmares each morning and find there’s no relief in waking.” Something in my expression stops him. “Better not to give in to it. It takes ten times as long to put yourself back together as it does to fall apart.”

Well, he must know. I take a deep breath, forcing myself back into one piece.

“The more you can distract yourself, the better,” he says. “First thing tomorrow, we’ll get you your own rope. Until then, take mine.”

I spend the rest of the night on my mattress obsessively making knots, holding them up for Buttercup's inspection. If one looks suspicious, he swipes it out of the air and bites it a few times to make sure it's dead. By morning, my fingers are sore, but I'm still holding on.

With twenty-four hours of quiet behind us, Coin finally announces we can leave the bunker. Our old quarters have been destroyed by the bombings. Everyone must follow exact directions to their new compartments. We clean our spaces, as directed, and file obediently toward the door.

Before I'm halfway there, Boggs appears and pulls me from the line. He signals for Gale and Finnick to join us. People move aside to let us by. Some even smile at me since the Crazy Cat game seems to have made me more lovable. Out the door, up the stairs, down the hall to one of those multidirectional elevators, and finally we arrive at Special Defense. Nothing along our route has been damaged, but we are still very deep.

Boggs ushers us into a room virtually identical to Command. Coin, Plutarch, Haymitch, Cressida, and everybody else around the table looks exhausted. Someone has finally broken out the coffee—although I'm sure it's viewed only as an emergency stimulant—and Plutarch has both hands wrapped tightly around his cup as if at any moment it might be taken away.

There's no small talk. "We need all four of you suited up and aboveground," says the president. "You have two hours to get footage showing the damage from the bombing, establish that Thirteen's military unit remains not only functional but dominant, and, most important, that the Mockingjay is still alive. Any questions?"

"Can we have a coffee?" asks Finnick.

Steaming cups are handed out. I stare distastefully at the shiny black liquid, never having been much of a fan of the stuff, but thinking it might help me stay on my feet. Finnick sloshes some cream in my cup and reaches into the sugar bowl. "Want a sugar cube?" he asks in his old seductive voice. That's how we met, with Finnick offering me sugar. Surrounded by horses and chariots, costumed and painted for the crowds, before we were allies. Before I had any idea what made him tick. The memory actually coaxes a smile out of me. "Here, it improves the taste," he says in his real voice, plunking three cubes in my cup.

As I turn to go suit up as the Mockingjay, I catch Gale watching me and Finnick unhappily. What now? Does he actually think something's going on between us? Maybe he saw me go to Finnick's last night. I would've passed

the Hawthornes' space to get there. I guess that probably rubbed him the wrong way. Me seeking out Finnick's company instead of his. Well, fine. I've got rope burn on my fingers, I can barely hold my eyes open, and a camera crew's waiting for me to do something brilliant. And Snow's got Peeta. Gale can think whatever he wants.

In my new Remake Room in Special Defense, my prep team slaps me into my Mockingjay suit, arranges my hair, and applies minimal makeup before my coffee's even cooled. In ten minutes, the cast and crew of the next propos are making the circuitous trek to the outside. I slurp my coffee as we travel, finding that the cream and sugar greatly enhance its flavor. As I knock back the dregs that have settled to the bottom of the cup, I feel a slight buzz start to run through my veins.

After climbing a final ladder, Boggs hits a lever that opens a trapdoor. Fresh air rushes in. I take big gulps and for the first time allow myself to feel how much I hated the bunker. We emerge into the woods, and my hands run through the leaves overhead. Some are just starting to turn. "What day is it?" I ask no one in particular. Boggs tells me September begins next week.

September. That means Snow has had Peeta in his clutches for five, maybe six weeks. I examine a leaf on my palm and see I'm shaking. I can't will myself to stop. I blame the coffee and try to focus on slowing my breathing, which is far too rapid for my pace.

Debris begins to litter the forest floor. We come to our first crater, thirty yards wide and I can't tell how deep. Very. Boggs says anyone on the first ten levels would likely have been killed. We skirt the pit and continue on.

"Can you rebuild it?" Gale asks.

"Not anytime soon. That one didn't get much. A few backup generators and a poultry farm," says Boggs. "We'll just seal it off."

The trees disappear as we enter the area inside the fence. The craters are ringed with a mixture of old and new rubble. Before the bombing, very little of the current 13 was aboveground. A few guard stations. The training area. About a foot of the top floor of our building—where Buttercup's window jutted out—with several feet of steel on top of it. Even that was never meant to withstand more than a superficial attack.

"How much of an edge did the boy's warning give you?" asks Haymitch.

"About ten minutes before our own systems would've detected the missiles," says Boggs.

"But it did help, right?" I ask. I can't bear it if he says no.

“Absolutely,” Boggs replies. “Civilian evacuation was completed. Seconds count when you’re under attack. Ten minutes meant lives saved.”

Prim, I think. *And Gale*. They were in the bunker only a couple of minutes before the first missile hit. Peeta might have saved them. Add their names to the list of things I can never stop owing him for.

Cressida has the idea to film me in front of the ruins of the old Justice Building, which is something of a joke since the Capitol’s been using it as a backdrop for fake news broadcasts for years, to show that the district no longer existed. Now, with the recent attack, the Justice Building sits about ten yards away from the edge of a new crater.

As we approach what used to be the grand entrance, Gale points out something and the whole party slows down. I don’t know what the problem is at first and then I see the ground strewn with fresh pink and red roses. “Don’t touch them!” I yell. “They’re for me!”

The sickeningly sweet smell hits my nose, and my heart begins to hammer against my chest. So I didn’t imagine it. The rose on my dresser. Before me lies Snow’s second delivery. Long-stemmed pink and red beauties, the very flowers that decorated the set where Peeta and I performed our post-victory interview. Flowers not meant for one, but for a pair of lovers.

I explain to the others as best I can. Upon inspection, they appear to be harmless, if genetically enhanced, flowers. Two dozen roses. Slightly wilted. Most likely dropped after the last bombing. A crew in special suits collects them and carts them away. I feel certain they will find nothing extraordinary in them, though. Snow knows exactly what he’s doing to me. It’s like having Cinna beaten to a pulp while I watch from my tribute tube. Designed to unhinge me.

Like then, I try to rally and fight back. But as Cressida gets Castor and Pollux in place, I feel my anxiety building. I’m so tired, so wired, and so unable to keep my mind on anything but Peeta since I’ve seen the roses. The coffee was a huge mistake. What I didn’t need was a stimulant. My body visibly shakes and I can’t seem to catch my breath. After days in the bunker, I’m squinting no matter what direction I turn, and the light hurts. Even in the cool breeze, sweat trickles down my face.

“So, what exactly do you need from me again?” I ask.

“Just a few quick lines that show you’re alive and still fighting,” says Cressida.

“Okay.” I take my position and then I’m staring into the red light. Staring. Staring. “I’m sorry, I’ve got nothing.”

Cressida walks up to me. “You feeling okay?” I nod. She pulls a small cloth from her pocket and blots my face. “How about we do the old Q-and-A thing?”

“Yeah. That would help, I think.” I cross my arms to hide the shaking. Glance at Finnick, who gives me a thumbs-up. But he’s looking pretty shaky himself.

Cressida’s back in position now. “So, Katniss. You’ve survived the Capitol bombing of Thirteen. How did it compare with what you experienced on the ground in Eight?”

“We were so far underground this time, there was no real danger. Thirteen’s alive and well and so am—” My voice cuts off in a dry, squeaking sound.

“Try the line again,” says Cressida. “‘Thirteen’s alive and well and so am I.’”

I take a breath, trying to force air down into my diaphragm. “Thirteen’s alive and so—” No, that’s wrong.

I swear I can still smell those roses.

“Katniss, just this one line and you’re done today. I promise,” says Cressida. “‘Thirteen’s alive and well and so am I.’”

I swing my arms to loosen myself up. Place my fists on my hips. Then drop them to my sides. Saliva’s filling my mouth at a ridiculous rate and I feel vomit at the back of my throat. I swallow hard and open my lips so I can get the stupid line out and go hide in the woods and—that’s when I start crying.

It’s impossible to be the Mockingjay. Impossible to complete even this one sentence. Because now I know that everything I say will be directly taken out on Peeta. Result in his torture. But not his death, no, nothing so merciful as that. Snow will ensure that his life is much worse than death.

“Cut,” I hear Cressida say quietly.

“What’s wrong with her?” Plutarch says under his breath.

“She’s figured out how Snow’s using Peeta,” says Finnick.

There’s something like a collective sigh of regret from the semicircle of people spread out before me. Because I know this now. Because there will never be a way for me to not know this again. Because, beyond the military disadvantage losing a Mockingjay entails, I am broken.

Several sets of arms would embrace me. But in the end, the only person I truly want to comfort me is Haymitch, because he loves Peeta, too. I reach out for him and say something like his name and he's there, holding me and patting my back. "It's okay. It'll be okay, sweetheart." He sits me on a length of broken marble pillar and keeps an arm around me while I sob.

"I can't do this anymore," I say.

"I know," he says.

"All I can think of is—what he's going to do to Peeta—because I'm the Mockingjay!" I get out.

"I know." Haymitch's arm tightens around me.

"Did you see? How weird he acted? What are they—doing to him?" I'm gasping for air between sobs, but I manage one last phrase. "It's my fault!" And then I cross some line into hysteria and there's a needle in my arm and the world slips away.

It must be strong, whatever they shot into me, because it's a full day before I come to. My sleep wasn't peaceful, though. I have the sense of emerging from a world of dark, haunted places where I traveled alone. Haymitch sits in the chair by my bed, his skin waxen, his eyes bloodshot. I remember about Peeta and start to tremble again.

Haymitch reaches out and squeezes my shoulder. "It's all right. We're going to try to get Peeta out."

"What?" That makes no sense.

"Plutarch's sending in a rescue team. He has people on the inside. He thinks we can get Peeta back alive," he says.

"Why didn't we before?" I say.

"Because it's costly. But everyone agrees this is the thing to do. It's the same choice we made in the arena. To do whatever it takes to keep you going. We can't lose the Mockingjay now. And you can't perform unless you know Snow can't take it out on Peeta." Haymitch offers me a cup. "Here, drink something."

I slowly sit up and take a sip of water. "What do you mean, costly?"

He shrugs. "Covers will be blown. People may die. But keep in mind that they're dying every day. And it's not just Peeta; we're getting Annie out for Finnick, too."

"Where is he?" I ask.

"Behind that screen, sleeping his sedative off. He lost it right after we knocked you out," says Haymitch. I smile a little, feel a bit less weak. "Yeah,

it was a really excellent shoot. You two cracked up and Boggs left to arrange the mission to get Peeta. We're officially in reruns."

"Well, if Boggs is leading it, that's a plus," I say.

"Oh, he's on top of it. It was volunteer only, but he pretended not to notice me waving my hand in the air," says Haymitch. "See? He's already demonstrated good judgment."

Something's wrong. Haymitch's trying a little too hard to cheer me up. It's not really his style. "So who else volunteered?"

"I think there were seven altogether," he says evasively.

I get a bad feeling in the pit of my stomach. "Who else, Haymitch?" I insist.

Haymitch finally drops the good-natured act. "You know who else, Katniss. You know who stepped up first."

Of course I do.

Gale.

Today I might lose both of them.

I try to imagine a world where both Gale's and Peeta's voices have ceased. Hands stilled. Eyes unblinking. I'm standing over their bodies, having a last look, leaving the room where they lie. But when I open the door to step out into the world, there's only a tremendous void. A pale gray nothingness that is all my future holds.

"Do you want me to have them sedate you until it's over?" asks Haymitch. He's not joking. This is a man who spent his adult life at the bottom of a bottle, trying to anesthetize himself against the Capitol's crimes. The sixteen-year-old boy who won the second Quarter Quell must have had people he loved—family, friends, a sweetheart maybe—that he fought to get back to. Where are they now? How is it that until Peeta and I were thrust upon him, there was no one at all in his life? What did Snow do to them?

"No," I say. "I want to go to the Capitol. I want to be part of the rescue mission."

"They're gone," says Haymitch.

"How long ago did they leave? I could catch up. I could—" What? What could I do?

Haymitch shakes his head. "It'll never happen. You're too valuable and too vulnerable. There was talk of sending you to another district to divert the Capitol's attention while the rescue takes place. But no one felt you could handle it."

"Please, Haymitch!" I'm begging now. "I have to do something. I can't just sit here waiting to hear if they died. There must be something I can do!"

"All right. Let me talk to Plutarch. You stay put." But I can't. Haymitch's footsteps are still echoing in the outer hall when I fumble my way through the slit in the dividing curtain to find Finnick sprawled out on his stomach, his hands twisted in his pillowcase. Although it's cowardly—cruel even—to rouse him from the shadowy, muted drug land to stark reality, I go ahead and do it because I can't stand to face this by myself.

As I explain our situation, his initial agitation mysteriously ebbs. “Don’t you see, Katniss, this will decide things. One way or the other. By the end of the day, they’ll either be dead or with us. It’s...it’s more than we could hope for!”

Well, that’s a sunny view of our situation. And yet there’s something calming about the idea that this torment could come to an end.

The curtain yanks back and there’s Haymitch. He has a job for us, if we can pull it together. They still need post-bombing footage of 13. “If we can get it in the next few hours, Beetee can air it leading up to the rescue, and maybe keep the Capitol’s attention elsewhere.”

“Yes, a distraction,” says Finnick. “A decoy of sorts.”

“What we really need is something so riveting that even President Snow won’t be able to tear himself away. Got anything like that?” asks Haymitch.

Having a job that might help the mission snaps me into focus. While I knock down breakfast and get prepped, I try to think of what I might say. President Snow must be wondering how that blood-splattered floor and his roses are affecting me. If he wants me broken, then I will have to be whole. But I don’t think I will convince him of anything by shouting a couple of defiant lines at the camera. Besides, that won’t buy the rescue team any time. Outbursts are short. It’s stories that take time.

I don’t know if it will work, but when the television crew’s all assembled aboveground, I ask Cressida if she could start out by asking me about Peeta. I take a seat on the fallen marble pillar where I had my breakdown, wait for the red light and Cressida’s question.

“How did you meet Peeta?” she asks.

And then I do the thing that Haymitch has wanted since my first interview. I open up. “When I met Peeta, I was eleven years old, and I was almost dead.” I talk about that awful day when I tried to sell the baby clothes in the rain, how Peeta’s mother chased me from the bakery door, and how he took a beating to bring me the loaves of bread that saved our lives. “We had never even spoken. The first time I ever talked to Peeta was on the train to the Games.”

“But he was already in love with you,” says Cressida.

“I guess so.” I allow myself a small smile.

“How are you doing with the separation?” she asks.

“Not well. I know at any moment Snow could kill him. Especially since he warned Thirteen about the bombing. It’s a terrible thing to live with,” I

say. “But because of what they’re putting him through, I don’t have any reservations anymore. About doing whatever it takes to destroy the Capitol. I’m finally free.” I turn my gaze skyward and watch the flight of a hawk across the sky. “President Snow once admitted to me that the Capitol was fragile. At the time, I didn’t know what he meant. It was hard to see clearly because I was so afraid. Now I’m not. The Capitol’s fragile because it depends on the districts for everything. Food, energy, even the Peacekeepers that police us. If we declare our freedom, the Capitol collapses. President Snow, thanks to you, I’m officially declaring mine today.”

I’ve been sufficient, if not dazzling. Everyone loves the bread story. But it’s my message to President Snow that gets the wheels spinning in Plutarch’s brain. He hastily calls Finnick and Haymitch over and they have a brief but intense conversation that I can see Haymitch isn’t happy with. Plutarch seems to win—Finnick’s pale but nodding his head by the end of it.

As Finnick moves to take my seat before the camera, Haymitch tells him, “You don’t have to do this.”

“Yes, I do. If it will help her.” Finnick balls up his rope in his hand. “I’m ready.”

I don’t know what to expect. A love story about Annie? An account of the abuses in District 4? But Finnick Odair takes a completely different tack.

“President Snow used to...sell me...my body, that is,” Finnick begins in a flat, removed tone. “I wasn’t the only one. If a victor is considered desirable, the president gives them as a reward or allows people to buy them for an exorbitant amount of money. If you refuse, he kills someone you love. So you do it.”

That explains it, then. Finnick’s parade of lovers in the Capitol. They were never real lovers. Just people like our old Head Peacekeeper, Cray, who bought desperate girls to devour and discard because he could. I want to interrupt the taping and beg Finnick’s forgiveness for every false thought I’ve ever had about him. But we have a job to do, and I sense Finnick’s role will be far more effective than mine.

“I wasn’t the only one, but I was the most popular,” he says. “And perhaps the most defenseless, because the people I loved were so defenseless. To make themselves feel better, my patrons would make presents of money or jewelry, but I found a much more valuable form of payment.”

Secrets, I think. That's what Finnick told me his lovers paid him in, only I thought the whole arrangement was by his choice.

"Secrets," he says, echoing my thoughts. "And this is where you're going to want to stay tuned, President Snow, because so very many of them were about you. But let's begin with some of the others."

Finnick begins to weave a tapestry so rich in detail that you can't doubt its authenticity. Tales of strange sexual appetites, betrayals of the heart, bottomless greed, and bloody power plays. Drunken secrets whispered over damp pillow-cases in the dead of night. Finnick was someone bought and sold. A district slave. A handsome one, certainly, but in reality, harmless. Who would he tell? And who would believe him if he did? But some secrets are too delicious not to share. I don't know the people Finnick names—all seem to be prominent Capitol citizens—but I know, from listening to the chatter of my prep team, the attention the most mild slip in judgment can draw. If a bad haircut can lead to hours of gossip, what will charges of incest, back-stabbing, blackmail, and arson produce? Even as the waves of shock and recrimination roll over the Capitol, the people there will be waiting, as I am now, to hear about the president.

"And now, on to our good President Coriolanus Snow," says Finnick. "Such a young man when he rose to power. Such a clever one to keep it. How, you must ask yourself, did he do it? One word. That's all you really need to know. *Poison*." Finnick goes back to Snow's political ascension, which I know nothing of, and works his way up to the present, pointing out case after case of the mysterious deaths of Snow's adversaries or, even worse, his allies who had the potential to become threats. People dropping dead at a feast or slowly, inexplicably declining into shadows over a period of months. Blamed on bad shellfish, elusive viruses, or an overlooked weakness in the aorta. Snow drinking from the poisoned cup himself to deflect suspicion. But antidotes don't always work. They say that's why he wears the roses that reek of perfume. They say it's to cover the scent of blood from the mouth sores that will never heal. They say, they say, they say... Snow has a list and no one knows who will be next.

Poison. The perfect weapon for a snake.

Since my opinion of the Capitol and its noble president are already so low, I can't say Finnick's allegations shock me. They seem to have far more effect on the displaced Capitol rebels like my crew and Fulvia—even Plutarch occasionally reacts in surprise, maybe wondering how a specific

tidbit passed him by. When Finnick finishes, they just keep the cameras rolling until finally he has to be the one to say “Cut.”

The crew hurries inside to edit the material, and Plutarch leads Finnick off for a chat, probably to see if he has any more stories. I’m left with Haymitch in the rubble, wondering if Finnick’s fate would have one day been mine. Why not? Snow could have gotten a really good price for the girl on fire.

“Is that what happened to you?” I ask Haymitch.

“No. My mother and younger brother. My girl. They were all dead two weeks after I was crowned victor. Because of that stunt I pulled with the force field,” he answers. “Snow had no one to use against me.”

“I’m surprised he didn’t just kill you,” I say.

“Oh, no. I was the example. The person to hold up to the young Finniks and Johanna and Cashmires. Of what could happen to a victor who caused problems,” says Haymitch. “But he knew he had no leverage against me.”

“Until Peeta and I came along,” I say softly. I don’t even get a shrug in return.

With our job done, there’s nothing left for Finnick and me to do but wait. We try to fill the dragging minutes in Special Defense. Tie knots. Push our lunch around our bowls. Blow things up on the shooting range. Because of the danger of detection, no communication comes from the rescue team. At 15:00, the designated hour, we stand tense and silent in the back of a room full of screens and computers and watch Beetee and his team try to dominate the airwaves. His usual fidgety distraction is replaced with a determination I have never seen. Most of my interview doesn’t make the cut, just enough to show I am alive and still defiant. It is Finnick’s salacious and gory account of the Capitol that takes the day. Is Beetee’s skill improving? Or are his counterparts in the Capitol a little too fascinated to want to tune Finnick out? For the next sixty minutes, the Capitol feed alternates between the standard afternoon newscast, Finnick, and attempts to black it all out. But the rebel techno team manages to override even the latter and, in a real coup, keeps control for almost the entire attack on Snow.

“Let it go!” says Beetee, throwing up his hands, relinquishing the broadcast back to the Capitol. He mops his face with a cloth. “If they’re not out of there by now, they’re all dead.” He spins in his chair to see Finnick and me reacting to his words. “It was a good plan, though. Did Plutarch show it to you?”

Of course not. Beetee takes us to another room and shows us how the team, with the help of rebel insiders, will attempt—has attempted—to free the victors from an underground prison. It seems to have involved knockout gas distributed by the ventilation system, a power failure, the detonation of a bomb in a government building several miles from the prison, and now the disruption of the broadcast. Beetee's glad we find the plan hard to follow, because then our enemies will, too.

"Like your electricity trap in the arena?" I ask.

"Exactly. And see how well that worked out?" says Beetee.

Well...not really, I think.

Finnick and I try to station ourselves in Command, where surely first word of the rescue will come, but we are barred because serious war business is being carried out. We refuse to leave Special Defense and end up waiting in the hummingbird room for news.

Making knots. Making knots. No word. Making knots. Tick-tock. This is a clock. Do not think of Gale. Do not think of Peeta. Making knots. We do not want dinner. Fingers raw and bleeding. Finnick finally gives up and assumes the hunched position he took in the arena when the jabberjays attacked. I perfect my miniature noose. The words of "The Hanging Tree" replay in my head. Gale and Peeta. Peeta and Gale.

"Did you love Annie right away, Finnick?" I ask.

"No." A long time passes before he adds, "She crept up on me."

I search my heart, but at the moment the only person I can feel creeping up on me is Snow.

It must be midnight, it must be tomorrow when Haymitch pushes open the door. "They're back. We're wanted in the hospital." My mouth opens with a flood of questions that he cuts off with "That's all I know."

I want to run, but Finnick's acting so strange, as if he's lost the ability to move, so I take his hand and lead him like a small child. Through Special Defense, into the elevator that goes this way and that, and on to the hospital wing. The place is in an uproar, with doctors shouting orders and the wounded being wheeled through the halls in their beds.

We're sideswiped by a gurney bearing an unconscious, emaciated young woman with a shaved head. Her flesh shows bruises and oozing scabs. Johanna Mason. Who actually knew rebel secrets. At least the one about me. And this is how she has paid for it.

Through a doorway, I catch a glimpse of Gale, stripped to the waist, perspiration streaming down his face as a doctor removes something from under his shoulder blade with a long pair of tweezers. Wounded, but alive. I call his name, start toward him until a nurse pushes me back and shuts me out.

“Finnick!” Something between a shriek and a cry of joy. A lovely if somewhat bedraggled young woman—dark tangled hair, sea green eyes—runs toward us in nothing but a sheet. “Finnick!” And suddenly, it’s as if there’s no one in the world but these two, crashing through space to reach each other. They collide, enfold, lose their balance, and slam against a wall, where they stay. Clinging into one being. Indivisible.

A pang of jealousy hits me. Not for either Finnick or Annie but for their certainty. No one seeing them could doubt their love.

Boggs, looking a little worse for wear but uninjured, finds Haymitch and me. “We got them all out. Except Enobaria. But since she’s from Two, we doubt she’s being held anyway. Peeta’s at the end of the hall. The effects of the gas are just wearing off. You should be there when he wakes.”

Peeta.

Alive and well—maybe not well but alive and here. Away from Snow. Safe. Here. With me. In a minute I can touch him. See his smile. Hear his laugh.

Haymitch’s grinning at me. “Come on, then,” he says.

I’m light-headed with giddiness. What will I say? Oh, who cares what I say? Peeta will be ecstatic no matter what I do. He’ll probably be kissing me anyway. I wonder if it will feel like those last kisses on the beach in the arena, the ones I haven’t dared let myself consider until this moment.

Peeta’s awake already, sitting on the side of the bed, looking bewildered as a trio of doctors reassure him, flash lights in his eyes, check his pulse. I’m disappointed that mine was not the first face he saw when he woke, but he sees it now. His features register disbelief and something more intense that I can’t quite place. Desire? Desperation? Surely both, for he sweeps the doctors aside, leaps to his feet, and moves toward me. I run to meet him, my arms extended to embrace him. His hands are reaching for me, too, to caress my face, I think.

My lips are just forming his name when his fingers lock around my throat.

The cold collar chafes my neck and makes the shivering even harder to control. At least I am no longer in the claustrophobic tube, while the machines click and whir around me, listening to a disembodied voice telling me to hold still while I try to convince myself I can still breathe. Even now, when I've been assured there will be no permanent damage, I hunger for air.

The medical team's main concerns—damage to my spinal cord, airway, veins, and arteries—have been allayed. Bruising, hoarseness, the sore larynx, this strange little cough—not to be worried about. It will all be fine. The Mockingjay will not lose her voice. Where, I want to ask, is the doctor who determines if I am losing my mind? Only I'm not supposed to talk right now. I can't even thank Boggs when he comes to check on me. To look me over and tell me he's seen a lot worse injuries among the soldiers when they teach choke holds in training.

It was Boggs who knocked out Peeta with one blow before any permanent damage could be done. I know Haymitch would have come to my defense if he hadn't been utterly unprepared. To catch both Haymitch and myself off guard is a rare thing. But we have been so consumed with saving Peeta, so tortured by having him in the Capitol's hands, that the elation at having him back blinded us. If I'd had a private reunion with Peeta, he would have killed me. Now that he's deranged.

No, not deranged, I remind myself. *Hijacked*. That's the word I heard pass between Plutarch and Haymitch as I was wheeled past them in the hallway. *Hijacked*. I don't know what it means.

Prim, who appeared moments after the attack and has stayed as close to me as possible ever since, spreads another blanket over me. "I think they'll take the collar off soon, Katniss. You won't be so cold then." My mother, who's been assisting in a complicated surgery, has still not been informed of Peeta's assault. Prim takes one of my hands, which is clutched in a fist, and massages it until it opens and blood begins to flow through my fingers again. She's starting on the second fist when the doctors show up, remove the

collar, and give me a shot of something for pain and swelling. I lie, as instructed, with my head still, not aggravating the injuries to my neck.

Plutarch, Haymitch, and Beetee have been waiting in the hall for the doctors to give them clearance to see me. I don't know if they've told Gale, but since he's not here, I assume they haven't. Plutarch ushers the doctors out and tries to order Prim to go as well, but she says, "No. If you force me to leave, I'll go directly to surgery and tell my mother everything that's happened. And I warn you, she doesn't think much of a Gamemaker calling the shots on Katniss's life. Especially when you've taken such poor care of her."

Plutarch looks offended, but Haymitch chuckles. "I'd let it go, Plutarch," he says. Prim stays.

"So, Katniss, Peeta's condition has come as a shock to all of us," says Plutarch. "We couldn't help but notice his deterioration in the last two interviews. Obviously, he'd been abused, and we put his psychological state down to that. Now we believe something more was going on. That the Capitol has been subjecting him to a rather uncommon technique known as hijacking. Beetee?"

"I'm sorry," Beetee says, "but I can't tell you all the specifics of it, Katniss. The Capitol's very secretive about this form of torture, and I believe the results are inconsistent. This we do know. It's a type of fear conditioning. The term *hijack* comes from an old English word that means 'to capture,' or even better, 'seize.' We believe it was chosen because the technique involves the use of tracker jacker venom, and the *jack* suggested *hijack*. You were stung in your first Hunger Games, so unlike most of us, you have firsthand knowledge of the effects of the venom."

Terror. Hallucinations. Nightmarish visions of losing those I love. Because the venom targets the part of the brain that houses fear.

"I'm sure you remember how frightening it was. Did you also suffer mental confusion in the aftermath?" asks Beetee. "A sense of being unable to judge what was true and what was false? Most people who have been stung and lived to tell about it report something of the kind."

Yes. That encounter with Peeta. Even after I was clearheaded, I wasn't sure if he had saved my life by taking on Cato or if I'd imagined it.

"Recall is made more difficult because memories can be changed." Beetee taps his forehead. "Brought to the forefront of your mind, altered, and saved again in the revised form. Now imagine that I ask you to remember

something—either with a verbal suggestion or by making you watch a tape of the event—and while that experience is refreshed, I give you a dose of tracker jacker venom. Not enough to induce a three-day blackout. Just enough to infuse the memory with fear and doubt. And that’s what your brain puts in long-term storage.”

I start to feel sick. Prim asks the question that’s in my mind. “Is that what they’ve done to Peeta? Taken his memories of Katniss and distorted them so they’re scary?”

Beetee nods. “So scary that he’d see her as life-threatening. That he might try to kill her. Yes, that’s our current theory.”

I cover my face with my arms because this isn’t happening. It isn’t possible. For someone to make Peeta forget he loves me...no one could do that.

“But you can reverse it, right?” asks Prim.

“Um...very little data on that,” says Plutarch. “None, really. If hijacking rehabilitation has been attempted before, we have no access to those records.”

“Well, you’re going to try, aren’t you?” Prim persists. “You’re not just going to lock him up in some padded room and leave him to suffer?”

“Of course, we’ll try, Prim,” says Beetee. “It’s just, we don’t know to what degree we’ll succeed. If any. My guess is that fearful events are the hardest to root out. They’re the ones we naturally remember the best, after all.”

“And apart from his memories of Katniss, we don’t yet know what else has been tampered with,” says Plutarch. “We’re putting together a team of mental health and military professionals to come up with a counterattack. I, personally, feel optimistic that he’ll make a full recovery.”

“Do you?” asks Prim caustically. “And what do *you* think, Haymitch?”

I shift my arms slightly so I can see his expression through the crack. He’s exhausted and discouraged as he admits, “I think Peeta might get somewhat better. But...I don’t think he’ll ever be the same.” I snap my arms back together, closing the crack, shutting them all out.

“At least he’s alive,” says Plutarch, as if he’s losing patience with the lot of us. “Snow executed Peeta’s stylist and his prep team on live television tonight. We’ve no idea what happened to Effie Trinket. Peeta’s damaged, but he’s here. With us. And that’s a definite improvement over his situation twelve hours ago. Let’s keep that in mind, all right?”

Plutarch's attempt to cheer me up—laced with the news of another four, possibly five, murders—somehow backfires. Portia. Peeta's prep team. Effie. The effort to fight back tears makes my throat throb until I'm gasping again. Eventually, they have no choice but to sedate me.

When I wake, I wonder if this will be the only way I sleep now, with drugs shot into my arm. I'm glad I'm not supposed to talk for the next few days, because there's nothing I want to say. Or do. In fact, I'm a model patient, my lethargy taken for restraint, obedience to the doctors' orders. I no longer feel like crying. In fact, I can only manage to hold on to one simple thought: an image of Snow's face accompanied by the whisper in my head. *I will kill you.*

My mother and Prim take turns nursing me, coaxing me to swallow bites of soft food. People come in periodically to give me updates on Peeta's condition. The high levels of tracker jacker venom are working their way out of his body. He's being treated only by strangers, natives of 13—no one from home or the Capitol has been allowed to see him—to keep any dangerous memories from triggering. A team of specialists works long hours designing a strategy for his recovery.

Gale's not supposed to visit me, as he's confined to bed with some kind of shoulder wound. But on the third night, after I've been medicated and the lights turned down low for bedtime, he slips silently into my room. He doesn't speak, just runs his fingers over the bruises on my neck with a touch as light as moth wings, plants a kiss between my eyes, and disappears.

The next morning, I'm discharged from the hospital with instructions to move quietly and speak only when necessary. I'm not imprinted with a schedule, so I wander around aimlessly until Prim's excused from her hospital duties to take me to our family's latest compartment. 2212. Identical to the last one, but with no window.

Buttercup has now been issued a daily food allowance and a pan of sand that's kept under the bathroom sink. As Prim tucks me into bed, he hops up on my pillow, vying for her attention. She cradles him but stays focused on me. "Katniss, I know this whole thing with Peeta is terrible for you. But remember, Snow worked on him for weeks, and we've only had him for a few days. There's a chance that the old Peeta, the one who loves you, is still inside. Trying to get back to you. Don't give up on him."

I look at my little sister and think how she has inherited the best qualities our family has to offer: my mother's healing hands, my father's level head,

and my fight. There's something else there as well, something entirely her own. An ability to look into the confusing mess of life and see things for what they are. Is it possible she could be right? That Peeta could return to me?

"I have to get back to the hospital," Prim says, placing Buttercup on the bed beside me. "You two keep each other company, okay?"

Buttercup springs off the bed and follows her to the door, complaining loudly when he's left behind. We're about as much company for each other as dirt. After maybe thirty seconds, I know I can't stand being confined in the subterranean cell, and leave Buttercup to his own devices. I get lost several times, but eventually I make my way down to Special Defense. Everyone I pass stares at the bruises, and I can't help feeling self-conscious to the point that I tug my collar up to my ears.

Gale must have been released from the hospital this morning as well, because I find him in one of the research rooms with Beetee. They're immersed, heads bent over a drawing, taking a measurement. Versions of the picture litter the table and floor. Tacked on the corkboard walls and occupying several computer screens are other designs of some sort. In the rough lines of one, I recognize Gale's twitch-up snare. "What are these?" I ask hoarsely, pulling their attention from the sheet.

"Ah, Katniss, you've found us out," says Beetee cheerfully.

"What? Is this a secret?" I know Gale's been down here working with Beetee a lot, but I assumed they were messing around with bows and guns.

"Not really. But I've felt a little guilty about it. Stealing Gale away from you so much," Beetee admits.

Since I've spent most of my time in 13 disoriented, worried, angry, being remade, or hospitalized, I can't say Gale's absences have inconvenienced me. Things haven't been exactly harmonious between us, either. But I let Beetee think he owes me. "I hope you've been putting his time to good use."

"Come and see," he says, waving me over to a computer screen.

This is what they've been doing. Taking the fundamental ideas behind Gale's traps and adapting them into weapons against humans. Bombs mostly. It's less about the mechanics of the traps than the psychology behind them. Booby-trapping an area that provides something essential to survival. A water or food supply. Frightening prey so that a large number flee into a greater destruction. Endangering off-spring in order to draw in the actual desired target, the parent. Luring the victim into what appears to be a safe haven—where death awaits it. At some point, Gale and Beetee left the

wilderness behind and focused on more human impulses. Like compassion. A bomb explodes. Time is allowed for people to rush to the aid of the wounded. Then a second, more powerful bomb kills them as well.

“That seems to be crossing some kind of line,” I say. “So anything goes?” They both stare at me—Beetee with doubt, Gale with hostility. “I guess there isn’t a rule book for what might be unacceptable to do to another human being.”

“Sure there is. Beetee and I have been following the same rule book President Snow used when he hijacked Peeta,” says Gale.

Cruel, but to the point. I leave without further comment. I feel if I don’t get outside immediately, I’ll just go ballistic, but I’m still in Special Defense when I’m waylaid by Haymitch. “Come on,” he says. “We need you back up at the hospital.”

“What for?” I ask.

“They’re going to try something on Peeta,” he answers. “Send in the most innocuous person from Twelve they can come up with. Find someone Peeta might share childhood memories with, but nothing too close to you. They’re screening people now.”

I know this will be a difficult task, since anyone Peeta shares childhood memories with would most likely be from town, and almost none of those people escaped the flames. But when we reach the hospital room that has been turned into a work space for Peeta’s recovery team, there she sits chatting with Plutarch. Delly Cartwright. As always, she gives me a smile that suggests I’m her best friend in the world. She gives this smile to everyone. “Katniss!” she calls out.

“Hey, Delly,” I say. I’d heard she and her younger brother had survived. Her parents, who ran the shoe shop in town, weren’t as lucky. She looks older, wearing the drab 13 clothes that flatter no one, with her long yellow hair in a practical braid instead of curls. Delly’s a bit thinner than I remember, but she was one of the few kids in District 12 with a couple of pounds to spare. The diet here, the stress, the grief of losing her parents have all, no doubt, contributed. “How are you doing?” I ask.

“Oh, it’s been a lot of changes all at once.” Her eyes fill with tears. “But everyone’s really nice here in Thirteen, don’t you think?”

Delly means it. She genuinely likes people. All people, not just a select few she’s spent years making up her mind about.

“They’ve made an effort to make us feel welcome,” I say. I think that’s a fair statement without going overboard. “Are you the one they’ve picked to see Peeta?”

“I guess so. Poor Peeta. Poor *you*. I’ll never understand the Capitol,” she says.

“Better not to, maybe,” I tell her.

“Delly’s known Peeta for a long time,” says Plutarch.

“Oh, yes!” Delly’s face brightens. “We played together from when we were little. I used to tell people he was my brother.”

“What do you think?” Haymitch asks me. “Anything that might trigger memories of you?”

“We were all in the same class. But we never overlapped much,” I say.

“Katniss was always so amazing, I never dreamed she would notice me,” says Delly. “The way she could hunt and go in the Hob and everything. Everyone admired her so.”

Haymitch and I both have to take a hard look at her face to double-check if she’s joking. To hear Delly describe it, I had next to no friends because I intimidated people by being so exceptional. Not true. I had next to no friends because I wasn’t friendly. Leave it to Delly to spin me into something wonderful.

“Delly always thinks the best of everyone,” I explain. “I don’t think Peeta could have bad memories associated with her.” Then I remember. “Wait. In the Capitol. When I lied about recognizing the Avox girl. Peeta covered for me and said she looked like Delly.”

“I remember,” says Haymitch. “But I don’t know. It wasn’t true. Delly wasn’t actually there. I don’t think it can compete with years of childhood memories.”

“Especially with such a pleasant companion as Delly,” says Plutarch. “Let’s give it a shot.”

Plutarch, Haymitch, and I go to the observation room next to where Peeta’s confined. It’s crowded with ten members of his recovery team armed with pens and clipboards. The one-way glass and audio setup allow us to watch Peeta secretly. He lies on the bed, his arms strapped down. He doesn’t fight the restraints, but his hands fidget continuously. His expression seems more lucid than when he tried to strangle me, but it’s still not one that belongs to him.

When the door quietly opens, his eyes widen in alarm, then become confused. Delly crosses the room tentatively, but as she nears him she naturally breaks into a smile. "Peeta? It's Delly. From home."

"Delly?" Some of the clouds seem to clear. "Delly. It's you."

"Yes!" she says with obvious relief. "How do you feel?"

"Awful. Where are we? What's happened?" asks Peeta.

"Here we go," says Haymitch.

"I told her to steer clear of any mention of Katniss or the Capitol," says Plutarch. "Just see how much of home she could conjure up."

"Well...we're in District Thirteen. We live here now," says Delly.

"That's what those people have been saying. But it makes no sense. Why aren't we home?" asks Peeta.

Delly bites her lip. "There was...an accident. I miss home badly, too. I was only just thinking about those chalk drawings we used to do on the paving stones. Yours were so wonderful. Remember when you made each one a different animal?"

"Yeah. Pigs and cats and things," says Peeta. "You said...about an accident?"

I can see the sheen of sweat on Delly's forehead as she tries to work around the question. "It was bad. No one...could stay," she says haltingly.

"Hang in there, girl," says Haymitch.

"But I know you're going to like it here, Peeta. The people have been really nice to us. There's always food and clean clothes, and school's much more interesting," says Delly.

"Why hasn't my family come to see me?" Peeta asks.

"They can't." Delly's tearing up again. "A lot of people didn't get out of Twelve. So we'll need to make a new life here. I'm sure they could use a good baker. Do you remember when your father used to let us make dough girls and boys?"

"There was a fire," Peeta says suddenly.

"Yes," she whispers.

"Twelve burned down, didn't it? Because of her," says Peeta angrily. "Because of Katniss!" He begins to pull on the restraints.

"Oh, no, Peeta. It wasn't her fault," says Delly.

"Did she tell you that?" he hisses at her.

"Get her out of there," says Plutarch. The door opens immediately and Delly begins to back toward it slowly.

“She didn’t have to. I was—” Delly begins.

“Because she’s lying! She’s a liar! You can’t believe anything she says! She’s some kind of mutt the Capitol created to use against the rest of us!” Peeta shouts.

“No, Peeta. She’s not a—” Delly tries again.

“Don’t trust her, Delly,” says Peeta in a frantic voice. “I did, and she tried to kill me. She killed my friends. My family. Don’t even go near her! She’s a mutt!”

A hand reaches through the doorway, pulls Delly out, and the door swings shut. But Peeta keeps yelling. “A mutt! She’s a stinking mutt!”

Not only does he hate me and want to kill me, he no longer believes I’m human. It was less painful being strangled.

Around me the recovery team members scribble like crazy, taking down every word. Haymitch and Plutarch grab my arms and propel me out of the room. They lean me up against a wall in the silent hallway. But I know Peeta continues to scream behind the door and the glass.

Prim was wrong. Peeta is irretrievable. “I can’t stay here anymore,” I say numbly. “If you want me to be the Mockingjay, you’ll have to send me away.”

“Where do you want to go?” asks Haymitch.

“The Capitol.” It’s the only place I can think of where I have a job to do.

“Can’t do it,” Plutarch says. “Not until all the districts are secure. Good news is, the fighting’s almost over in all of them but Two. It’s a tough nut to crack, though.”

That’s right. First the districts. Next the Capitol. And then I hunt down Snow.

“Fine,” I say. “Send me to Two.”

District 2 is a large district, as one might expect, composed of a series of villages spread across the mountains. Each was originally associated with a mine or quarry, although now, many are devoted to the housing and training of Peacekeepers. None of this would present much of a challenge, since the rebels have 13's airpower on their side, except for one thing: At the center of the district is a virtually impenetrable mountain that houses the heart of the Capitol's military.

We've nicknamed the mountain the Nut since I relayed Plutarch's "tough nut to crack" comment to the weary and discouraged rebel leaders here. The Nut was established directly after the Dark Days, when the Capitol had lost 13 and was desperate for a new underground stronghold. They had some of their military resources situated on the outskirts of the Capitol itself—nuclear missiles, aircraft, troops—but a significant chunk of their power was now under an enemy's control. Of course, there was no way they could hope to replicate 13, which was the work of centuries. However, in the old mines of nearby District 2, they saw opportunity. From the air, the Nut appeared to be just another mountain with a few entrances on its faces. But inside were vast cavernous spaces where slabs of stones had been cut, hauled to the surface, and transported down slippery narrow roads to make distant buildings. There was even a train system to facilitate transporting the miners from the Nut to the very center of the main town in District 2. It ran right to the square that Peeta and I visited during the Victory Tour, standing on the wide marble steps of the Justice Building, trying not to look too closely at Cato's and Clove's grieving families assembled below us.

It was not the most ideal terrain, plagued as it was by mudslides, floods, and avalanches. But the advantages outweighed the concerns. As they'd cut deep into the mountain, the miners had left large pillars and walls of stone to support the infrastructure. The Capitol reinforced these and set about making the mountain their new military base. Filling it with computer banks and meeting rooms, barracks and arsenals. Widening entrances to allow the exit of hovercraft from the hangar, installing missile launchers. But on the whole,

leaving the exterior of the mountain largely unchanged. A rough, rocky tangle of trees and wildlife. A natural fortress to protect them from their enemies.

By the other districts' standards, the Capitol babied the inhabitants here. Just by looking at the District 2 rebels, you can tell they were decently fed and cared for in childhood. Some did end up as quarry and mine workers. Others were educated for jobs in the Nut or funneled into the ranks of Peacekeepers. Trained young and hard for combat. The Hunger Games were an opportunity for wealth and a kind of glory not seen elsewhere. Of course, the people of 2 swallowed the Capitol's propaganda more easily than the rest of us. Embraced their ways. But for all that, at the end of the day, they were still slaves. And if that was lost on the citizens who became Peacekeepers or worked in the Nut, it was not lost on the stonecutters who formed the backbone of the resistance here.

Things stand as they did when I arrived two weeks ago. The outer villages are in rebel hands, the town divided, and the Nut is as untouchable as ever. Its few entrances heavily fortified, its heart safely enfolded in the mountain. While every other district has now wrested control from the Capitol, 2 remains in its pocket.

Each day, I do whatever I can to help. Visit the wounded. Tape short propos with my camera crew. I'm not allowed in actual combat, but they invite me to the meetings on the status of the war, which is a lot more than they did in 13. It's much better here. Freer, no schedules on my arm, fewer demands on my time. I live aboveground in the rebel villages or surrounding caves. For safety's sake, I'm relocated often. During the day, I've been given clearance to hunt as long as I take a guard along and don't stray too far. In the thin, cold mountain air, I feel some physical strength returning, my mind clearing away the rest of the fogginess. But with this mental clarity comes an even sharper awareness of what has been done to Peeta.

Snow has stolen him from me, twisted him beyond recognition, and made me a present of him. Boggs, who came to 2 when I did, told me that even with all the plotting, it was a little too easy to rescue Peeta. He believes if 13 hadn't made the effort, Peeta would've been delivered to me anyway. Dropped off in an actively warring district or perhaps 13 itself. Tied up with ribbons and tagged with my name. Programmed to murder me.

It's only now that he's been corrupted that I can fully appreciate the real Peeta. Even more than I would've if he'd died. The kindness, the steadiness, the warmth that had an unexpected heat behind it. Outside of Prim, my

mother, and Gale, how many people in the world love me unconditionally? I think in my case, the answer may now be none. Sometimes when I'm alone, I take the pearl from where it lives in my pocket and try to remember the boy with the bread, the strong arms that warded off nightmares on the train, the kisses in the arena. To make myself put a name to the thing I've lost. But what's the use? It's gone. He's gone. Whatever existed between us is gone. All that's left is my promise to kill Snow. I tell myself this ten times a day.

Back in 13, Peeta's rehabilitation continues. Even though I don't ask, Plutarch gives me cheerful updates on the phone like "Good news, Katniss! I think we've almost got him convinced you're not a mutt!" Or "Today he was allowed to feed himself pudding!"

When Haymitch gets on after, he admits Peeta's no better. The only dubious ray of hope has come from my sister. "Prim came up with the idea of trying to hijack him back," Haymitch tells me. "Bring up the distorted memories of you and then give him a big dose of a calming drug, like morphling. We've only tried it on one memory. The tape of the two of you in the cave, when you told him that story about getting Prim the goat."

"Any improvement?" I ask.

"Well, if extreme confusion is an improvement over extreme terror, then yes," says Haymitch. "But I'm not sure it is. He lost the ability to speak for several hours. Went into some sort of stupor. When he came out, the only thing he asked about was the goat."

"Right," I say.

"How's it out there?" he asks.

"No forward motion," I tell him.

"We're sending out a team to help with the mountain. Beetee and some of the others," he says. "You know, the brains."

When the brains are selected, I'm not surprised to see Gale's name on the list. I thought Beetee would bring him, not for his technological expertise, but in the hopes that he could somehow think of a way to ensnare a mountain. Originally, Gale offered to come with me to 2, but I could see I was tearing him away from his work with Beetee. I told him to sit tight and stay where he was most needed. I didn't tell him his presence would make it even more difficult for me to mourn Peeta.

Gale finds me when they arrive late one afternoon. I'm sitting on a log at the edge of my current village, plucking a goose. A dozen or so of the birds are piled at my feet. Great flocks of them have been migrating through here

since I've arrived, and the pickings are easy. Without a word, Gale settles beside me and begins to relieve a bird of its feathers. We're through about half when he says, "Any chance we'll get to eat these?"

"Yeah. Most go to the camp kitchen, but they expect me to give a couple to whoever I'm staying with tonight," I say. "For keeping me."

"Isn't the honor of the thing enough?" he says.

"You'd think," I reply. "But word's gotten out that mockingjays are hazardous to your health."

We pluck in silence for a while longer. Then he says, "I saw Peeta yesterday. Through the glass."

"What'd you think?" I ask.

"Something selfish," says Gale.

"That you don't have to be jealous of him anymore?" My fingers give a yank, and a cloud of feathers floats down around us.

"No. Just the opposite." Gale pulls a feather out of my hair. "I thought... I'll never compete with that. No matter how much pain I'm in." He spins the feather between his thumb and forefinger. "I don't stand a chance if he doesn't get better. You'll never be able to let him go. You'll always feel wrong about being with me."

"The way I always felt wrong kissing him because of you," I say.

Gale holds my gaze. "If I thought that was true, I could almost live with the rest of it."

"It is true," I admit. "But so is what you said about Peeta."

Gale makes a sound of exasperation. Nonetheless, after we've dropped off the birds and volunteered to go back to the woods to gather kindling for the evening fire, I find myself wrapped in his arms. His lips brushing the faded bruises on my neck, working their way to my mouth. Despite what I feel for Peeta, this is when I accept deep down that he'll never come back to me. Or I'll never go back to him. I'll stay in 2 until it falls, go to the Capitol and kill Snow, and then die for my trouble. And he'll die insane and hating me. So in the fading light I shut my eyes and kiss Gale to make up for all the kisses I've withheld, and because it doesn't matter anymore, and because I'm so desperately lonely I can't stand it.

Gale's touch and taste and heat remind me that at least my body's still alive, and for the moment it's a welcome feeling. I empty my mind and let the sensations run through my flesh, happy to lose myself. When Gale pulls away slightly, I move forward to close the gap, but I feel his hand under my chin.

“Katniss,” he says. The instant I open my eyes, the world seems disjointed. This is not our woods or our mountains or our way. My hand automatically goes to the scar on my left temple, which I associate with confusion. “Now kiss me.” Bewildered, unblinking, I stand there while he leans in and presses his lips to mine briefly. He examines my face closely. “What’s going on in your head?”

“I don’t know,” I whisper back.

“Then it’s like kissing someone who’s drunk. It doesn’t count,” he says with a weak attempt at a laugh. He scoops up a pile of kindling and drops it in my empty arms, returning me to myself.

“How do you know?” I say, mostly to cover my embarrassment. “Have you kissed someone who’s drunk?” I guess Gale could’ve been kissing girls right and left back in 12. He certainly had enough takers. I never thought about it much before.

He just shakes his head. “No. But it’s not hard to imagine.”

“So, you never kissed any other girls?” I ask.

“I didn’t say that. You know, you were only twelve when we met. And a real pain besides. I did have a life outside of hunting with you,” he says, loading up with firewood.

Suddenly, I’m genuinely curious. “Who did you kiss? And where?”

“Too many to remember. Behind the school, on the slag heap, you name it,” he says.

I roll my eyes. “So when did I become so special? When they carted me off to the Capitol?”

“No. About six months before that. Right after New Year’s. We were in the Hob, eating some slop of Greasy Sae’s. And Darius was teasing you about trading a rabbit for one of his kisses. And I realized...I minded,” he tells me.

I remember that day. Bitter cold and dark by four in the afternoon. We’d been hunting, but a heavy snow had driven us back into town. The Hob was crowded with people looking for refuge from the weather. Greasy Sae’s soup, made with stock from the bones of a wild dog we’d shot a week earlier, was below her usual standards. Still, it was hot, and I was starving as I scooped it up, sitting cross-legged on her counter. Darius was leaning on the post of the stall, tickling my cheek with the end of my braid, while I smacked his hand away. He was explaining why one of his kisses merited a rabbit, or possibly two, since everyone knows redheaded men are the most

virile. And Greasy Sae and I were laughing because he was so ridiculous and persistent and kept pointing out women around the Hob who he said had paid far more than a rabbit to enjoy his lips. “See? The one in the green muffler? Go ahead and ask her. *If* you need a reference.”

A million miles from here, a billion days ago, this happened. “Darius was just joking around,” I say.

“Probably. Although you’d be the last to figure out if he wasn’t,” Gale tells me. “Take Peeta. Take me. Or even Finnick. I was starting to worry he had his eye on you, but he seems back on track now.”

“You don’t know Finnick if you think he’d love me,” I say.

Gale shrugs. “I know he was desperate. That makes people do all kinds of crazy things.”

I can’t help thinking that’s directed at me.

Bright and early the next morning, the brains assemble to take on the problem of the Nut. I’m asked to the meeting, although I don’t have much to contribute. I avoid the conference table and perch in the wide windowsill that has a view of the mountain in question. The commander from 2, a middle-aged woman named Lyme, takes us on a virtual tour of the Nut, its interior and fortifications, and recounts the failed attempts to seize it. I’ve crossed paths with her briefly a couple of times since my arrival, and was dogged by the feeling I’d met her before. She’s memorable enough, standing over six feet tall and heavily muscled. But it’s only when I see a clip of her in the field, leading a raid on the main entrance of the Nut, that something clicks and I realize I’m in the presence of another victor. Lyme, the tribute from District 2, who won her Hunger Games over a generation ago. Effie sent us her tape, among others, to prepare for the Quarter Quell. I’ve probably caught glimpses of her during the Games over the years, but she’s kept a low profile. With my newfound knowledge of Haymitch’s and Finnick’s treatment, all I can think is: What did the Capitol do to her after she won?

When Lyme finishes the presentation, the questions from the brains begin. Hours pass, and lunch comes and goes, as they try to come up with a realistic plan for taking the Nut. But while Beetee thinks he might be able to override certain computer systems, and there’s some discussion of putting the handful of internal spies to use, no one has any really innovative thoughts. As the afternoon wears on, talk keeps returning to a strategy that has been tried repeatedly—the storming of the entrances. I can see Lyme’s frustration

building because so many variations of this plan have already failed, so many of her soldiers have been lost. Finally, she bursts out, “The next person who suggests we take the entrances better have a brilliant way to do it, because you’re going to be the one leading that mission!”

Gale, who is too restless to sit at the table for more than a few hours, has been alternating between pacing and sharing my windowsill. Early on, he seemed to accept Lyme’s assertion that the entrances couldn’t be taken, and dropped out of the conversation entirely. For the last hour or so, he’s sat quietly, his brow knitted in concentration, staring at the Nut through the window glass. In the silence that follows Lyme’s ultimatum, he speaks up. “Is it really so necessary that we take the Nut? Or would it be enough to disable it?”

“That would be a step in the right direction,” says Beetee. “What do you have in mind?”

“Think of it as a wild dog den,” Gale continues. “You’re not going to fight your way in. So you have two choices. Trap the dogs inside or flush them out.”

“We’ve tried bombing the entrances,” says Lyme. “They’re set too far inside the stone for any real damage to be done.”

“I wasn’t thinking of that,” says Gale. “I was thinking of using the mountain.” Beetee rises and joins Gale at the window, peering through his ill-fitting glasses. “See? Running down the sides?”

“Avalanche paths,” says Beetee under his breath. “It’d be tricky. We’d have to design the detonation sequence with great care, and once it’s in motion, we couldn’t hope to control it.”

“We don’t need to control it if we give up the idea that we have to possess the Nut,” says Gale. “Only shut it down.”

“So you’re suggesting we start avalanches and block the entrances?” asks Lyme.

“That’s it,” says Gale. “Trap the enemy inside, cut off from supplies. Make it impossible for them to send out their hovercraft.”

While everyone considers the plan, Boggs flips through a stack of blueprints of the Nut and frowns. “You risk killing everyone inside. Look at the ventilation system. It’s rudimentary at best. Nothing like what we have in Thirteen. It depends entirely on pumping in air from the mountainsides. Block those vents and you’ll suffocate whoever is trapped.”

“They could still escape through the train tunnel to the square,” says Beetee.

“Not if we blow it up,” says Gale brusquely. His intent, his full intent, becomes clear. Gale has no interest in preserving the lives of those in the Nut. No interest in caging the prey for later use.

This is one of his death traps.

The implications of what Gale is suggesting settle quietly around the room. You can see the reaction playing out on people's faces. The expressions range from pleasure to distress, from sorrow to satisfaction.

"The majority of the workers are citizens from Two," says Beetee neutrally.

"So what?" says Gale. "We'll never be able to trust them again."

"They should at least have a chance to surrender," says Lyme.

"Well, that's a luxury we weren't given when they fire-bombed Twelve, but you're all so much cozier with the Capitol here," says Gale. By the look on Lyme's face, I think she might shoot him, or at least take a swing. She'd probably have the upper hand, too, with all her training. But her anger only seems to infuriate him and he yells, "We watched children burn to death and there was nothing we could do!"

I have to close my eyes a minute, as the image rips through me. It has the desired effect. I want everyone in that mountain dead. Am about to say so. But then...I'm also a girl from District 12. Not President Snow. I can't help it. I can't condemn someone to the death he's suggesting. "Gale," I say, taking his arm and trying to speak in a reasonable tone. "The Nut's an old mine. It'd be like causing a massive coal mining accident." Surely the words are enough to make anyone from 12 think twice about the plan.

"But not so quick as the one that killed our fathers," he retorts. "Is that everyone's problem? That our enemies might have a few hours to reflect on the fact that they're dying, instead of just being blown to bits?"

Back in the old days, when we were nothing more than a couple of kids hunting outside of 12, Gale said things like this and worse. But then they were just words. Here, put into practice, they become deeds that can never be reversed.

"You don't know how those District Two people ended up in the Nut," I say. "They may have been coerced. They may be held against their will. Some are our own spies. Will you kill them, too?"

“I would sacrifice a few, yes, to take out the rest of them,” he replies. “And if I were a spy in there, I’d say, ‘Bring on the avalanches!’”

I know he’s telling the truth. That Gale would sacrifice his life in this way for the cause—no one doubts it. Perhaps we’d all do the same if we were the spies and given the choice. I guess I would. But it’s a coldhearted decision to make for other people and those who love them.

“You said we had two choices,” Boggs tells him. “To trap them or to flush them out. I say we try to avalanche the mountain but leave the train tunnel alone. People can escape into the square, where we’ll be waiting for them.”

“Heavily armed, I hope,” says Gale. “You can be sure they’ll be.”

“Heavily armed. We’ll take them prisoner,” agrees Boggs.

“Let’s bring Thirteen into the loop now,” Beetee suggests. “Let President Coin weigh in.”

“She’ll want to block the tunnel,” says Gale with conviction.

“Yes, most likely. But you know, Peeta did have a point in his propos. About the dangers of killing ourselves off. I’ve been playing with some numbers. Factoring in the casualties and the wounded and...I think it’s at least worth a conversation,” says Beetee.

Only a handful of people are invited to be part of that conversation. Gale and I are released with the rest. I take him hunting so he can blow off some steam, but he’s not talking about it. Probably too angry with me for countering him.

The call does happen, a decision is made, and by evening I’m suited up in my Mockingjay outfit, with my bow slung over my shoulder and an earpiece that connects me to Haymitch in 13—just in case a good opportunity for a propo arises. We wait on the roof of the Justice Building with a clear view of our target.

Our hoverplanes are initially ignored by the commanders in the Nut, because in the past they’ve been little more trouble than flies buzzing around a honeypot. But after two rounds of bombings in the higher elevations of the mountain, the planes have their attention. By the time the Capitol’s antiaircraft weapons begin to fire, it’s already too late.

Gale’s plan exceeds anyone’s expectations. Beetee was right about being unable to control the avalanches once they’d been set in motion. The mountainsides are naturally unstable, but weakened by the explosions, they seem almost fluid. Whole sections of the Nut collapse before our eyes,

obliterating any sign that human beings have ever set foot on the place. We stand speechless, tiny and insignificant, as waves of stone thunder down the mountain. Burying the entrances under tons of rock. Raising a cloud of dirt and debris that blackens the sky. Turning the Nut into a tomb.

I imagine the hell inside the mountain. Sirens wailing. Lights flickering into darkness. Stone dust choking the air. The shrieks of panicked, trapped beings stumbling madly for a way out, only to find the entrances, the launchpad, the ventilation shafts themselves clogged with earth and rock trying to force its way in. Live wires flung free, fires breaking out, rubble making a familiar path a maze. People slamming, shoving, scrambling like ants as the hill presses in, threatening to crush their fragile shells.

“Katniss?” Haymitch’s voice is in my earpiece. I try to answer back and find both of my hands are clamped tightly over my mouth. “Katniss!”

On the day my father died, the sirens went off during my school lunch. No one waited for dismissal, or was expected to. The response to a mine accident was something outside the control of even the Capitol. I ran to Prim’s class. I still remember her, tiny at seven, very pale, but sitting straight up with her hands folded on her desk. Waiting for me to collect her as I’d promised I would if the sirens ever sounded. She sprang out of her seat, grabbed my coat sleeve, and we wove through the streams of people pouring out onto the streets to pool at the main entrance of the mine. We found our mother clenching the rope that had been hastily strung to keep the crowd back. In retrospect, I guess I should have known there was a problem right then. Because why were we looking for her, when the reverse should have been true?

The elevators were screeching, burning up and down their cables as they vomited smoke-blackened miners into the light of day. With each group came cries of relief, relatives diving under the rope to lead off their husbands, wives, children, parents, siblings. We stood in the freezing air as the afternoon turned overcast, a light snow dusted the earth. The elevators moved more slowly now and disgorged fewer beings. I knelt on the ground and pressed my hands into the cinders, wanting so badly to pull my father free. If there’s a more helpless feeling than trying to reach someone you love who’s trapped underground, I don’t know it. The wounded. The bodies. The waiting through the night. Blankets put around your shoulders by strangers. A mug of something hot that you don’t drink. And then finally, at dawn, the grieved expression on the face of the mine captain that could only mean one thing.

What did we just do?

“Katniss! Are you there?” Haymitch is probably making plans to have me fitted for a head shackle at this very moment.

I drop my hands. “Yes.”

“Get inside. Just in case the Capitol tries to retaliate with what’s left of its air force,” he instructs.

“Yes,” I repeat. Everyone on the roof, except for the soldiers manning the machine guns, begin to make their way inside. As I descend the stairs, I can’t help brushing my fingers along the unblemished white marble walls. So cold and beautiful. Even in the Capitol, there’s nothing to match the magnificence of this old building. But there is no give to the surface—only my flesh yields, my warmth taken. Stone conquers people every time.

I sit at the base of one of the gigantic pillars in the great entrance hall. Through the doors I can see the white expanse of marble that leads to the steps on the square. I remember how sick I was the day Peeta and I accepted congratulations there for winning the Games. Worn down by the Victory Tour, failing in my attempt to calm the districts, facing the memories of Clove and Cato, particularly Cato’s gruesome, slow death by mutts.

Boggs crouches down beside me, his skin pale in the shadows. “We didn’t bomb the train tunnel, you know. Some of them will probably get out.”

“And then we’ll shoot them when they show their faces?” I ask.

“Only if we have to,” he answers.

“We could send in trains ourselves. Help evacuate the wounded,” I say.

“No. It was decided to leave the tunnel in their hands. That way they can use all the tracks to bring people out,” says Boggs. “Besides, it will give us time to get the rest of our soldiers to the square.”

A few hours ago, the square was a no-man’s-land, the front line of the fight between the rebels and the Peacekeepers. When Coin gave approval for Gale’s plan, the rebels launched a heated attack and drove the Capitol forces back several blocks so that we would control the train station in the event that the Nut fell. Well, it’s fallen. The reality has sunk in. Any survivors will escape to the square. I can hear the gunfire starting again, as the Peacekeepers are no doubt trying to fight their way in to rescue their comrades. Our own soldiers are being brought in to counter this.

“You’re cold,” says Boggs. “I’ll see if I can find a blanket.” He goes before I can protest. I don’t want a blanket, even if the marble continues to leech my body heat.

“Katniss,” says Haymitch in my ear.

“Still here,” I answer.

“Interesting turn of events with Peeta this afternoon. Thought you’d want to know,” he says. Interesting isn’t good. It isn’t better. But I don’t really have any choice but to listen. “We showed him that clip of you singing ‘The Hanging Tree.’ It was never aired, so the Capitol couldn’t use it when he was being hijacked. He says he recognized the song.”

For a moment, my heart skips a beat. Then I realize it’s just more tracker jacker serum confusion. “He couldn’t, Haymitch. He never heard me sing that song.”

“Not you. Your father. He heard him singing it one day when he came to trade at the bakery. Peeta was small, probably six or seven, but he remembered it because he was specially listening to see if the birds stopped singing,” says Haymitch. “Guess they did.”

Six or seven. That would have been before my mother banned the song. Maybe even right around the time I was learning it. “Was I there, too?”

“Don’t think so. No mention of you anyway. But it’s the first connection to you that hasn’t triggered some mental meltdown,” says Haymitch. “It’s something, at least, Katniss.”

My father. He seems to be everywhere today. Dying in the mine. Singing his way into Peeta’s muddled consciousness. Flickering in the look Boggs gives me as he protectively wraps the blanket around my shoulders. I miss him so badly it hurts.

The gunfire’s really picking up outside. Gale hurries by with a group of rebels, eagerly headed for the battle. I don’t petition to join the fighters, not that they would let me. I have no stomach for it anyway, no heat in my blood. I wish Peeta was here—the old Peeta—because he would be able to articulate why it is so wrong to be exchanging fire when people, any people, are trying to claw their way out of the mountain. Or is my own history making me too sensitive? Aren’t we at war? Isn’t this just another way to kill our enemies?

Night falls quickly. Huge, bright spotlights are turned on, illuminating the square. Every bulb must be burning at full wattage inside the train station as well. Even from my position across the square, I can see clearly through the plate-glass front of the long, narrow building. It would be impossible to miss the arrival of a train, or even a single person. But hours pass and no one

comes. With each minute, it becomes harder to imagine that anyone survived the assault on the Nut.

It's well after midnight when Cressida comes to attach a special microphone to my costume. "What's this for?" I ask.

Haymitch's voice comes on to explain. "I know you're not going to like this, but we need you to make a speech."

"A speech?" I say, immediately feeling queasy.

"I'll feed it to you, line by line," he assures me. "You'll just have to repeat what I say. Look, there's no sign of life from that mountain. We've won, but the fighting's continuing. So we thought if you went out on the steps of the Justice Building and laid it out—told everybody that the Nut's defeated, that the Capitol's presence in District Two is finished—you might be able to get the rest of their forces to surrender."

I peer at the darkness beyond the square. "I can't even see their forces."

"That's what the mike's for," he says. "You'll be broadcast, both your voice through their emergency audio system, and your image wherever people have access to a screen."

I know there are a couple of huge screens here on the square. I saw them on the Victory Tour. It might work, if I were good at this sort of thing. Which I'm not. They tried to feed me lines in those early experiments with the propos, too, and it was a flop.

"You could save a lot of lives, Katniss," Haymitch says finally.

"All right. I'll give it a try," I tell him.

It's strange standing outside at the top of the stairs, fully costumed, brightly lit, but with no visible audience to deliver my speech to. Like I'm doing a show for the moon.

"Let's make this quick," says Haymitch. "You're too exposed."

My television crew, positioned out in the square with special cameras, indicates that they're ready. I tell Haymitch to go ahead, then click on my mike and listen carefully to him dictate the first line of the speech. A huge image of me lights up one of the screens over the square as I begin. "People of District Two, this is Katniss Everdeen speaking to you from the steps of your Justice Building, where—"

The pair of trains comes screeching into the train station side by side. As the doors slide open, people tumble out in a cloud of smoke they've brought from the Nut. They must have had at least an inkling of what would await them at the square, because you can see them trying to act evasively. Most of

them flatten on the floor, and a spray of bullets inside the station takes out the lights. They've come armed, as Gale predicted, but they've come wounded as well. The moans can be heard in the otherwise silent night air.

Someone kills the lights on the stairs, leaving me in the protection of shadow. A flame blooms inside the station—one of the trains must actually be on fire—and a thick, black smoke billows against the windows. Left with no choice, the people begin to push out into the square, choking but defiantly waving their guns. My eyes dart around the rooftops that ring the square. Every one of them has been fortified with rebel-manned machine gun nests. Moonlight glints off oiled barrels.

A young man staggers out from the station, one hand pressed against a bloody cloth at his cheek, the other dragging a gun. When he trips and falls to his face, I see the scorch marks down the back of his shirt, the red flesh beneath. And suddenly, he's just another burn victim from a mine accident.

My feet fly down the steps and I take off running for him. "Stop!" I yell at the rebels. "Hold your fire!" The words echo around the square and beyond as the mike amplifies my voice. "Stop!" I'm nearing the young man, reaching down to help him, when he drags himself up to his knees and trains his gun on my head.

I instinctively back up a few steps, raise my bow over my head to show my intention was harmless. Now that he has both hands on his gun, I notice the ragged hole in his cheek where something—falling stone maybe—punctured the flesh. He smells of burning things, hair and meat and fuel. His eyes are crazed with pain and fear.

"Freeze," Haymitch's voice whispers in my ear. I follow his order, realizing that this is what all of District 2, all of Panem maybe, must be seeing at the moment. The Mockingjay at the mercy of a man with nothing to lose.

His garbled speech is barely comprehensible. "Give me one reason I shouldn't shoot you."

The rest of the world recedes. There's only me looking into the wretched eyes of the man from the Nut who asks for one reason. Surely I should be able to come up with thousands. But the words that make it to my lips are "I can't."

Logically, the next thing that should happen is the man pulling the trigger. But he's perplexed, trying to make sense of my words. I experience my own confusion as I realize what I've said is entirely true, and the noble impulse

that carried me across the square is replaced by despair. “I can’t. That’s the problem, isn’t it?” I lower my bow. “We blew up your mine. You burned my district to the ground. We’ve got every reason to kill each other. So do it. Make the Capitol happy. I’m done killing their slaves for them.” I drop my bow on the ground and give it a nudge with my boot. It slides across the stone and comes to rest at his knees.

“I’m not their slave,” the man mutters.

“I am,” I say. “That’s why I killed Cato...and he killed Thresh...and he killed Clove...and she tried to kill me. It just goes around and around, and who wins? Not us. Not the districts. Always the Capitol. But I’m tired of being a piece in their Games.”

Peeta. On the rooftop the night before our first Hunger Games. He understood it all before we’d even set foot in the arena. I hope he’s watching now, that he remembers that night as it happened, and maybe forgives me when I die.

“Keep talking. Tell them about watching the mountain go down,” Haymitch insists.

“When I saw that mountain fall tonight, I thought...they’ve done it again. Got me to kill you—the people in the districts. But why did I do it? District Twelve and District Two have no fight except the one the Capitol gave us.” The young man blinks at me uncomprehendingly. I sink on my knees before him, my voice low and urgent. “And why are you fighting with the rebels on the rooftops? With Lyme, who was your victor? With people who were your neighbors, maybe even your family?”

“I don’t know,” says the man. But he doesn’t take his gun off me.

I rise and turn slowly in a circle, addressing the machine guns. “And you up there? I come from a mining town. Since when do miners condemn other miners to that kind of death, and then stand by to kill whoever manages to crawl from the rubble?”

“Who is the enemy?” whispers Haymitch.

“These people”—I indicate the wounded bodies on the square—“are not your enemy!” I whip back around to the train station. “The rebels are not your enemy! We all have one enemy, and it’s the Capitol! This is our chance to put an end to their power, but we need every district person to do it!”

The cameras are tight on me as I reach out my hands to the man, to the wounded, to the reluctant rebels across Panem. “Please! Join us!”

My words hang in the air. I look to the screen, hoping to see them recording some wave of reconciliation going through the crowd.
Instead I watch myself get shot on television.

“Always.”

In the twilight of morphling, Peeta whispers the word and I go searching for him. It’s a gauzy, violet-tinted world, with no hard edges, and many places to hide. I push through cloud banks, follow faint tracks, catch the scent of cinnamon, of dill. Once I feel his hand on my cheek and try to trap it, but it dissolves like mist through my fingers.

When I finally begin to surface into the sterile hospital room in 13, I remember. I was under the influence of sleep syrup. My heel had been injured after I’d climbed out on a branch over the electric fence and dropped back into 12. Peeta had put me to bed and I had asked him to stay with me as I was drifting off. He had whispered something I couldn’t quite catch. But some part of my brain had trapped his single word of reply and let it swim up through my dreams to taunt me now. *“Always.”*

Morphling dulls the extremes of all emotions, so instead of a stab of sorrow, I merely feel emptiness. A hollow of dead brush where flowers used to bloom. Unfortunately, there’s not enough of the drug left in my veins for me to ignore the pain in the left side of my body. That’s where the bullet hit. My hands fumble over the thick bandages encasing my ribs and I wonder what I’m still doing here.

It wasn’t him, the man kneeling before me on the square, the burned one from the Nut. He didn’t pull the trigger. It was someone farther back in the crowd. There was less a sense of penetration than the feeling that I’d been struck with a sledgehammer. Everything after the moment of impact is confusion riddled with gunfire. I try to sit up, but the only thing I manage is a moan.

The white curtain that divides my bed from the next patient’s whips back, and Johanna Mason stares down at me. At first I feel threatened, because she attacked me in the arena. I have to remind myself that she did it to save my life. It was part of the rebel plot. But still, that doesn’t mean she doesn’t despise me. Maybe her treatment of me was all an act for the Capitol?

“I’m alive,” I say rustily.

“No kidding, brainless.” Johanna walks over and plunks down on my bed, sending spikes of pain shooting across my chest. When she grins at my discomfort, I know we’re not in for some warm reunion scene. “Still a little sore?” With an expert hand, she quickly detaches the morphling drip from my arm and plugs it into a socket taped into the crook of her own. “They started cutting back my supply a few days ago. Afraid I’m going to turn into one of those freaks from Six. I’ve had to borrow from you when the coast was clear. Didn’t think you’d mind.”

Mind? How can I mind when she was almost tortured to death by Snow after the Quarter Quell? I have no right to mind, and she knows it.

Johanna sighs as the morphling enters her bloodstream. “Maybe they were onto something in Six. Drug yourself out and paint flowers on your body. Not such a bad life. Seemed happier than the rest of us, anyway.”

In the weeks since I left 13, she’s gained some weight back. A soft down of hair has sprouted on her shaved head, helping to hide some of the scars. But if she’s siphoning off my morphling, she’s struggling.

“They’ve got this head doctor who comes around every day. Supposed to be helping me recover. Like some guy who’s spent his life in this rabbit warren’s going to fix me up. Complete idiot. At least twenty times a session he reminds me that I’m totally safe.” I manage a smile. It’s a truly stupid thing to say, especially to a victor. As if such a state of being ever existed, anywhere, for anyone. “How about you, Mockingjay? You feel totally safe?”

“Oh, yeah. Right up until I got shot,” I say.

“Please. That bullet never even touched you. Cinna saw to that,” she says.

I think of the layers of protective armor in my Mockingjay outfit. But the pain came from somewhere. “Broken ribs?”

“Not even. Bruised pretty good. The impact ruptured your spleen. They couldn’t repair it.” She gives a dismissive wave of her hand. “Don’t worry, you don’t need one. And if you did, they’d find you one, wouldn’t they? It’s everybody’s job to keep you alive.”

“Is that why you hate me?” I ask.

“Partly,” she admits. “Jealousy is certainly involved. I also think you’re a little hard to swallow. With your tacky romantic drama and your defender-of-the-helpless act. Only it isn’t an act, which makes you more unbearable. Please feel free to take this personally.”

“You should have been the Mockingjay. No one would’ve had to feed you lines,” I say.

“True. But no one likes me,” she tells me.

“They trusted you, though. To get me out,” I remind her. “And they’re afraid of you.”

“Here, maybe. In the Capitol, you’re the one they’re scared of now.” Gale appears in the doorway, and Johanna neatly unhooks herself and reattaches me to the morphling drip. “Your cousin’s not afraid of me,” she says confidentially. She scoots off my bed and crosses to the door, nudging Gale’s leg with her hip as she passes him. “Are you, gorgeous?” We can hear her laughter as she disappears down the hall.

I raise my eyebrows at him as he takes my hand. “Terrified,” he mouths. I laugh, but it turns into a wince. “Easy.” He strokes my face as the pain ebbs. “You’ve got to stop running straight into trouble.”

“I know. But someone blew up a mountain,” I answer.

Instead of pulling back, he leans in closer, searching my face. “You think I’m heartless.”

“I know you’re not. But I won’t tell you it’s okay,” I say.

Now he draws back, almost impatiently. “Katniss, what difference is there, really, between crushing our enemy in a mine or blowing them out of the sky with one of Beetee’s arrows? The result is the same.”

“I don’t know. We were under attack in Eight, for one thing. The hospital was under attack,” I say.

“Yes, and those hoverplanes came from District Two,” he says. “So, by taking them out, we prevented further attacks.”

“But that kind of thinking...you could turn it into an argument for killing anyone at any time. You could justify sending kids into the Hunger Games to prevent the districts from getting out of line,” I say.

“I don’t buy that,” he tells me.

“I do,” I reply. “It must be those trips to the arena.”

“Fine. We know how to disagree,” he says. “We always have. Maybe it’s good. Between you and me, we’ve got District Two now.”

“Really?” For a moment a feeling of triumph flares up inside me. Then I think about the people on the square. “Was there fighting after I was shot?”

“Not much. The workers from the Nut turned on the Capitol soldiers. The rebels just sat by and watched,” he says. “Actually, the whole country just sat by and watched.”

“Well, that’s what they do best,” I say.

You’d think that losing a major organ would entitle you to lie around a few weeks, but for some reason, my doctors want me up and moving almost immediately. Even with the morphling, the internal pain’s severe the first few days, but then it slacks off considerably. The soreness from the bruised ribs, however, promises to hang on for a while. I begin to resent Johanna dipping into my morphling supply, but I still let her take whatever she likes.

Rumors of my death have been running rampant, so they send in the team to film me in my hospital bed. I show off my stitches and impressive bruising and congratulate the districts on their successful battle for unity. Then I warn the Capitol to expect us soon.

As part of my rehabilitation, I take short walks aboveground each day. One afternoon, Plutarch joins me and gives me an update on our current situation. Now that District 2 has allied with us, the rebels are taking a breather from the war to regroup. Fortifying supply lines, seeing to the wounded, reorganizing their troops. The Capitol, like 13 during the Dark Days, finds itself completely cut off from outside help as it holds the threat of nuclear attack over its enemies. Unlike 13, the Capitol is not in a position to reinvent itself and become self-sufficient.

“Oh, the city might be able to scrape along for a while,” says Plutarch. “Certainly, there are emergency supplies stockpiled. But the significant difference between Thirteen and the Capitol are the expectations of the populace. Thirteen was used to hardship, whereas in the Capitol, all they’ve known is *Panem et Circenses*.”

“What’s that?” I recognize *Panem*, of course, but the rest is nonsense.

“It’s a saying from thousands of years ago, written in a language called Latin about a place called Rome,” he explains. “*Panem et Circenses* translates into ‘Bread and Circuses.’ The writer was saying that in return for full bellies and entertainment, his people had given up their political responsibilities and therefore their power.”

I think about the Capitol. The excess of food. And the ultimate entertainment. The Hunger Games. “So that’s what the districts are for. To provide the bread and circuses.”

“Yes. And as long as that kept rolling in, the Capitol could control its little empire. Right now, it can provide neither, at least at the standard the people are accustomed to,” says Plutarch. “We have the food and I’m about

to orchestrate an entertainment propo that's sure to be popular. After all, everybody loves a wedding."

I freeze in my tracks, sick at the idea of what he's suggesting. Somehow staging some perverse wedding between Peeta and me. I haven't been able to face that one-way glass since I've been back and, at my own request, only get updates about Peeta's condition from Haymitch. He speaks very little about it. Different techniques are being tried. There will never truly be a way to cure him. And now they want me to marry Peeta for a propo?

Plutarch rushes to reassure me. "Oh, no, Katniss. Not your wedding. Finnick and Annie's. All you need to do is show up and pretend to be happy for them."

"That's one of the few things I won't have to pretend, Plutarch," I tell him.

The next few days bring a flurry of activity as the event is planned. The differences between the Capitol and 13 are thrown into sharp relief by the event. When Coin says "wedding," she means two people signing a piece of paper and being assigned a new compartment. Plutarch means hundreds of people dressed in finery at a three-day celebration. It's amusing to watch them haggle over the details. Plutarch has to fight for every guest, every musical note. After Coin vetoes a dinner, entertainment, and alcohol, Plutarch yells, "What's the point of the propo if no one's having any fun!"

It's hard to put a Gamemaker on a budget. But even a quiet celebration causes a stir in 13, where they seem to have no holidays at all. When it's announced that children are wanted to sing District 4's wedding song, practically every kid shows up. There's no shortage of volunteers to help make decorations. In the dining hall, people chat excitedly about the event.

Maybe it's more than the festivities. Maybe it's that we are all so starved for something good to happen that we want to be part of it. It would explain why—when Plutarch has a fit over what the bride will wear—I volunteer to take Annie back to my house in 12, where Cinna left a variety of evening clothes in a big storage closet downstairs. All of the wedding gowns he designed for me went back to the Capitol, but there are some dresses I wore on the Victory Tour. I'm a little leery about being with Annie since all I really know about her is that Finnick loves her and everybody thinks she's mad. On the hovercraft ride, I decide she's less mad than unstable. She laughs at odd places in the conversation or drops out of it distractedly. Those green eyes fixate on a point with such intensity that you find yourself trying to

make out what she sees in the empty air. Sometimes, for no reason, she presses both her hands over her ears as if to block out a painful sound. All right, she's strange, but if Finnick loves her, that's good enough for me.

I got permission for my prep team to come along, so I'm relieved of having to make any fashion decisions. When I open the closet, we all fall silent because Cinna's presence is so strong in the flow of the fabrics. Then Octavia drops to her knees, rubs the hem of a skirt against her cheek, and bursts into tears. "It's been so long," she gasps, "since I've seen anything pretty."

Despite reservations on Coin's side that it's too extravagant, and on Plutarch's side that it's too drab, the wedding is a smash hit. The three hundred lucky guests culled from 13 and the many refugees wear their everyday clothes, the decorations are made from autumn foliage, the music is provided by a choir of children accompanied by the lone fiddler who made it out of 12 with his instrument. So it's simple, frugal by the Capitol's standards. It doesn't matter because nothing can compete with the beauty of the couple. It isn't about their borrowed finery—Annie wears a green silk dress I wore in 5, Finnick one of Peeta's suits that they altered—although the clothes are striking. Who can look past the radiant faces of two people for whom this day was once a virtual impossibility? Dalton, the cattle guy from 10, conducts the ceremony, since it's similar to the one used in his district. But there are unique touches of District 4. A net woven from long grass that covers the couple during their vows, the touching of each other's lips with salt water, and the ancient wedding song, which likens marriage to a sea voyage.

No, I don't have to pretend to be happy for them.

After the kiss that seals the union, the cheers, and a toast with apple cider, the fiddler strikes up a tune that turns every head from 12. We may have been the smallest, poorest district in Panem, but we know how to dance. Nothing has been officially scheduled at this point, but Plutarch, who's calling the propo from the control room, must have his fingers crossed. Sure enough, Greasy Sae grabs Gale by the hand and pulls him into the center of the floor and faces off with him. People pour in to join them, forming two long lines. And the dancing begins.

I'm standing off to the side, clapping to the rhythm, when a bony hand pinches me above the elbow. Johanna scowls at me. "Are you going to miss the chance to let Snow see you dancing?" She's right. What could spell

victory louder than a happy Mockingjay twirling around to music? I find Prim in the crowd. Since winter evenings gave us a lot of time to practice, we're actually pretty good partners. I brush off her concerns about my ribs, and we take our places in the line. It hurts, but the satisfaction of having Snow watch me dance with my little sister reduces other feelings to dust.

Dancing transforms us. We teach the steps to the District 13 guests. Insist on a special number for the bride and groom. Join hands and make a giant, spinning circle where people show off their footwork. Nothing silly, joyful, or fun has happened in so long. This could go on all night if not for the last event planned in Plutarch's propo. One I hadn't heard about, but then it was meant to be a surprise.

Four people wheel out a huge wedding cake from a side room. Most of the guests back up, making way for this rarity, this dazzling creation with blue-green, white-tipped icing waves swimming with fish and sailboats, seals and sea flowers. But I push my way through the crowd to confirm what I knew at first sight. As surely as the embroidery stitches in Annie's gown were done by Cinna's hand, the frosted flowers on the cake were done by Peeta's.

This may seem like a small thing, but it speaks volumes. Haymitch has been keeping a great deal from me. The boy I last saw, screaming his head off, trying to tear free of his restraints, could never have made this. Never have had the focus, kept his hands steady, designed something so perfect for Finnick and Annie. As if anticipating my reaction, Haymitch is at my side.

"Let's you and me have a talk," he says.

Out in the hall, away from the cameras, I ask, "What's happening to him?"

Haymitch shakes his head. "I don't know. None of us knows. Sometimes he's almost rational, and then, for no reason, he goes off again. Doing the cake was a kind of therapy. He's been working on it for days. Watching him...he seemed almost like before."

"So, he's got the run of the place?" I ask. The idea makes me nervous on about five different levels.

"Oh, no. He frosted under heavy guard. He's still under lock and key. But I've talked to him," Haymitch says.

"Face-to-face?" I ask. "And he didn't go nuts?"

"No. Pretty angry with me, but for all the right reasons. Not telling him about the rebel plot and whatnot." Haymitch pauses a moment, as if deciding

something. “He says he’d like to see you.”

I’m on a frosting sailboat, tossed around by blue-green waves, the deck shifting beneath my feet. My palms press into the wall to steady myself. This wasn’t part of the plan. I wrote Peeta off in 2. Then I was to go to the Capitol, kill Snow, and get taken out myself. The gunshot was only a temporary setback. Never was I supposed to hear the words *He says he’d like to see you*. But now that I have, there’s no way to refuse.

At midnight, I’m standing outside the door to his cell. Hospital room. We had to wait for Plutarch to finish getting his wedding footage, which, despite the lack of what he calls razzle-dazzle, he’s pleased with. “The best thing about the Capitol basically ignoring Twelve all these years is that you people still have a little spontaneity. The audience eats that up. Like when Peeta announced he was in love with you or you did the trick with the berries. Makes for good television.”

I wish I could meet with Peeta privately. But the audience of doctors has assembled behind the one-way glass, clipboards ready, pens poised. When Haymitch gives me the okay in my earpiece, I slowly open the door.

Those blue eyes lock on me instantly. He’s got three restraints on each arm, and a tube that can dispense a knockout drug just in case he loses control. He doesn’t fight to free himself, though, only observes me with the wary look of someone who still hasn’t ruled out that he’s in the presence of a mutt. I walk over until I’m standing about a yard from the bed. There’s nothing to do with my hands, so I cross my arms protectively over my ribs before I speak. “Hey.”

“Hey,” he responds. It’s like his voice, almost his voice, except there’s something new in it. An edge of suspicion and reproach.

“Haymitch said you wanted to talk to me,” I say.

“Look at you, for starters.” It’s like he’s waiting for me to transform into a hybrid drooling wolf right before his eyes. He stares so long I find myself casting furtive glances at the one-way glass, hoping for some direction from Haymitch, but my earpiece stays silent. “You’re not very big, are you? Or particularly pretty?”

I know he’s been through hell and back, and yet somehow the observation rubs me the wrong way. “Well, you’ve looked better.”

Haymitch’s advice to back off gets muffled by Peeta’s laughter. “And not even remotely nice. To say that to me after all I’ve been through.”

“Yeah. We’ve all been through a lot. And you’re the one who was known for being nice. Not me.” I’m doing everything wrong. I don’t know why I feel so defensive. He’s been tortured! He’s been hijacked! What’s wrong with me? Suddenly, I think I might start screaming at him—I’m not even sure about what—so I decide to get out of there. “Look, I don’t feel so well. Maybe I’ll drop by tomorrow.”

I’ve just reached the door when his voice stops me. “Katniss. I remember about the bread.”

The bread. Our one moment of real connection before the Hunger Games.

“They showed you the tape of me talking about it,” I say.

“No. Is there a tape of you talking about it? Why didn’t the Capitol use it against me?” he asks.

“I made it the day you were rescued,” I answer. The pain in my chest wraps around my ribs like a vise. The dancing was a mistake. “So what do you remember?”

“You. In the rain,” he says softly. “Digging in our trash bins. Burning the bread. My mother hitting me. Taking the bread out for the pig but then giving it to you instead.”

“That’s it. That’s what happened,” I say. “The next day, after school, I wanted to thank you. But I didn’t know how.”

“We were outside at the end of the day. I tried to catch your eye. You looked away. And then...for some reason, I think you picked a dandelion.” I nod. He does remember. I have never spoken about that moment aloud. “I must have loved you a lot.”

“You did.” My voice catches and I pretend to cough.

“And did you love me?” he asks.

I keep my eyes on the tiled floor. “Everyone says I did. Everyone says that’s why Snow had you tortured. To break me.”

“That’s not an answer,” he tells me. “I don’t know what to think when they show me some of the tapes. In that first arena, it looked like you tried to kill me with those tracker jackers.”

“I was trying to kill all of you,” I say. “You had me treed.”

“Later, there’s a lot of kissing. Didn’t seem very genuine on your part. Did you like kissing me?” he asks.

“Sometimes,” I admit. “You know people are watching us now?”

“I know. What about Gale?” he continues.

My anger's returning. I don't care about his recovery—this isn't the business of the people behind the glass. "He's not a bad kisser either," I say shortly.

"And it was okay with both of us? You kissing the other?" he asks.

"No. It wasn't okay with either of you. But I wasn't asking your permission," I tell him.

Peeta laughs again, coldly, dismissively. "Well, you're a piece of work, aren't you?"

Haymitch doesn't protest when I walk out. Down the hall. Through the beehive of compartments. Find a warm pipe to hide behind in a laundry room. It takes a long time before I get to the bottom of why I'm so upset. When I do, it's almost too mortifying to admit. All those months of taking it for granted that Peeta thought I was wonderful are over. Finally, he can see me for who I really am. Violent. Distrustful. Manipulative. Deadly.

And I hate him for it.

Blindsided. That's how I feel when Haymitch tells me in the hospital. I fly down the steps to Command, mind racing a mile a minute, and burst right into a war meeting.

"What do you mean, I'm not going to the Capitol? I have to go! I'm the Mockingjay!" I say.

Coin barely looks up from her screen. "And as the Mockingjay, your primary goal of unifying the districts against the Capitol has been achieved. Don't worry—if it goes well, we'll fly you in for the surrender."

The surrender?

"That'll be too late! I'll miss all the fighting. You need me—I'm the best shot you've got!" I shout. I don't usually brag about this, but it's got to be at least close to true. "Gale's going."

"Gale has shown up for training every day unless occupied with other approved duties. We feel confident he can manage himself in the field," says Coin. "How many training sessions do you estimate you've attended?"

None. That's how many. "Well, sometimes I was hunting. And...I trained with Beetee down in Special Weaponry."

"It's not the same, Katniss," says Boggs. "We all know you're smart and brave and a good shot. But we need soldiers in the field. You don't know the first thing about executing orders, and you're not exactly at your physical peak."

"That didn't bother you when I was in Eight. Or Two, for that matter," I counter.

"You weren't originally authorized for combat in either case," says Plutarch, shooting me a look that signals I'm about to reveal too much.

No, the bomber battle in 8 and my intervention in 2 were spontaneous, rash, and definitely unauthorized.

"And both resulted in your injury," Boggs reminds me. Suddenly, I see myself through his eyes. A smallish seventeen-year-old girl who can't quite catch her breath since her ribs haven't fully healed. Disheveled.

Undisciplined. Recuperating. Not a soldier, but someone who needs to be looked after.

“But I have to go,” I say.

“Why?” asks Coin.

I can’t very well say it’s so I can carry out my own personal vendetta against Snow. Or that the idea of remaining here in 13 with the latest version of Peeta while Gale goes off to fight is unbearable. But I have no shortage of reasons to want to fight in the Capitol. “Because of Twelve. Because they destroyed my district.”

The president thinks about this a moment. Considers me. “Well, you have three weeks. It’s not long, but you can begin training. If the Assignment Board deems you fit, possibly your case will be reviewed.”

That’s it. That’s the most I can hope for. I guess it’s my own fault. I did blow off my schedule every single day unless something suited me. It didn’t seem like much of a priority, jogging around a field with a gun with so many other things going on. And now I’m paying for my negligence.

Back in the hospital, I find Johanna in the same circumstance and spitting mad. I tell her about what Coin said. “Maybe you can train, too.”

“Fine. I’ll train. But I’m going to the stinking Capitol if I have to kill a crew and fly there myself,” says Johanna.

“Probably best not to bring that up in training,” I say. “But it’s nice to know I’ll have a ride.”

Johanna grins, and I feel a slight but significant shift in our relationship. I don’t know that we’re actually friends, but possibly the word *allies* would be accurate. That’s good. I’m going to need an ally.

The next morning, when we report for training at 7:30, reality slaps me in the face. We’ve been funneled into a class of relative beginners, fourteen- or fifteen-year-olds, which seems a little insulting until it’s obvious that they’re in far better condition than we are. Gale and the other people already chosen to go to the Capitol are in a different, accelerated phase of training. After we stretch—which hurts—there’s a couple of hours of strengthening exercises—which hurt—and a five-mile run—which kills. Even with Johanna’s motivational insults driving me on, I have to drop out after a mile.

“It’s my ribs,” I explain to the trainer, a no-nonsense middle-aged woman we’re supposed to address as Soldier York. “They’re still bruised.”

“Well, I’ll tell you, Soldier Everdeen, those are going to take at least another month to heal up on their own,” she says.

I shake my head. "I don't have a month."

She looks me up and down. "The doctors haven't offered you any treatment?"

"Is there a treatment?" I ask. "They said they had to mend naturally."

"That's what they say. But they could speed up the process if I recommend it. I warn you, though, it isn't any fun," she tells me.

"Please. I've got to get to the Capitol," I say.

Soldier York doesn't question this. She scribbles something on a pad and sends me directly back to the hospital. I hesitate. I don't want to miss any more training. "I'll be back for the afternoon session," I promise. She just purses her lips.

Twenty-four needle jabs to my rib cage later, I'm flattened out on my hospital bed, gritting my teeth to keep from begging them to bring back my morphling drip. It's been by my bed so I can take a hit as needed. I haven't used it lately, but I kept it for Johanna's sake. Today they tested my blood to make sure it was clean of the painkiller, as the mixture of the two drugs—the morphling and whatever's set my ribs on fire—has dangerous side effects. They made it clear I would have a difficult couple of days. But I told them to go ahead.

It's a bad night in our room. Sleep's out of the question. I think I can actually smell the ring of flesh around my chest burning, and Johanna's fighting off withdrawal symptoms. Early on, when I apologize about cutting off her morphling supply, she waves it off, saying it had to happen anyway. But by three in the morning, I'm the target of every colorful bit of profanity District 7 has to offer. At dawn, she drags me out of bed, determined to get to training.

"I don't think I can do it," I confess.

"You can do it. We both can. We're victors, remember? We're the ones who can survive anything they throw at us," she snarls at me. She's a sick greenish color, shaking like a leaf. I get dressed.

We must be victors to make it through the morning. I think I'm going to lose Johanna when we realize it's pouring outside. Her face turns ashen and she seems to have ceased breathing.

"It's just water. It won't kill us," I say. She clenches her jaw and stomps out into the mud. Rain drenches us as we work our bodies and then slog around the running course. I bail after a mile again, and I have to resist the temptation to take off my shirt so the cold water can sizzle off my ribs. I force

down my field lunch of soggy fish and beet stew. Johanna gets halfway through her bowl before it comes back up. In the afternoon, we learn to assemble our guns. I manage it, but Johanna can't hold her hands steady enough to fit the parts together. When York's back is turned, I help her out. Even though the rain continues, the afternoon's an improvement because we're on the shooting range. At last, something I'm good at. It takes some adjusting from a bow to a gun, but by the end of the day, I've got the best score in my class.

We're just inside the hospital doors when Johanna declares, "This has to stop. Us living in the hospital. Everyone views us as patients."

It's not a problem for me. I can move into our family compartment, but Johanna's never been assigned one. When she tries to get discharged from the hospital, they won't agree to let her live alone, even if she comes in for daily talks with the head doctor. I think they may have put two and two together about the morphling and this only adds to their view that she's unstable. "She won't be alone. I'm going to room with her," I announce. There's some dissent, but Haymitch takes our part, and by bedtime, we have a compartment across from Prim and my mother, who agrees to keep an eye on us.

After I take a shower, and Johanna sort of wipes herself down with a damp cloth, she makes a cursory inspection of the place. When she opens the drawer that holds my few possessions, she shuts it quickly. "Sorry."

I think how there's nothing in Johanna's drawer but her government-issued clothes. That she doesn't have one thing in the world to call her own. "It's okay. You can look at my stuff if you want."

Johanna unlatches my locket, studying the pictures of Gale, Prim, and my mother. She opens the silver parachute and pulls out the spile and slips it onto her pinkie. "Makes me thirsty just looking at it." Then she finds the pearl Peeta gave me. "Is this—?"

"Yeah," I say. "Made it through somehow." I don't want to talk about Peeta. One of the best things about training is, it keeps me from thinking of him.

"Haymitch says he's getting better," she says.

"Maybe. But he's changed," I say.

"So have you. So have I. And Finnick and Haymitch and Beetee. Don't get me started on Annie Cresta. The arena messed us all up pretty good, don't you think? Or do you still feel like the girl who volunteered for your sister?" she asks me.

“No,” I answer.

“That’s the one thing I think my head doctor might be right about. There’s no going back. So we might as well get on with things.” She neatly returns my keepsakes to the drawer and climbs into the bed across from me just as the lights go out. “You’re not afraid I’ll kill you tonight?”

“Like I couldn’t take you,” I answer. Then we laugh, since both our bodies are so wrecked, it will be a miracle if we can get up the next day. But we do. Each morning, we do. And by the end of the week, my ribs feel almost like new, and Johanna can assemble her rifle without help.

Soldier York gives the pair of us an approving nod as we knock off for the day. “Fine job, Soldiers.”

When we move out of hearing, Johanna mutters, “I think winning the Games was easier.” But the look on her face says she’s pleased.

In fact, we’re almost in good spirits when we go to the dining hall, where Gale’s waiting to eat with me. Receiving a giant serving of beef stew doesn’t hurt my mood either. “First shipments of food arrived this morning,” Greasy Sae tells me. “That’s real beef, from District Ten. Not any of your wild dog.”

“Don’t remember you turning it down,” Gale tosses back.

We join a group that includes Delly, Annie, and Finnick. It’s something to see Finnick’s transformation since his marriage. His earlier incarnations—the decadent Capitol heartthrob I met before the Quell, the enigmatic ally in the arena, the broken young man who tried to help me hold it together—these have been replaced by someone who radiates life. Finnick’s real charms of self-effacing humor and an easygoing nature are on display for the first time. He never lets go of Annie’s hand. Not when they walk, not when they eat. I doubt he ever plans to. She’s lost in some daze of happiness. There are still moments when you can tell something slips in her brain and another world blinds her to us. But a few words from Finnick call her back.

Delly, who I’ve known since I was little but never gave much thought to, has grown in my estimation. She was told what Peeta said to me that night after the wedding, but she’s not a gossip. Haymitch says she’s the best defender I have when Peeta goes off on some kind of tear about me. Always taking my side, blaming his negative perceptions on the Capitol’s torture. She has more influence on him than any of the others do, because he really does know her. Anyway, even if she’s sugarcoating my good points, I appreciate it. Frankly, I could use a little sugarcoating.

I'm starving and the stew is so delicious—beef, potatoes, turnips, and onions in a thick gravy—that I have to force myself to slow down. All around the dining hall, you can feel the rejuvenating effect that a good meal can bring on. The way it can make people kinder, funnier, more optimistic, and remind them it's not a mistake to go on living. It's better than any medicine. So I try to make it last and join in the conversation. Sop up the gravy on my bread and nibble on it as I listen to Finnick telling some ridiculous story about a sea turtle swimming off with his hat. Laugh before I realize he's standing there. Directly across the table, behind the empty seat next to Johanna. Watching me. I choke momentarily as the gravy bread sticks in my throat.

"Peeta!" says Delly. "It's so nice to see you out...and about."

Two large guards stand behind him. He holds his tray awkwardly, balanced on his fingertips since his wrists are shackled with a short chain between them.

"What's with the fancy bracelets?" asks Johanna.

"I'm not quite trustworthy yet," says Peeta. "I can't even sit here without your permission." He indicates the guards with his head.

"Sure he can sit here. We're old friends," says Johanna, patting the space beside her. The guards nod and Peeta takes a seat. "Peeta and I had adjoining cells in the Capitol. We're very familiar with each other's screams."

Annie, who's on Johanna's other side, does that thing where she covers her ears and exits reality. Finnick shoots Johanna an angry look as his arm encircles Annie.

"What? My head doctor says I'm not supposed to censor my thoughts. It's part of my therapy," replies Johanna.

The life has gone out of our little party. Finnick murmurs things to Annie until she slowly removes her hands. Then there's a long silence while people pretend to eat.

"Annie," says Delly brightly, "did you know it was Peeta who decorated your wedding cake? Back home, his family ran the bakery and he did all the icing."

Annie cautiously looks across Johanna. "Thank you, Peeta. It was beautiful."

"My pleasure, Annie," says Peeta, and I hear that old note of gentleness in his voice that I thought was gone forever. Not that it's directed at me. But still.

“If we’re going to fit in that walk, we better go,” Finnick tells her. He arranges both of their trays so he can carry them in one hand while holding tightly to her with the other. “Good seeing you, Peeta.”

“You be nice to her, Finnick. Or I might try and take her away from you.” It could be a joke, if the tone wasn’t so cold. Everything it conveys is wrong. The open distrust of Finnick, the implication that Peeta has his eye on Annie, that Annie could desert Finnick, that I do not even exist.

“Oh, Peeta,” says Finnick lightly. “Don’t make me sorry I restarted your heart.” He leads Annie away after giving me a concerned glance.

When they’re gone, Delly says in a reproachful voice, “He did save your life, Peeta. More than once.”

“For her.” He gives me a brief nod. “For the rebellion. Not for me. I don’t owe him anything.”

I shouldn’t rise to the bait, but I do. “Maybe not. But Mags is dead and you’re still here. That should count for something.”

“Yeah, a lot of things should count for something that don’t seem to, Katniss. I’ve got some memories I can’t make sense of, and I don’t think the Capitol touched them. A lot of nights on the train, for instance,” he says.

Again the implications. That more happened on the train than did. That what did happen—those nights I only kept my sanity because his arms were around me—no longer matters. Everything a lie, everything a way of misusing him.

Peeta makes a little gesture with his spoon, connecting Gale and me. “So, are you two officially a couple now, or are they still dragging out the star-crossed lover thing?”

“Still dragging,” says Johanna.

Spasms cause Peeta’s hands to tighten into fists, then splay out in a bizarre fashion. Is it all he can do to keep them from my neck? I can feel the tension in Gale’s muscles next to me, fear an altercation. But Gale simply says, “I wouldn’t have believed it if I hadn’t seen it myself.”

“What’s that?” asks Peeta.

“You,” Gale answers.

“You’ll have to be a little more specific,” says Peeta. “What about me?”

“That they’ve replaced you with the evil-mutt version of yourself,” says Johanna.

Gale finishes his milk. “You done?” he asks me. I rise and we cross to drop off our trays. At the door, an old man stops me because I’m still

clutching the rest of my gravy bread in my hand. Something in my expression, or maybe the fact that I've made no attempt to conceal it, makes him go easy on me. He lets me stuff the bread in my mouth and move on. Gale and I are almost to my compartment when he speaks again. "I didn't expect that."

"I told you he hated me," I say.

"It's the way he hates you. It's so...familiar. I used to feel like that," he admits. "When I'd watch you kissing him on the screen. Only I knew I wasn't being entirely fair. He can't see that."

We reach my door. "Maybe he just sees me as I really am. I have to get some sleep."

Gale catches my arm before I can disappear. "So that's what you're thinking now?" I shrug. "Katniss, as your oldest friend, believe me when I say he's not seeing you as you really are." He kisses my cheek and goes.

I sit on my bed, trying to stuff information from my Military Tactics books into my head while memories of my nights with Peeta on the train distract me. After about twenty minutes, Johanna comes in and throws herself across the foot of my bed. "You missed the best part. Delly lost her temper at Peeta over how he treated you. She got very squeaky. It was like someone stabbing a mouse with a fork repeatedly. The whole dining hall was riveted."

"What'd Peeta do?" I ask.

"He started arguing with himself like he was two people. The guards had to take him away. On the good side, no one seemed to notice I finished his stew." Johanna rubs her hand over her protruding belly. I look at the layer of grime under her fingernails. Wonder if the people in 7 ever bathe.

We spend a couple of hours quizzing each other on military terms. I visit my mother and Prim for a while. When I'm back in my compartment, showered, staring into the darkness, I finally ask, "Johanna, could you really hear him screaming?"

"That was part of it," she says. "Like the jabberjays in the arena. Only it was real. And it didn't stop after an hour. Tick, tock."

"Tick, tock," I whisper back.

Roses. Wolf mutts. Tributes. Frosted dolphins. Friends. Mockingjays. Stylists. Me.

Everything screams in my dreams tonight.

I throw myself into training with a vengeance. Eat, live, and breathe the workouts, drills, weapons practice, lectures on tactics. A handful of us are moved into an additional class that gives me hope I may be a contender for the actual war. The soldiers simply call it the Block, but the tattoo on my arm lists it as S.S.C., short for Simulated Street Combat. Deep in 13, they've built an artificial Capitol city block. The instructor breaks us into squads of eight and we attempt to carry out missions—gaining a position, destroying a target, searching a home—as if we were really fighting our way through the Capitol. The thing's rigged so that everything that can go wrong for you does. A false step triggers a land mine, a sniper appears on a rooftop, your gun jams, a crying child leads you into an ambush, your squadron leader—who's just a voice on the program—gets hit by a mortar and you have to figure out what to do without orders. Part of you knows it's fake and that they're not going to kill you. If you set off a land mine, you hear the explosion and have to pretend to fall over dead. But in other ways, it feels pretty real in there—the enemy soldiers dressed in Peacekeepers' uniforms, the confusion of a smoke bomb. They even gas us. Johanna and I are the only ones who get our masks on in time. The rest of our squad gets knocked out for ten minutes. And the supposedly harmless gas I took a few lungfuls of gives me a wicked headache for the rest of the day.

Cressida and her crew tape Johanna and me on the firing range. I know Gale and Finnick are being filmed as well. It's part of a new propos series to show the rebels preparing for the Capitol invasion. On the whole, things are going pretty well.

Then Peeta starts showing up for our morning workouts. The manacles are off, but he's still constantly accompanied by a pair of guards. After lunch, I see him across the field, drilling with a group of beginners. I don't know what they're thinking. If a spat with Delly can reduce him to arguing with himself, he's got no business learning how to assemble a gun.

When I confront Plutarch, he assures me that it's all for the camera. They've got footage of Annie getting married and Johanna hitting targets, but

all of Panem is wondering about Peeta. They need to see he's fighting for the rebels, not for Snow. And maybe if they could just get a couple of shots of the two of us, not kissing necessarily, just looking happy to be back together—

I walk away from the conversation right then. That is not going to happen.

In my rare moments of downtime, I anxiously watch the preparations for the invasions. See equipment and provisions readied, divisions assembled. You can tell when someone's received orders because they're given a very short haircut, the mark of a person going into battle. There is much talk of the opening offensive, which will be to secure the train tunnels that feed up into the Capitol.

Just a few days before the first troops are to move out, York unexpectedly tells Johanna and me she's recommended us for the exam, and we're to report immediately. There are four parts: an obstacle course that assesses your physical condition, a written tactics exam, a test of weapons proficiency, and a simulated combat situation in the Block. I don't even have time to get nervous for the first three and do well, but there's a backlog at the Block. Some kind of technical bug they're working out. A group of us exchanges information. This much seems true. You go through alone. There's no predicting what situation you'll be thrown into. One boy says, under his breath, that he's heard it's designed to target each individual's weaknesses.

My weaknesses? That's a door I don't even want to open. But I find a quiet spot and try to assess what they might be. The length of the list depresses me. Lack of physical brute force. A bare minimum of training. And somehow my stand-out status as the Mockingjay doesn't seem to be an advantage in a situation where they're trying to get us to blend into a pack. They could nail me to the wall on any number of things.

Johanna's called three ahead of me, and I give her a nod of encouragement. I wish I had been at the top of the list because now I'm really overthinking the whole thing. By the time my name's called, I don't know what my strategy should be. Fortunately, once I'm in the Block, a certain amount of training does kick in. It's an ambush situation. Peacekeepers appear almost instantly and I have to make my way to a rendezvous point to meet up with my scattered squad. I slowly navigate the street, taking out Peacekeepers as I go. Two on the rooftop to my left, another in the doorway up ahead. It's challenging, but not as hard as I was expecting. There's a nagging feeling that if it's too simple, I must be missing the point. I'm within a couple of buildings from my goal when things begin to heat up. A half

dozen Peacekeepers come charging around the corner. They will outgun me, but I notice something. A drum of gasoline lying carelessly in the gutter. This is it. My test. To perceive that blowing up the drum will be the only way to achieve my mission. Just as I step out to do it, my squadron leader, who's been fairly useless up to this point, quietly orders me to hit the ground. Every instinct I have screams for me to ignore the voice, to pull the trigger, to blow the Peacekeepers sky-high. And suddenly, I realize what the military will think my biggest weakness is. From my first moment in the Games, when I ran for that orange backpack, to the fire in 8, to my impulsive race across the square in 2. I cannot take orders.

I smack into the ground so hard and fast, I'll be picking gravel out of my chin for a week. Someone else blows the gas tank. The Peacekeepers die. I make my rendezvous point. When I exit the Block on the far side, a soldier congratulates me, stamps my hand with squad number 451, and tells me to report to Command. Almost giddy with success, I run through the halls, skidding around corners, bounding down the steps because the elevator's too slow. I bang into the room before the oddity of the situation dawns on me. I shouldn't be in Command; I should be getting my hair buzzed. The people around the table aren't freshly minted soldiers but the ones calling the shots.

Boggs smiles and shakes his head when he sees me. "Let's see it." Unsure now, I hold out my stamped hand. "You're with me. It's a special unit of sharpshooters. Join your squad." He nods over at a group lining the wall. Gale. Finnick. Five others I don't know. My squad. I'm not only in, I get to work under Boggs. With my friends. I force myself to take calm, soldierly steps to join them, instead of jumping up and down.

We must be important, too, because we're in Command, and it has nothing to do with a certain Mockingjay. Plutarch stands over a wide, flat panel in the center of the table. He's explaining something about the nature of what we will encounter in the Capitol. I'm thinking this is a terrible presentation—because even on tiptoe I can't see what's on the panel—until he hits a button. A holographic image of a block of the Capitol projects into the air.

"This, for example, is the area surrounding one of the Peacekeepers' barracks. Not unimportant, but not the most crucial of targets, and yet look." Plutarch enters some sort of code on a keyboard, and lights begin to flash. They're in an assortment of colors and blink at different speeds. "Each light is called a pod. It represents a different obstacle, the nature of which could

be anything from a bomb to a band of mutts. Make no mistake, whatever it contains is designed to either trap or kill you. Some have been in place since the Dark Days, others developed over the years. To be honest, I created a fair number myself. This program, which one of our people absconded with when we left the Capitol, is our most recent information. They don't know we have it. But even so, it's likely that new pods have been activated in the last few months. This is what you will face."

I'm unaware that my feet are moving to the table until I'm inches from the holograph. My hand reaches in and cups a rapidly blinking green light.

Someone joins me, his body tense. Finnick, of course. Because only a victor would see what I see so immediately. The arena. Laced with pods controlled by Gamemakers. Finnick's fingers caress a steady red glow over a doorway. "Ladies and gentlemen..."

His voice is quiet, but mine rings through the room. "Let the Seventy-sixth Hunger Games begin!"

I laugh. Quickly. Before anyone has time to register what lies beneath the words I have just uttered. Before eyebrows are raised, objections are uttered, two and two are put together, and the solution is that I should be kept as far away from the Capitol as possible. Because an angry, independently thinking victor with a layer of psychological scar tissue too thick to penetrate is maybe the last person you want on your squad.

"I don't even know why you bothered to put Finnick and me through training, Plutarch," I say.

"Yeah, we're already the two best-equipped soldiers you have," Finnick adds cockily.

"Do not think that fact escapes me," he says with an impatient wave. "Now back in line, Soldiers Odair and Everdeen. I have a presentation to finish."

We retreat to our places, ignoring the questioning looks thrown our way. I adopt an attitude of extreme concentration as Plutarch continues, nodding my head here and there, shifting my position to get a better view, all the while telling myself to hang on until I can get to the woods and scream. Or curse. Or cry. Or maybe all three at once.

If this was a test, Finnick and I both pass it. When Plutarch finishes and the meeting's adjourned, I have a bad moment when I learn there's a special order for me. But it's merely that I skip the military haircut because they would like the Mockingjay to look as much like the girl in the arena as

possible at the anticipated surrender. For the cameras, you know. I shrug to communicate that my hair length's a matter of complete indifference to me. They dismiss me without further comment.

Finnick and I gravitate toward each other in the hallway. "What will I tell Annie?" he says under his breath.

"Nothing," I answer. "That's what my mother and sister will be hearing from me." Bad enough that we know we're heading back into a fully equipped arena. No use dropping it on our loved ones.

"If she sees that holograph—" he begins.

"She won't. It's classified information. It must be," I say. "Anyway, it's not like an actual Games. Any number of people will survive. We're just overreacting because—well, you know why. You still want to go, don't you?"

"Of course. I want to destroy Snow as much as you do," he says.

"It won't be like the others," I say firmly, trying to convince myself as well. Then the real beauty of the situation dawns on me. "This time Snow will be a player, too."

Before we can continue, Haymitch appears. He wasn't at the meeting, isn't thinking of arenas but something else. "Johanna's back in the hospital."

I assumed Johanna was fine, had passed her exam, but simply wasn't assigned to a sharpshooters' unit. She's wicked throwing an ax but about average with a gun. "Is she hurt? What happened?"

"It was while she was on the Block. They try to ferret out a soldier's potential weaknesses. So they flooded the street," says Haymitch.

This doesn't help. Johanna can swim. At least, I seem to remember her swimming around some in the Quarter Quell. Not like Finnick, of course, but none of us are like Finnick. "So?"

"That's how they tortured her in the Capitol. Soaked her and then used electric shocks," says Haymitch. "In the Block she had some kind of flashback. Panicked, didn't know where she was. She's back under sedation." Finnick and I just stand there, as if we've lost the ability to respond. I think of the way Johanna never showers. How she forced herself into the rain like it was acid that day. I had attributed her misery to the morphling withdrawal.

"You two should go see her. You're as close to friends as she's got," says Haymitch.

That makes the whole thing worse. I don't really know what's between Johanna and Finnick. But I hardly know her. No family. No friends. Not so much as a token from 7 to set beside her regulation clothes in her anonymous drawer. Nothing.

"I better go tell Plutarch. He won't be happy," Haymitch continues. "He wants as many victors as possible for the cameras to follow in the Capitol. Thinks it makes for better television."

"Are you and Beetee going?" I ask.

"As many young and attractive victors as possible," Haymitch corrects himself. "So, no. We'll be here."

Finnick goes directly down to see Johanna, but I linger outside a few minutes until Boggs comes out. He's my commander now, so I guess he's the one to ask for any special favors. When I tell him what I want to do, he writes me a pass so that I can go to the woods during Reflection, provided I stay within sight of the guards. I run to my compartment, thinking to use the parachute, but it's so full of ugly memories. Instead, I go across the hall and take one of the white cotton bandages I brought from 12. Square. Sturdy. Just the thing.

In the woods, I find a pine tree and strip handfuls of fragrant needles from the boughs. After making a neat pile in the middle of the bandage, I gather up the sides, give them a twist, and tie them tightly with a length of vine, making an apple-sized bundle.

At the hospital room door, I watch Johanna for a moment, realize that most of her ferocity is in her abrasive attitude. Stripped of that, as she is now, there's only a slight young woman, her wide-set eyes fighting to stay awake against the power of the drugs. Terrified of what sleep will bring. I cross to her and hold out the bundle.

"What's that?" she says hoarsely. Damp edges of her hair form little spikes over her forehead.

"I made it for you. Something to put in your drawer." I place it in her hands. "Smell it."

She lifts the bundle to her nose and takes a tentative sniff. "Smells like home." Tears flood her eyes.

"That's what I was hoping. You being from Seven and all," I say. "Remember when we met? You were a tree. Well, briefly."

Suddenly, she has my wrist in an iron grip. "You have to kill him, Katniss."

“Don’t worry.” I resist the temptation to wrench my arm free.

“Swear it. On something you care about,” she hisses.

“I swear it. On my life.” But she doesn’t let go of my arm.

“On your family’s life,” she insists.

“On my family’s life,” I repeat. I guess my concern for my own survival isn’t compelling enough. She lets go and I rub my wrist. “Why do you think I’m going, anyway, brainless?”

That makes her smile a little. “I just needed to hear it.” She presses the bundle of pine needles to her nose and closes her eyes.

The remaining days go by in a whirl. After a brief workout each morning, my squad’s on the shooting range full-time in training. I practice mostly with a gun, but they reserve an hour a day for specialty weapons, which means I get to use my Mockingjay bow, Gale his heavy militarized one. The trident Beetee designed for Finnick has a lot of special features, but the most remarkable is that he can throw it, press a button on a metal cuff on his wrist, and return it to his hand without chasing it down.

Sometimes we shoot at Peacekeeper dummies to become familiar with the weaknesses in their protective gear. The chinks in the armor, so to speak. If you hit flesh, you’re rewarded with a burst of fake blood. Our dummies are soaked in red.

It’s reassuring to see just how high the overall level of accuracy is in our group. Along with Finnick and Gale, the squad includes five soldiers from 13. Jackson, a middle-aged woman who’s Boggs’s second in command, looks kind of sluggish but can hit things the rest of us can’t even see without a scope. Farsighted, she says. There’s a pair of sisters in their twenties named Leeg—we call them Leeg 1 and Leeg 2 for clarity—who are so similar in uniform, I can’t tell them apart until I notice Leeg 1 has weird yellow flecks in her eyes. Two older guys, Mitchell and Homes, never say much but can shoot the dust off your boots at fifty yards. I see other squads that are also quite good, but I don’t fully understand our status until the morning Plutarch joins us.

“Squad Four-Five-One, you have been selected for a special mission,” he begins. I bite the inside of my lip, hoping against hope that it’s to assassinate Snow. “We have numerous sharpshooters, but rather a dearth of camera crews. Therefore, we’ve handpicked the eight of you to be what we call our ‘Star Squad.’ You will be the on-screen faces of the invasion.”

Disappointment, shock, then anger run through the group. “What you’re saying is, we won’t be in actual combat,” snaps Gale.

“You will be in combat, but perhaps not always on the front line. If one can even isolate a front line in this type of war,” says Plutarch.

“None of us wants that.” Finnick’s remark is followed by a general rumble of assent, but I stay silent. “We’re going to fight.”

“You’re going to be as useful to the war effort as possible,” Plutarch says. “And it’s been decided that you are of most value on television. Just look at the effect Katniss had running around in that Mockingjay suit. Turned the whole rebellion around. Do you notice how she’s the only one not complaining? It’s because she understands the power of that screen.”

Actually, Katniss isn’t complaining because she has no intention of staying with the “Star Squad,” but she recognizes the necessity of getting to the Capitol before carrying out any plan. Still, to be too compliant may arouse suspicion as well.

“But it’s not all pretend, is it?” I ask. “That’d be a waste of talent.”

“Don’t worry,” Plutarch tells me. “You’ll have plenty of real targets to hit. But don’t get blown up. I’ve got enough on my plate without having to replace you. Now get to the Capitol and put on a good show.”

The morning we ship out, I say good-bye to my family. I haven’t told them how much the Capitol’s defenses mirror the weapons in the arena, but my going off to war is awful enough on its own. My mother holds me tightly for a long time. I feel tears on her cheek, something she suppressed when I was slated for the Games. “Don’t worry. I’ll be perfectly safe. I’m not even a real soldier. Just one of Plutarch’s televised puppets,” I reassure her.

Prim walks me as far as the hospital doors. “How do you feel?”

“Better, knowing you’re somewhere Snow can’t reach you,” I say.

“Next time we see each other, we’ll be free of him,” says Prim firmly. Then she throws her arms around my neck. “Be careful.”

I consider saying a final good-bye to Peeta, decide it would only be bad for both of us. But I do slip the pearl into the pocket of my uniform. A token of the boy with the bread.

A hovercraft takes us to, of all places, 12, where a makeshift transportation area has been set up outside the fire zone. No luxury trains this time, but a cargo car packed to the limit with soldiers in their dark gray uniforms, sleeping with their heads on their packs. After a couple of days’ travel, we disembark inside one of the mountain tunnels leading to the

Capitol, and make the rest of the six-hour trek on foot, taking care to step only on a glowing green paint line that marks safe passage to the air above.

We come out in the rebel encampment, a ten-block stretch outside the train station where Peeta and I made our previous arrivals. It's already crawling with soldiers. Squad 451 is assigned a spot to pitch its tents. This area has been secured for over a week. Rebels pushed out the Peacekeepers, losing hundreds of lives in the process. The Capitol forces fell back and have regrouped farther into the city. Between us lie the booby-trapped streets, empty and inviting. Each one will need to be swept of pods before we can advance.

Mitchell asks about hoverplane bombings—we do feel very naked pitched out in the open—but Boggs says it's not an issue. Most of the Capitol's air fleet was destroyed in 2 or during the invasion. If it has any craft left, it's holding on to them. Probably so Snow and his inner circle can make a last-minute escape to some presidential bunker somewhere if needed. Our own hoverplanes were grounded after the Capitol's antiaircraft missiles decimated the first few waves. This war will be battled out on the streets with, hopefully, only superficial damage to the infrastructure and a minimum of human casualties. The rebels want the Capitol, just as the Capitol wanted 13.

After three days, much of Squad 451 risks deserting out of boredom. Cressida and her team take shots of us firing. They tell us we're part of the disinformation team. If the rebels only shoot Plutarch's pods, it will take the Capitol about two minutes to realize we have the holograph. So there's a lot of time spent shattering things that don't matter, to throw them off the scent. Mostly we just add to the piles of rainbow glass that's been blown off the exteriors of the candy-colored buildings. I suspect they are intercutting this footage with the destruction of significant Capitol targets. Once in a while it seems a real sharpshooter's services are needed. Eight hands go up, but Gale, Finnick, and I are never chosen.

"It's your own fault for being so camera-ready," I tell Gale. If looks could kill.

I don't think they quite know what to do with the three of us, particularly me. I have my Mockingjay outfit with me, but I've only been taped in my uniform. Sometimes I use a gun, sometimes they ask me to shoot with my bow and arrows. It's as if they don't want to entirely lose the Mockingjay, but they

want to downgrade my role to foot soldier. Since I don't care, it's amusing rather than upsetting to imagine the arguments going on back in 13.

While I outwardly express discontent about our lack of any real participation, I'm busy with my own agenda. Each of us has a paper map of the Capitol. The city forms an almost perfect square. Lines divide the map into smaller squares, with letters along the top and numbers down the side to form a grid. I consume this, noting every intersection and side street, but it's remedial stuff. The commanders here are working off Plutarch's holograph. Each has a handheld contraption called a Holo that produces images like I saw in Command. They can zoom into any area of the grid and see what pods await them. The Holo's an independent unit, a glorified map really, since it can neither send nor receive signals. But it's far superior to my paper version.

A Holo is activated by a specific commander's voice giving his or her name. Once it's working, it responds to the other voices in the squadron so if, say, Boggs were killed or severely disabled, someone could take over. If anyone in the squad repeats "nightlock" three times in a row, the Holo will explode, blowing everything in a five-yard radius sky-high. This is for security reasons in the event of capture. It's understood that we would all do this without hesitation.

So what I need to do is steal Boggs's activated Holo and clear out before he notices. I think it would be easier to steal his teeth.

On the fourth morning, Soldier Leeg 2 hits a mislabeled pod. It doesn't unleash a swarm of mutation gnats, which the rebels are prepared for, but shoots out a sunburst of metal darts. One finds her brain. She's gone before the medics can reach her. Plutarch promises a speedy replacement.

The following evening, the newest member of our squad arrives. With no manacles. No guards. Strolling out of the train station with his gun swinging from the strap over his shoulder. There's shock, confusion, resistance, but *451* is stamped on the back of Peeta's hand in fresh ink. Boggs relieves him of his weapon and goes to make a call.

"It won't matter," Peeta tells the rest of us. "The president assigned me herself. She decided the propos needed some heating up."

Maybe they do. But if Coin sent Peeta here, she's decided something else as well. That I'm of more use to her dead than alive.

PART III
“THE ASSASSIN”

I've never really seen Boggs angry before. Not when I've disobeyed his orders or puked on him, not even when Gale broke his nose. But he's angry when he returns from his phone call with the president. The first thing he does is instruct Soldier Jackson, his second in command, to set up a two-person, round-the-clock guard on Peeta. Then he takes me on a walk, weaving through the sprawling tent encampment until our squad is far behind us.

"He'll try and kill me anyway," I say. "Especially here. Where there are so many bad memories to set him off."

"I'll keep him contained, Katniss," says Boggs.

"Why does Coin want me dead now?" I ask.

"She denies she does," he answers.

"But we know it's true," I say. "And you must at least have a theory."

Boggs gives me a long, hard look before he answers. "Here's as much as I know. The president doesn't like you. She never did. It was Peeta she wanted rescued from the arena, but no one else agreed. It made matters worse when you forced her to give the other victors immunity. But even that could be overlooked in view of how well you've performed."

"Then what is it?" I insist.

"Sometime in the near future, this war will be resolved. A new leader will be chosen," says Boggs.

I roll my eyes. "Boggs, no one thinks I'm going to be the leader."

"No. They don't," he agrees. "But you'll throw support to someone. Would it be President Coin? Or someone else?"

"I don't know. I've never thought about it," I say.

"If your immediate answer isn't Coin, then you're a threat. You're the face of the rebellion. You may have more influence than any other single person," says Boggs. "Outwardly, the most you've ever done is tolerated her."

"So she'll kill me to shut me up." The minute I say the words, I know they're true.

“She doesn’t need you as a rallying point now. As she said, your primary objective, to unite the districts, has succeeded,” Boggs reminds me. “These current propos could be done without you. There’s only one last thing you could do to add fire to the rebellion.”

“Die,” I say quietly.

“Yes. Give us a martyr to fight for,” says Boggs. “But that’s not going to happen under my watch, Soldier Everdeen. I’m planning for you to have a long life.”

“Why?” This kind of thinking will only bring him trouble. “You don’t owe me anything.”

“Because you’ve earned it,” he says. “Now get back to your squad.”

I know I should feel appreciative of Boggs sticking his neck out for me, but really I’m just frustrated. I mean, how can I steal his Holo and desert now? Betraying him was complicated enough without this whole new layer of debt. I already owe him for saving my life.

Seeing the cause of my current dilemma calmly pitching his tent back at our site makes me furious. “What time is my watch?” I ask Jackson.

She squints at me in doubt, or maybe she’s just trying to get my face in focus. “I didn’t put you in the rotation.”

“Why not?” I ask.

“I’m not sure you could really shoot Peeta, if it came to it,” she says.

I speak up so the whole squad can hear me clearly. “I wouldn’t be shooting Peeta. He’s gone. Johanna’s right. It’d be just like shooting another of the Capitol’s mutts.” It feels good to say something horrible about him, out loud, in public, after all the humiliation I’ve felt since his return.

“Well, that sort of comment isn’t recommending you either,” says Jackson.

“Put her in the rotation,” I hear Boggs say behind me.

Jackson shakes her head and makes a note. “Midnight to four. You’re on with me.”

The dinner whistle sounds, and Gale and I line up at the canteen. “Do you want me to kill him?” he asks bluntly.

“That’ll get us both sent back for sure,” I say. But even though I’m furious, the brutality of the offer rattles me. “I can deal with him.”

“You mean until you take off? You and your paper map and possibly a Holo if you can get your hands on it?” So Gale has not missed my preparations. I hope they haven’t been so obvious to the others. None of them

know my mind like he does, though. “You’re not planning on leaving me behind, are you?” he asks.

Up until this point, I was. But having my hunting partner to watch my back doesn’t sound like a bad idea. “As your fellow soldier, I have to strongly recommend you stay with your squad. But I can’t stop you from coming, can I?”

He grins. “No. Not unless you want me to alert the rest of the army.”

Squad 451 and the television crew collect dinner from the canteen and gather in a tense circle to eat. At first I think that Peeta is the cause of the unease, but by the end of the meal, I realize more than a few unfriendly looks have been directed my way. This is a quick turnaround, since I’m pretty sure when Peeta appeared the whole team was concerned about how dangerous he might be, especially to me. But it’s not until I get a phone call through to Haymitch that I understand.

“What are you trying to do? Provoke him into an attack?” he asks me.

“Of course not. I just want him to leave me alone,” I say.

“Well, he can’t. Not after what the Capitol put him through,” says Haymitch. “Look, Coin may have sent him there hoping he’d kill you, but Peeta doesn’t know that. He doesn’t understand what’s happened to him. So you can’t blame him—”

“I don’t!” I say.

“You do! You’re punishing him over and over for things that are out of his control. Now, I’m not saying you shouldn’t have a fully loaded weapon next to you round the clock. But I think it’s time you flipped this little scenario around in your head. If you’d been taken by the Capitol, and hijacked, and then tried to kill Peeta, is this the way he would be treating you?” demands Haymitch.

I fall silent. It isn’t. It isn’t how he would be treating me at all. He would be trying to get me back at any cost. Not shutting me out, abandoning me, greeting me with hostility at every turn.

“You and me, we made a deal to try and save him. Remember?” Haymitch says. When I don’t respond, he disconnects after a curt “Try and remember.”

The autumn day turns from brisk to cold. Most of the squad hunker down in their sleeping bags. Some sleep under the open sky, close to the heater in the center of our camp, while others retreat to their tents. Leeg 1 has finally broken down over her sister’s death, and her muffled sobs reach us through

the canvas. I huddle in my tent, thinking over Haymitch's words. Realizing with shame that my fixation with assassinating Snow has allowed me to ignore a much more difficult problem. Trying to rescue Peeta from the shadowy world the hijacking has stranded him in. I don't know how to find him, let alone lead him out. I can't even conceive of a plan. It makes the task of crossing a loaded arena, locating Snow, and putting a bullet through his head look like child's play.

At midnight, I crawl out of my tent and position myself on a camp stool near the heater to take my watch with Jackson. Boggs told Peeta to sleep out in full view where the rest of us could keep an eye on him. He isn't sleeping, though. Instead, he sits with his bag pulled up to his chest, clumsily trying to make knots in a short length of rope. I know it well. It's the one Finnick lent me that night in the bunker. Seeing it in his hands, it's like Finnick's echoing what Haymitch just said, that I've cast off Peeta. Now might be a good time to begin to remedy that. If I could think of something to say. But I can't. So I don't. I just let the sounds of soldiers' breathing fill the night.

After about an hour, Peeta speaks up. "These last couple of years must have been exhausting for you. Trying to decide whether to kill me or not. Back and forth. Back and forth."

That seems grossly unfair, and my first impulse is to say something cutting. But I revisit my conversation with Haymitch and try to take the first tentative step in Peeta's direction. "I never wanted to kill you. Except when I thought you were helping the Careers kill me. After that, I always thought of you as...an ally." That's a good safe word. Empty of any emotional obligation, but nonthreatening.

"Ally." Peeta says the word slowly, tasting it. "Friend. Lover. Victor. Enemy. Fiancée. Target. Mutt. Neighbor. Hunter. Tribute. Ally. I'll add it to the list of words I use to try to figure you out." He weaves the rope in and out of his fingers. "The problem is, I can't tell what's real anymore, and what's made up."

The cessation of rhythmic breathing suggests that either people have woken or have never really been asleep at all. I suspect the latter.

Finnick's voice rises from a bundle in the shadows. "Then you should ask, Peeta. That's what Annie does."

"Ask who?" Peeta says. "Who can I trust?"

"Well, us for starters. We're your squad," says Jackson.

"You're my guards," he points out.

“That, too,” she says. “But you saved a lot of lives in Thirteen. It’s not the kind of thing we forget.”

In the quiet that follows, I try to imagine not being able to tell illusion from reality. Not knowing if Prim or my mother loved me. If Snow was my enemy. If the person across the heater saved or sacrificed me. With very little effort, my life rapidly morphs into a nightmare. I suddenly want to tell Peeta everything about who he is, and who I am, and how we ended up here. But I don’t know how to start. Worthless. I’m worthless.

At a few minutes before four, Peeta turns to me again. “Your favorite color...it’s green?”

“That’s right.” Then I think of something to add. “And yours is orange.”

“Orange?” He seems unconvinced.

“Not bright orange. But soft. Like the sunset,” I say. “At least, that’s what you told me once.”

“Oh.” He closes his eyes briefly, maybe trying to conjure up that sunset, then nods his head. “Thank you.”

But more words tumble out. “You’re a painter. You’re a baker. You like to sleep with the windows open. You never take sugar in your tea. And you always double-knot your shoelaces.”

Then I dive into my tent before I do something stupid like cry.

In the morning, Gale, Finnick, and I go out to shoot some glass off the buildings for the camera crew. When we get back to camp, Peeta’s sitting in a circle with the soldiers from 13, who are armed but talking openly with him. Jackson has devised a game called “Real or Not Real” to help Peeta. He mentions something he thinks happened, and they tell him if it’s true or imagined, usually followed by a brief explanation.

“Most of the people from Twelve were killed in the fire.”

“Real. Less than nine hundred of you made it to Thirteen alive.”

“The fire was my fault.”

“Not real. President Snow destroyed Twelve the way he did Thirteen, to send a message to the rebels.”

This seems like a good idea until I realize that I’ll be the only one who can confirm or deny most of what weighs on him. Jackson breaks us up into watches. She matches up Finnick, Gale, and me each with a soldier from 13. This way Peeta will always have access to someone who knows him more personally. It’s not a steady conversation. Peeta spends a long time considering even small pieces of information, like where people bought their

soap back home. Gale fills him in on a lot of stuff about 12; Finnick is the expert on both of Peeta's Games, as he was a mentor in the first and a tribute in the second. But since Peeta's greatest confusion centers around me—and not everything can be explained simply—our exchanges are painful and loaded, even though we touch on only the most superficial of details. The color of my dress in 7. My preference for cheese buns. The name of our math teacher when we were little. Reconstructing his memory of me is excruciating. Perhaps it isn't even possible after what Snow did to him. But it does feel right to help him try.

The next afternoon, we're notified that the whole squad is needed to stage a fairly complicated propo. Peeta's been right about one thing: Coin and Plutarch are unhappy with the quality of footage they're getting from the Star Squad. Very dull. Very uninspiring. The obvious response is that they never let us do anything but playact with our guns. However, this is not about defending ourselves, it's about coming up with a usable product. So today, a special block has been set aside for filming. It even has a couple of active pods on it. One unleashes a spray of gunfire. The other nets the invader and traps them for either interrogation or execution, depending on the captors' preference. But it's still an unimportant residential block with nothing of strategic consequence.

The television crew means to provide a sense of heightened jeopardy by releasing smoke bombs and adding gunfire sound effects. We suit up in heavy protective gear, even the crew, as if we're heading into the heart of battle. Those of us with specialty weapons are allowed to take them along with our guns. Boggs gives Peeta back his gun, too, although he makes sure to tell him in a loud voice that it's only loaded with blanks.

Peeta just shrugs. "I'm not much of a shot anyway." He seems preoccupied with watching Pollux, to the point where it's getting a little worrisome, when he finally puzzles it out and begins to speak with agitation. "You're an Avox, aren't you? I can tell by the way you swallow. There were two Avoxes with me in prison. Darius and Lavinia, but the guards mostly called them the redheads. They'd been our servants in the Training Center, so they arrested them, too. I watched them being tortured to death. She was lucky. They used too much voltage and her heart stopped right off. It took days to finish him off. Beating, cutting off parts. They kept asking him questions, but he couldn't speak, he just made these horrible animal sounds. They didn't want information, you know? They wanted me to see it."

Peeta looks around at our stunned faces, as if waiting for a reply. When none is forthcoming, he asks, “Real or not real?” The lack of response upsets him more. “Real or not real?!” he demands.

“Real,” says Boggs. “At least, to the best of my knowledge...real.”

Peeta sags. “I thought so. There was nothing...shiny about it.” He wanders away from the group, muttering something about fingers and toes.

I move to Gale, press my forehead into the body armor where his chest should be, feel his arm tighten around me. We finally know the name of the girl who we watched the Capitol abduct from the woods of 12, the fate of the Peacekeeper friend who tried to keep Gale alive. This is no time to call up happy moments of remembrance. They lost their lives because of me. I add them to my personal list of kills that began in the arena and now includes thousands. When I look up, I see it has taken Gale differently. His expression says that there are not enough mountains to crush, enough cities to destroy. It promises death.

With Peeta’s grisly account fresh in our minds, we crunch through the streets of broken glass until we reach our target, the block we are to take. It is a real, if small, goal to accomplish. We gather around Boggs to examine the Holo projection of the street. The gunfire pod is positioned about a third of the way down, just above an apartment awning. We should be able to trigger it with bullets. The net pod is at the far end, almost the next corner. This will require someone to set off the body sensor mechanism. Everyone volunteers except Peeta, who doesn’t seem to know quite what’s going on. I don’t get picked. I get sent to Messalla, who dabs some makeup on my face for the anticipated close-ups.

The squad positions itself under Boggs’s direction, and then we have to wait for Cressida to get the cameramen in place as well. They’re both to our left, with Castor toward the front and Pollux bringing up the rear so they’ll be sure not to record each other. Messalla sets off a couple of smoke charges for atmosphere. Since this is both a mission and a shoot, I’m about to ask who’s in charge, my commander or my director, when Cressida calls, “Action!”

We slowly proceed down the hazy street, just like one of our exercises in the Block. Everyone has at least one section of windows to blow out, but Gale’s assigned the real target. When he hits the pod, we take cover—ducking into doorways or flattening onto the pretty, light orange and pink paving stones—as a hail of bullets sweeps back and forth over our heads. After a while, Boggs orders us forward.

Cressida stops us before we can rise, since she needs some close-up shots. We take turns reenacting our responses. Falling to the ground, grimacing, diving into alcoves. We know it's supposed to be serious business, but the whole thing feels a little ridiculous. Especially when it turns out that I'm not the worst actor in the squad. Not by a long shot. We're all laughing so hard at Mitchell's attempt to project his idea of desperation, which involves teeth grinding and nostrils flaring, that Boggs has to reprimand us.

"Pull it together, Four-Five-One," he says firmly. But you can see him suppressing a smile as he's double-checking the next pod. Positioning the Holo to find the best light in the smoky air. Still facing us as his left foot steps back onto the orange paving stone. Triggering the bomb that blows off his legs.

It's as if in an instant, a painted window shatters, revealing the ugly world behind it. Laughter changes to screams, blood stains pastel stones, real smoke darkens the special effect stuff made for television.

A second explosion seems to split the air and leaves my ears ringing. But I can't make out where it came from.

I reach Boggs first, try to make sense of the torn flesh, missing limbs, to find something to stem the red flow from his body. Homes pushes me aside, wrenching open a first-aid kit. Boggs clutches my wrist. His face, gray with dying and ash, seems to be receding. But his next words are an order. "The Holo."

The Holo. I scramble around, digging through chunks of tile slick with blood, shuddering when I encounter bits of warm flesh. Find it rammed into a stairwell with one of Boggs's boots. Retrieve it, wiping it clean with bare hands as I return it to my commander.

Homes has the stump of Boggs's left thigh cupped by some sort of compression bandage, but it's already soaked through. He's trying to tourniquet the other above the existing knee. The rest of the squad has gathered in a protective formation around the crew and us. Finnick's attempting to revive Messalla, who was thrown into a wall by the explosion. Jackson's barking into a field communicator, trying unsuccessfully to alert the camp to send medics, but I know it's too late. As a child, watching my mother work, I learned that once a pool of blood has reached a certain size, there's no going back.

I kneel beside Boggs, prepared to repeat the role I played with Rue, with the morphling from 6, giving him someone to hold on to as he's released from life. But Boggs has both hands working the Holo. He's typing in a command, pressing his thumb to the screen for print recognition, speaking a string of letters and numbers in response to a prompt. A green shaft of light bursts out of the Holo and illuminates his face. He says, "Unfit for command. Transfer of prime security clearance to Squad Four-Five-One Soldier Katniss

Everdeen.” It’s all he can do to turn the Holo toward my face. “Say your name.”

“Katniss Everdeen,” I say into the green shaft. Suddenly, it has me trapped in its light. I can’t move or even blink as images flicker rapidly before me. Scanning me? Recording me? Blinding me? It vanishes, and I shake my head to clear it. “What did you do?”

“Prepare to retreat!” Jackson hollers.

Finnick’s yelling something back, gesturing to the end of the block where we entered. Black, oily matter spouts like a geyser from the street, billowing between the buildings, creating an impenetrable wall of darkness. It seems to be neither liquid nor gas, mechanical nor natural. Surely it’s lethal. There’s no heading back the way we came.

Deafening gunfire as Gale and Leeg 1 begin to blast a path across the stones toward the far end of the block. I don’t know what they’re doing until another bomb, ten yards away, detonates, opening a hole in the street. Then I realize this is a rudimentary attempt at minesweeping. Homes and I latch on to Boggs and begin to drag him after Gale. Agony takes over and he’s crying out in pain and I want to stop, to find a better way, but the blackness is rising above the buildings, swelling, rolling at us like a wave.

I’m yanked backward, lose my grip on Boggs, slam into the stones. Peeta looks down at me, gone, mad, flashing back into the land of the hijacked, his gun raised over me, descending to crush my skull. I roll, hear the butt slam into the street, catch the tumble of bodies out of the corner of my eye as Mitchell tackles Peeta and pins him to the ground. But Peeta, always so powerful and now fueled by tracker jacker insanity, gets his feet under Mitchell’s belly and launches him farther down the block.

There’s a loud snap of a trap as the pod triggers. Four cables, attached to tracks on the buildings, break through the stones, dragging up the net that encases Mitchell. It makes no sense—how instantly bloodied he is—until we see the barbs sticking from the wire that encases him. I know it immediately. It decorated the top of the fence around 12. As I call to him not to move, I gag on the smell of the blackness, thick, tarlike. The wave has crested and begun to fall.

Gale and Leeg 1 shoot through the front door lock of the corner building, then begin to fire at the cables holding Mitchell’s net. Others are restraining Peeta now. I lunge back to Boggs, and Homes and I drag him inside the apartment, through someone’s pink and white velvet living room, down a

hallway hung with family photos, onto the marble floor of a kitchen, where we collapse. Castor and Pollux carry in a writhing Peeta between them. Somehow Jackson gets cuffs on him, but it only makes him wilder and they're forced to lock him in a closet.

In the living room, the front door slams, people shout. Then footsteps pound down the hall as the black wave roars past the building. From the kitchen, we can hear the windows groan, shatter. The noxious tar smell permeates the air. Finnick carries in Messalla. Leeg 1 and Cressida stumble into the room after them, coughing.

"Gale!" I shriek.

He's there, slamming the kitchen door shut behind him, choking out one word. "Fumes!" Castor and Pollux grab towels, aprons to stuff in the cracks as Gale retches into a bright yellow sink.

"Mitchell?" asks Homes. Leeg 1 just shakes her head.

Boggs forces the Holo into my hand. His lips are moving, but I can't make out what he's saying. I lean my ear down to his mouth to catch his harsh whisper. "Don't trust them. Don't go back. Kill Peeta. Do what you came to do."

I draw back so I can see his face. "What? Boggs? Boggs?" His eyes are still open, but dead. Pressed in my hand, glued to it by his blood, is the Holo.

Peeta's feet slamming into the closet door break up the ragged breathing of the others. But even as we listen, his energy seems to ebb. The kicks diminish to an irregular drumming. Then nothing. I wonder if he, too, is dead.

"He's gone?" Finnick asks, looking down at Boggs. I nod. "We need to get out of here. Now. We just set off a streetful of pods. You can bet they've got us on surveillance tapes."

"Count on it," says Castor. "All the streets are covered by surveillance cameras. I bet they set off the black wave manually when they saw us taping the propo."

"Our radio communicators went dead almost immediately. Probably an electromagnetic pulse device. But I'll get us back to camp. Give me the Holo." Jackson reaches for the unit, but I clutch it to my chest.

"No. Boggs gave it to me," I say.

"Don't be ridiculous," she snaps. Of course, she thinks it's hers. She's second in command.

"It's true," says Homes. "He transferred the prime security clearance to her while he was dying. I saw it."

“Why would he do that?” demands Jackson.

Why indeed? My head’s reeling from the ghastly events of the last five minutes—Boggs mutilated, dying, dead, Peeta’s homicidal rage, Mitchell bloody and netted and swallowed by that foul black wave. I turn to Boggs, very badly needing him alive. Suddenly sure that he, and maybe he alone, is completely on my side. I think of his last orders....

“Don’t trust them. Don’t go back. Kill Peeta. Do what you came to do.”

What did he mean? Don’t trust who? The rebels? Coin? The people looking at me right now? I won’t go back, but he must know I can’t just fire a bullet through Peeta’s head. Can I? Should I? Did Boggs guess that what I really came to do is desert and kill Snow on my own?

I can’t work all of this out now, so I just decide to carry out the first two orders: to not trust anyone and to move deeper into the Capitol. But how can I justify this? Make them let me keep the Holo?

“Because I’m on a special mission for President Coin. I think Boggs was the only one who knew about it.”

This in no way convinces Jackson. “To do what?”

Why not tell them the truth? It’s as plausible as anything I’ll come up with. But it must seem like a real mission, not revenge. “To assassinate President Snow before the loss of life from this war makes our population unsustainable.”

“I don’t believe you,” says Jackson. “As your current commander, I order you to transfer the prime security clearance over to me.”

“No,” I say. “That would be in direct violation of President Coin’s orders.”

Guns are pointed. Half the squad at Jackson, half at me. Someone’s about to die, when Cressida speaks up. “It’s true. That’s why we’re here. Plutarch wants it televised. He thinks if we can film the Mockingjay assassinating Snow, it will end the war.”

This gives even Jackson pause. Then she gestures with her gun toward the closet. “And why is he here?”

There she has me. I can think of no sane reason that Coin would send an unstable boy, programmed to kill me, along on such a key assignment. It really weakens my story. Cressida comes to my aid again. “Because the two post-Games interviews with Caesar Flickerman were shot in President Snow’s personal quarters. Plutarch thinks Peeta may be of some use as a guide in a location we have little knowledge of.”

I want to ask Cressida why she's lying for me, why she's fighting for us to go on with my self-appointed mission. Now's not the time.

"We have to go!" says Gale. "I'm following Katniss. If you don't want to, head back to camp. But let's move!"

Homes unlocks the closet and heaves an unconscious Peeta over his shoulder. "Ready."

"Boggs?" says Leeg 1.

"We can't take him. He'd understand," says Finnick. He frees Boggs's gun from his shoulder and slings the strap over his own. "Lead on, Soldier Everdeen."

I don't know how to lead on. I look at the Holo for direction. It's still activated, but it might as well be dead for all the good that does me. There's no time for fiddling around with the buttons, trying to figure out how to work it. "I don't know how to use this. Boggs said you would help me," I tell Jackson. "He said I could count on you."

Jackson scowls, snatches the Holo from me, and taps in a command. An intersection comes up. "If we go out the kitchen door, there's a small courtyard, then the back side of another corner apartment unit. We're looking at an overview of the four streets that meet at the intersection."

I try to get my bearings as I stare at the cross section of the map blinking with pods in every direction. And those are only the pods Plutarch knows about. The Holo didn't indicate that the block we just left was mined, had the black geyser, or that the net was made from barbed wire. Besides that, there may be Peacekeepers to deal with, now that they know our position. I bite the inside of my lip, feeling everyone's eyes on me. "Put on your masks. We're going out the way we came in."

Instant objections. I raise my voice over them. "If the wave was that powerful, then it may have triggered and absorbed other pods in our path."

People stop to consider this. Pollux makes a few quick signs to his brother. "It may have disabled the cameras as well," Castor translates. "Coated the lenses."

Gale props one of his boots on the counter and examines the splatter of black on the toe. Scrapes it with a kitchen knife from a block on the counter. "It's not corrosive. I think it was meant to either suffocate or poison us."

"Probably our best shot," says Leeg 1.

Masks go on. Finnick adjusts Peeta's mask over his lifeless face. Cressida and Leeg 1 prop up a woozy Messalla between them.

I'm waiting for someone to take the point position when I remember that's my job now. I push on the kitchen door and meet with no resistance. A half-inch layer of the black goo has spread from the living room about three-quarters of the way down the hall. When I gingerly test it with the toe of my boot, I find it has the consistency of a gel. I lift my foot and after stretching slightly, it springs back into place. I take three steps into the gel and look back. No footprints. It's the first good thing that's happened today. The gel becomes slightly thicker as I cross the living room. I ease open the front door, expecting gallons of the stuff to pour in, but it holds its form.

The pink and orange block seems to have been dipped in glossy black paint and set out to dry. Paving stones, buildings, even the rooftops are coated in the gel. A large teardrop hangs above the street. Two shapes project from it. A gun barrel and a human hand. Mitchell. I wait on the sidewalk, staring up at him until the entire group has joined me.

"If anyone needs to go back, for whatever reason, now is the time," I say. "No questions asked, no hard feelings." No one seems inclined to retreat. So I start moving into the Capitol, knowing we don't have much time. The gel's deeper here, four to six inches, and makes a sucking sound each time you pick up your foot, but it still covers our tracks.

The wave must have been enormous, with tremendous power behind it, as it's affected several blocks that lie ahead. And though I tread with care, I think my instinct was right about its triggering other pods. One block is sprinkled with the golden bodies of tracker jackers. They must have been set free only to succumb to the fumes. A little farther along, an entire apartment building has collapsed and lies in a mound under the gel. I sprint across the intersections, holding up a hand for the others to wait while I look for trouble, but the wave seems to have dismantled the pods far better than any squad of rebels could.

On the fifth block, I can tell that we've reached the point where the wave began to peter out. The gel's only an inch deep, and I can see baby blue rooftops peeking out across the next intersection. The afternoon light has faded, and we badly need to get under cover and form a plan. I choose an apartment two-thirds of the way down the block. Homes jimmies the lock, and I order the others inside. I stay on the street for just a minute, watching the last of our footprints fade away, then close the door behind me.

Flashlights built into our guns illuminate a large living room with mirrored walls that throw our faces back at us at every turn. Gale checks the

windows, which show no damage, and removes his mask. "It's all right. You can smell it, but it's not too strong."

The apartment seems to be laid out exactly like the first one we took refuge in. The gel blacks out any natural daylight in the front, but some light still slips through the shutters in the kitchen. Along the hallway are two bedrooms with baths. A spiral staircase in the living room leads up to an open space that composes much of the second floor. There are no windows upstairs, but the lights have been left on, probably by someone hastily evacuating. A huge television screen, blank but glowing softly, occupies one wall. Plush chairs and sofas are strewn around the room. This is where we congregate, slump into upholstery, try to catch our breath.

Jackson has her gun trained on Peeta even though he's still cuffed and unconscious, draped across a deep-blue sofa where Homes deposited him. What on earth am I going to do with him? With the crew? With everybody, frankly, besides Gale and Finnick? Because I'd rather track down Snow with those two than without them. But I can't lead ten people through the Capitol on a pretend mission, even if I could read the Holo. Should I, could I have sent them back when I had a chance? Or was it too dangerous? Both to them personally and to my mission? Maybe I shouldn't have listened to Boggs, because he might have been in some delusional death state. Maybe I should just come clean, but then Jackson would take over and we'd end up back at camp. Where I'd have Coin to answer to.

Just as the complexity of the mess I've dragged everybody into begins to overload my brain, a distant chain of explosions sends a tremor through the room.

"It wasn't close," Jackson assures us. "A good four or five blocks away."

"Where we left Boggs," says Leeg 1.

Although no one has made a move toward it, the television flares to life, emitting a high-pitched beeping sound, bringing half our party to its feet.

"It's all right!" calls Cressida. "It's just an emergency broadcast. Every Capitol television is automatically activated for it."

There we are on-screen, just after the bomb took out Boggs. A voice-over tells the audience what they are viewing as we try to regroup, react to the black gel shooting from the street, lose control of the situation. We watch the chaos that follows until the wave blots out the cameras. The last thing we see is Gale, alone on the street, trying to shoot through the cables that hold Mitchell aloft.

The reporter identifies Gale, Finnick, Boggs, Peeta, Cressida, and me by name.

“There’s no aerial footage. Boggs must have been right about their hovercraft capacity,” says Castor. I didn’t notice this, but I guess it’s the kind of thing a cameraman picks up on.

Coverage continues from the courtyard behind the apartment where we took shelter. Peacekeepers line the roof across from our former hideout. Shells are launched into the row of apartments, setting off the chain of explosions we heard, and the building collapses into rubble and dust.

Now we cut to a live feed. A reporter stands on the roof with the Peacekeepers. Behind her, the apartment block burns. Firefighters try to control the blaze with water hoses. We are pronounced dead.

“Finally, a bit of luck,” says Homes.

I guess he’s right. Certainly it’s better than having the Capitol in pursuit of us. But I just keep imagining how this will be playing back in 13. Where my mother and Prim, Hazelle and the kids, Annie, Haymitch, and a whole lot of people from 13 think that they have just seen us die.

“My father. He just lost my sister and now...” says Leeg 1.

We watch as they play the footage over and over. Revel in their victory, especially over me. Break away to do a montage of the Mockingjay’s rise to rebel power—I think they’ve had this part prepared for a while, because it seems pretty polished—and then go live so a couple of reporters can discuss my well-deserved violent end. Later, they promise, Snow will make an official statement. The screen fades back to a glow.

The rebels made no attempt to break in during the broadcast, which leads me to believe they think it’s true. If that’s so, we really are on our own.

“So, now that we’re dead, what’s our next move?” asks Gale.

“Isn’t it obvious?” No one even knew Peeta had regained consciousness. I don’t know how long he’s been watching, but by the look of misery on his face, long enough to see what happened on the street. How he went mad, tried to bash my head in, and hurled Mitchell into the pod. He painfully pushes himself up to a sitting position and directs his words to Gale.

“Our next move...is to kill me.”

That makes two requests for Peeta's death in less than an hour.

"Don't be ridiculous," says Jackson.

"I just murdered a member of our squad!" shouts Peeta.

"You pushed him off you. You couldn't have known he would trigger the net at that exact spot," says Finnick, trying to calm him.

"Who cares? He's dead, isn't he?" Tears begin to run down Peeta's face. "I didn't know. I've never seen myself like that before. Katniss is right. I'm the monster. I'm the mutt. I'm the one Snow has turned into a weapon!"

"It's not your fault, Peeta," says Finnick.

"You can't take me with you. It's only a matter of time before I kill someone else." Peeta looks around at our conflicted faces. "Maybe you think it's kinder to just dump me somewhere. Let me take my chances. But that's the same thing as handing me over to the Capitol. Do you think you'd be doing me a favor by sending me back to Snow?"

Peeta. Back in Snow's hands. Tortured and tormented until no bits of his former self will ever emerge again.

For some reason, the last stanza to "The Hanging Tree" starts running through my head. The one where the man wants his lover dead rather than have her face the evil that awaits her in the world.

*Are you, are you
Coming to the tree
Wear a necklace of rope, side by side with me.
Strange things did happen here
No stranger would it be
If we met up at midnight in the hanging tree.*

"I'll kill you before that happens," says Gale. "I promise."

Peeta hesitates, as if considering the reliability of this offer, and then shakes his head. "It's no good. What if you're not there to do it? I want one of those poison pills like the rest of you have."

Nightlock. There's one pill back at camp, in its special slot on the sleeve of my Mockingjay suit. But there's another in the breast pocket of my uniform. Interesting that they didn't issue one to Peeta. Perhaps Coin thought he might take it before he had the opportunity to kill me. It's unclear if Peeta means he'd finish himself off now, to spare us having to murder him, or only if the Capitol took him prisoner again. In the state he's in, I expect it would be sooner rather than later. It would certainly make things easier on the rest of us. Not to have to shoot him. It would certainly simplify the problem of dealing with his homicidal episodes.

I don't know if it's the pods, or the fear, or watching Boggs die, but I feel the arena all around me. It's as if I've never left, really. Once again I'm battling not only for my own survival but for Peeta's as well. How satisfying, how entertaining it would be for Snow to have me kill him. To have Peeta's death on my conscience for whatever is left of my life.

"It's not about you," I say. "We're on a mission. And you're necessary to it." I look to the rest of the group. "Think we might find some food here?"

Besides the medical kit and cameras, we have nothing but our uniforms and our weapons.

Half of us stay to guard Peeta or keep an eye out for Snow's broadcast, while the others hunt for something to eat. Messalla proves most valuable because he lived in a near replica of this apartment and knows where people would be most likely to stash food. Like how there's a storage space concealed by a mirrored panel in the bedroom, or how easy it is to pop out the ventilation screen in the hallway. So even though the kitchen cupboards are bare, we find over thirty canned goods and several boxes of cookies.

The hoarding disgusts the soldiers raised in 13. "Isn't this illegal?" says Leeg 1.

"On the contrary, in the Capitol you'd be considered stupid not to do it," says Messalla. "Even before the Quarter Quell, people were starting to stock up on scarce supplies."

"While others went without," says Leeg 1.

"Right," says Messalla. "That's how it works here."

"Fortunately, or we wouldn't have dinner," says Gale. "Everybody grab a can."

Some of our company seem reluctant to do this, but it's as good a method as any. I'm really not in the mood to divvy up everything into eleven equal parts, factoring in age, body weight, and physical output. I poke around in the

pile, about to settle on some cod chowder, when Peeta holds out a can to me. "Here."

I take it, not knowing what to expect. The label reads Lamb Stew.

I press my lips together at the memories of rain dripping through stones, my inept attempts at flirting, and the aroma of my favorite Capitol dish in the chilly air. So some part of it must still be in his head, too. How happy, how hungry, how close we were when that picnic basket arrived outside our cave. "Thanks." I pop open the top. "It even has dried plums." I bend the lid and use it as a makeshift spoon, scooping a bit into my mouth. Now this place tastes like the arena, too.

We're passing around a box of fancy cream-filled cookies when the beeping starts again. The seal of Panem lights up on the screen and remains there while the anthem plays. And then they begin to show images of the dead, just as they did with the tributes in the arena. They start with the four faces of our TV crew, followed by Boggs, Gale, Finnick, Peeta, and me. Except for Boggs, they don't bother with the soldiers from 13, either because they have no idea who they are or because they know they won't mean anything to the audience. Then the man himself appears, seated at his desk, a flag draped behind him, the fresh white rose gleaming in his lapel. I think he might have recently had more work done, because his lips are puffier than usual. And his prep team really needs to use a lighter hand with his blush.

Snow congratulates the Peacekeepers on a masterful job, honors them for ridding the country of the menace called the Mockingjay. With my death, he predicts a turning of the tide in the war, since the demoralized rebels have no one left to follow. And what was I, really? A poor, unstable girl with a small talent with a bow and arrow. Not a great thinker, not the mastermind of the rebellion, merely a face plucked from the rabble because I had caught the nation's attention with my antics in the Games. But necessary, so very necessary, because the rebels have no real leader among them.

Somewhere in District 13, Beetee hits a switch, because now it's not President Snow but President Coin who's looking at us. She introduces herself to Panem, identifies herself as the head of the rebellion, and then gives my eulogy. Praise for the girl who survived the Seam and the Hunger Games, then turned a country of slaves into an army of freedom fighters. "Dead or alive, Katniss Everdeen will remain the face of this rebellion. If ever you waver in your resolve, think of the Mockingjay, and in her you will find the strength you need to rid Panem of its oppressors."

“I had no idea how much I meant to her,” I say, which brings a laugh from Gale and questioning looks from the others.

Up comes a heavily doctored photo of me looking beautiful and fierce with a bunch of flames flickering behind me. No words. No slogan. My face is all they need now.

Beetee gives the reins back to a very controlled Snow. I have the feeling the president thought the emergency channel was impenetrable, and someone will end up dead tonight because it was breached. “Tomorrow morning, when we pull Katniss Everdeen’s body from the ashes, we will see exactly who the Mockingjay is. A dead girl who could save no one, not even herself.” Seal, anthem, and out.

“Except that you won’t find her,” says Finnick to the empty screen, voicing what we’re all probably thinking. The grace period will be brief. Once they dig through those ashes and come up missing eleven bodies, they’ll know we escaped.

“We can get a head start on them at least,” I say. Suddenly, I’m so tired. All I want is to lie down on a nearby green plush sofa and go to sleep. To cocoon myself in a comforter made of rabbit fur and goose down. Instead, I pull out the Holo and insist that Jackson talk me through the most basic commands—which are really about entering the coordinates of the nearest map grid intersection—so that I can at least begin to operate the thing myself. As the Holo projects our surroundings, I feel my heart sink even further. We must be moving closer to crucial targets, because the number of pods has noticeably increased. How can we possibly move forward into this bouquet of blinking lights without detection? We can’t. And if we can’t, we are trapped like birds in a net. I decide it’s best not to adopt some sort of superior attitude when I’m with these people. Especially when my eyes keep drifting to that green sofa. So I say, “Any ideas?”

“Why don’t we start by ruling out possibilities,” says Finnick. “The street is not a possibility.”

“The rooftops are just as bad as the street,” says Leeg 1.

“We still might have a chance to withdraw, go back the way we came,” says Homes. “But that would mean a failed mission.”

A pang of guilt hits me since I’ve fabricated said mission. “It was never intended for all of us to go forward. You just had the misfortune to be with me.”

“Well, that’s a moot point. We’re with you now,” says Jackson. “So, we can’t stay put. We can’t move up. We can’t move laterally. I think that just leaves one option.”

“Underground,” says Gale.

Underground. Which I hate. Like mines and tunnels and 13. Underground, where I dread dying, which is stupid because even if I die aboveground, the next thing they’ll do is bury me underground anyway.

The Holo can show subterranean as well as street-level pods. I see that when we go underground the clean, dependable lines of the street plan are interlaced with a twisting, turning mess of tunnels. The pods look less numerous, though.

Two doors down, a vertical tube connects our row of apartments to the tunnels. To reach the tube apartment, we will need to squeeze through a maintenance shaft that runs the length of the building. We can enter the shaft through the back of a closet space on the upper floor.

“Okay, then. Let’s make it look like we’ve never been here,” I say. We erase all signs of our stay. Send the empty cans down a trash chute, pocket the full ones for later, flip sofa cushions smeared with blood, wipe traces of gel from the tiles. There’s no fixing the latch on the front door, but we lock a second bolt, which will at least keep the door from swinging open on contact.

Finally, there’s only Peeta to contend with. He plants himself on the blue sofa, refusing to budge. “I’m not going. I’ll either disclose your position or hurt someone else.”

“Snow’s people will find you,” says Finnick.

“Then leave me a pill. I’ll only take it if I have to,” says Peeta.

“That’s not an option. Come along,” says Jackson.

“Or you’ll what? Shoot me?” asks Peeta.

“We’ll knock you out and drag you with us,” says Homes. “Which will both slow us down and endanger us.”

“Stop being noble! I don’t care if I die!” He turns to me, pleading now. “Katniss, please. Don’t you see, I want to be out of this?”

The trouble is, I *do* see. Why can’t I just let him go? Slip him a pill, pull the trigger? Is it because I care too much about Peeta or too much about letting Snow win? Have I turned him into a piece in my private Games? That’s despicable, but I’m not sure it’s beneath me. If it’s true, it would be kindest to kill Peeta here and now. But for better or worse, I am not

motivated by kindness. “We’re wasting time. Are you coming voluntarily or do we knock you out?”

Peeta buries his face in his hands for a few moments, then rises to join us.

“Should we free his hands?” asks Leeg 1.

“No!” Peeta growls at her, drawing his cuffs in close to his body.

“No,” I echo. “But I want the key.” Jackson passes it over without a word. I slip it into my pants pocket, where it clicks against the pearl.

When Homes pries open the small metal door to the maintenance shaft, we encounter another problem. There’s no way the insect shells will be able to fit through the narrow passage. Castor and Pollux remove them and detach emergency backup cameras. Each is the size of a shoe box and probably works about as well. Messalla can’t think of anywhere better to hide the bulky shells, so we end up dumping them in the closet. Leaving such an easy trail to follow frustrates me, but what else can we do?

Even going single file, holding our packs and gear out to the side, it’s a tight fit. We sidestep our way past the first apartment, and break into the second. In this apartment, one of the bedrooms has a door marked utility instead of a bathroom. Behind the door is the room with the entrance to the tube.

Messalla frowns at the wide circular cover, for a moment returning to his own fussy world. “It’s why no one ever wants the center unit. Workmen coming and going whenever and no second bath. But the rent’s considerably cheaper.” Then he notices Finnick’s amused expression and adds, “Never mind.”

The tube cover’s simple to unlatch. A wide ladder with rubber treads on the steps allows for a swift, easy descent into the bowels of the city. We gather at the foot of the ladder, waiting for our eyes to adjust to the dim strips of lights, breathing in the mixture of chemicals, mildew, and sewage.

Pollux, pale and sweaty, reaches out and latches on to Castor’s wrist. Like he might fall over if there isn’t someone to steady him.

“My brother worked down here after he became an Avox,” says Castor. Of course. Who else would they get to maintain these dank, evil-smelling passages mined with pods? “Took five years before we were able to buy his way up to ground level. Didn’t see the sun once.”

Under better conditions, on a day with fewer horrors and more rest, someone would surely know what to say. Instead we all stand there for a long time trying to formulate a response.

Finally, Peeta turns to Pollux. “Well, then you just became our most valuable asset.” Castor laughs and Pollux manages a smile.

We’re halfway down the first tunnel when I realize what was so remarkable about the exchange. Peeta sounded like his old self, the one who could always think of the right thing to say when nobody else could. Ironic, encouraging, a little funny, but not at anyone’s expense. I glance back at him as he trudges along under his guards, Gale and Jackson, his eyes fixed on the ground, his shoulders hunched forward. So dispirited. But for a moment, he was really here.

Peeta called it right. Pollux turns out to be worth ten Holos. There is a simple network of wide tunnels that directly corresponds to the main street plan above, underlying the major avenues and cross streets. It’s called the Transfer, since small trucks use it to deliver goods around the city. During the day, its many pods are deactivated, but at night it’s a minefield. However, hundreds of additional passages, utility shafts, train tracks, and drainage tubes form a multilevel maze. Pollux knows details that would lead to disaster for a newcomer, like which offshoots might require gas masks or have live wires or rats the size of beavers. He alerts us to the gush of water that sweeps through the sewers periodically, anticipates the time the Avoxes will be changing shifts, leads us into damp, obscure pipes to dodge the nearly silent passage of cargo trains. Most important, he has knowledge of the cameras. There aren’t many down in this gloomy, misty place, except in the Transfer. But we keep well out of their way.

Under Pollux’s guidance we make good time—remarkable time, if you compare it to our aboveground travel. After about six hours, fatigue takes over. It’s three in the morning, so I figure we still have a few hours before our bodies are discovered missing, they search through the rubble of the whole block of apartments in case we tried to escape through the shafts, and the hunt begins.

When I suggest we rest, no one objects. Pollux finds a small, warm room humming with machines loaded with levers and dials. He holds up his fingers to indicate we must be gone in four hours. Jackson works out a guard schedule, and, since I’m not on the first shift, I wedge myself in the tight space between Gale and Leeg 1 and go right to sleep.

It seems like only minutes later when Jackson shakes me awake, tells me I’m on watch. It’s six o’clock, and in one hour we must be on our way. Jackson tells me to eat a can of food and keep an eye on Pollux, who’s

insisted on being on guard the entire night. “He can’t sleep down here.” I drag myself into a state of relative alertness, eat a can of potato and bean stew, and sit against the wall facing the door. Pollux seems wide awake. He’s probably been reliving those five years of imprisonment all night. I get out the Holo and manage to input our grid coordinates and scan the tunnels. As expected, more pods are registering the closer we move toward the center of the Capitol. For a while, Pollux and I click around on the Holo, seeing what traps lie where. When my head begins to spin, I hand it over to him and lean back against the wall. I look down at the sleeping soldiers, crew, and friends, and I wonder how many of us will ever see the sun again.

When my eyes fall on Peeta, whose head rests right by my feet, I see he’s awake. I wish I could read what’s going on in his mind, that I could go in and untangle the mess of lies. Then I settle for something I can accomplish.

“Have you eaten?” I ask. A slight shake of his head indicates he hasn’t. I open a can of chicken and rice soup and hand it to him, keeping the lid in case he tries to slit his wrists with it or something. He sits up and tilts the can, chugging back the soup without really bothering to chew it. The bottom of the can reflects the lights from the machines, and I remember something that’s been itching at the back of my mind since yesterday. “Peeta, when you asked about what happened to Darius and Lavinia, and Boggs told you it was real, you said you thought so. Because there was nothing shiny about it. What did you mean?”

“Oh. I don’t know exactly how to explain it,” he tells me. “In the beginning, everything was just complete confusion. Now I can sort certain things out. I think there’s a pattern emerging. The memories they altered with the tracker jacker venom have this strange quality about them. Like they’re too intense or the images aren’t stable. You remember what it was like when we were stung?”

“Trees shattered. There were giant colored butterflies. I fell in a pit of orange bubbles.” I think about it. “Shiny orange bubbles.”

“Right. But nothing about Darius or Lavinia was like that. I don’t think they’d given me any venom yet,” he says.

“Well, that’s good, isn’t it?” I ask. “If you can separate the two, then you can figure out what’s true.”

“Yes. And if I could grow wings, I could fly. Only people can’t grow wings,” he says. “Real or not real?”

“Real,” I say. “But people don’t need wings to survive.”

“Mockingjays do.” He finishes the soup and returns the can to me.

In the fluorescent light, the circles under his eyes look like bruises. “There’s still time. You should sleep.” Unresisting, he lies back down, but just stares at the needle on one of the dials as it twitches from side to side. Slowly, as I would with a wounded animal, my hand stretches out and brushes a wave of hair from his forehead. He freezes at my touch, but doesn’t recoil. So I continue to gently smooth back his hair. It’s the first time I have voluntarily touched him since the last arena.

“You’re still trying to protect me. Real or not real,” he whispers.

“Real,” I answer. It seems to require more explanation. “Because that’s what you and I do. Protect each other.” After a minute or so, he drifts off to sleep.

Shortly before seven, Pollux and I move among the others, rousing them. There are the usual yawns and sighs that accompany waking. But my ears are picking up something else, too. Almost like a hissing. Perhaps it’s only steam escaping a pipe or the far-off whoosh of one of the trains....

I hush the group to get a better read on it. There’s a hissing, yes, but it’s not one extended sound. More like multiple exhalations that form words. A single word. Echoing throughout the tunnels. One word. One name. Repeated over and over again.

“Katniss.”

The grace period has ended. Perhaps Snow had them digging through the night. As soon as the fire died down, anyway. They found Boggs's remains, briefly felt reassured, and then, as the hours went by without further trophies, began to suspect. At some point, they realized that they had been tricked. And President Snow can't tolerate being made to look like a fool. It doesn't matter whether they tracked us to the second apartment or assumed we went directly underground. They know we are down here now and they've unleashed something, a pack of mutts probably, bent on finding me.

"*Katniss.*" I jump at the proximity of the sound. Look frantically for its source, bow loaded, seeking a target to hit. "*Katniss.*" Peeta's lips are barely moving, but there's no doubt, the name came out of him. Just when I thought he seemed a little better, when I thought he might be inching his way back to me, here is proof of how deep Snow's poison went. "*Katniss.*" Peeta's programmed to respond to the hissing chorus, to join in the hunt. He's beginning to stir. There's no choice. I position my arrow to penetrate his brain. He'll barely feel a thing. Suddenly, he's sitting up, eyes wide in alarm, short of breath. "Katniss!" He whips his head toward me but doesn't seem to notice my bow, the waiting arrow. "Katniss! Get out of here!"

I hesitate. His voice is alarmed, but not insane. "Why? What's making that sound?"

"I don't know. Only that it has to kill you," says Peeta. "Run! Get out! Go!"

After my own moment of confusion, I conclude I do not have to shoot him. Relax my bowstring. Take in the anxious faces around me. "Whatever it is, it's after me. It might be a good time to split up."

"But we're your guard," says Jackson.

"And your crew," adds Cressida.

"I'm not leaving you," Gale says.

I look at the crew, armed with nothing but cameras and clipboards. And there's Finnick with two guns and a trident. I suggest that he give one of his guns to Castor. Eject the blank cartridge from Peeta's, load it with a real one,

and arm Pollux. Since Gale and I have our bows, we hand our guns over to Messalla and Cressida. There's no time to show them anything but how to point and pull the trigger, but in close quarters, that might be enough. It's better than being defenseless. Now the only one without a weapon is Peeta, but anyone whispering my name with a bunch of mutts doesn't need one anyway.

We leave the room free of everything but our scent. There's no way to erase that at the moment. I'm guessing that's how the hissing things are tracking us, because we haven't left much of a physical trail. The mutts' noses will be abnormally keen, but possibly the time we spent slogging through water in drainpipes will help throw them.

Outside the hum of the room, the hissing becomes more distinct. But it's also possible to get a better sense of the mutts' location. They're behind us, still a fair distance. Snow probably had them released underground near the place where he found Boggs's body. Theoretically, we should have a good lead on them, although they're certain to be much faster than we are. My mind wanders to the wolflike creatures in the first arena, the monkeys in the Quarter Quell, the monstrosities I've witnessed on television over the years, and I wonder what form these mutts will take. Whatever Snow thinks will scare me the most.

Pollux and I have worked out a plan for the next leg of our journey, and since it heads away from the hissing, I see no reason to alter it. If we move swiftly, maybe we can reach Snow's mansion before the mutts reach us. But there's a sloppiness that comes with speed: the poorly placed boot that results in a splash, the accidental clang of a gun against a pipe, even my own commands, issued too loudly for discretion.

We've covered about three more blocks via an overflow pipe and a section of neglected train track when the screams begin. Thick, guttural. Bouncing off the tunnel walls.

"Avoxes," says Peeta immediately. "That's what Darius sounded like when they tortured him."

"The mutts must have found them," says Cressida.

"So they're not just after Katniss," says Leeg 1.

"They'll probably kill anyone. It's just that they won't stop until they get to her," says Gale. After his hours studying with Beetee, he is most likely right.

And here I am again. With people dying because of me. Friends, allies, complete strangers, losing their lives for the Mockingjay. “Let me go on alone. Lead them off. I’ll transfer the Holo to Jackson. The rest of you can finish the mission.”

“No one’s going to agree to that!” says Jackson in exasperation.

“We’re wasting time!” says Finnick.

“Listen,” Peeta whispers.

The screams have stopped, and in their absence my name has rebounded, startling in its proximity. It’s below as well as behind us now. “*Katniss.*”

I nudge Pollux on the shoulder and we start to run. Trouble is, we had planned to descend to a lower level, but that’s out now. When we come to the steps leading down, Pollux and I are scanning for a possible alternative on the Holo when I start gagging.

“Masks on!” orders Jackson.

There’s no need for masks. Everyone is breathing the same air. I’m the only one losing my stew because I’m the only one reacting to the odor. Drifting up from the stairwell. Cutting through the sewage. Roses. I begin to tremble.

I swerve away from the smell and stumble right out onto the Transfer. Smooth, pastel-colored tiled streets, just like the ones above, but bordered by white brick walls instead of homes. A roadway where delivery vehicles can drive with ease, without the congestion of the Capitol. Empty now, of everything but us. I swing up my bow and blow up the first pod with an explosive arrow, which kills the nest of flesh-eating rats inside. Then I sprint for the next intersection, where I know one false step will cause the ground beneath our feet to disintegrate, feeding us into something labeled Meat Grinder. I shout a warning to the others to stay with me. I plan for us to skirt around the corner and then detonate the Meat Grinder, but another unmarked pod lies in wait.

It happens silently. I would miss it entirely if Finnick didn’t pull me to a stop. “*Katniss!*”

I whip back around, arrow poised for flight, but what can be done? Two of Gale’s arrows already lie useless beside the wide shaft of golden light that radiates from ceiling to floor. Inside, Messalla is as still as a statue, poised up on the ball of one foot, head tilted back, held captive by the beam. I can’t tell if he’s yelling, although his mouth is stretched wide. We watch, utterly helpless, as the flesh melts off his body like candle wax.

“Can’t help him!” Peeta starts shoving people forward. “Can’t!” Amazingly, he’s the only one still functional enough to get us moving. I don’t know why he’s in control, when he should be flipping out and bashing my brains in, but that could happen any second. At the pressure of his hand against my shoulder, I turn away from the grisly thing that was Messalla; I make my feet go forward, fast, so fast that I can barely skid to a stop before the next intersection.

A spray of gunfire brings down a shower of plaster. I jerk my head from side to side, looking for the pod, before I turn and see the squad of Peacekeepers pounding down the Transfer toward us. With the Meat Grinder pod blocking our way, there’s nothing to do but fire back. They outnumber us two to one, but we’ve still got six original members of the Star Squad, who aren’t trying to run and shoot at the same time.

Fish in a barrel, I think, as blossoms of red stain their white uniforms. Three-quarters of them are down and dead when more begin to pour in from the side of the tunnel, the same one I flung myself through to get away from the smell, from the—

Those aren’t Peacekeepers.

They are white, four-limbed, about the size of a full-grown human, but that’s where the comparisons stop. Naked, with long reptilian tails, arched backs, and heads that jut forward. They swarm over the Peacekeepers, living and dead, clamp on to their necks with their mouths and rip off the helmeted heads. Apparently, having a Capitol pedigree is as useless here as it was in 13. It seems to take only seconds before the Peacekeepers are decapitated. The mutts fall to their bellies and skitter toward us on all fours.

“This way!” I shout, hugging the wall and making a sharp right turn to avoid the pod. When everyone’s joined me, I fire into the intersection, and the Meat Grinder activates. Huge mechanical teeth burst through the street and chew the tile to dust. That should make it impossible for the mutts to follow us, but I don’t know. The wolf and monkey mutts I’ve encountered could leap unbelievably far.

The hissing burns my ears, and the reek of roses makes the walls spin.

I grab Pollux’s arm. “Forget the mission. What’s the quickest way aboveground?”

There’s no time for checking the Holo. We follow Pollux for about ten yards along the Transfer and go through a doorway. I’m aware of tile changing to concrete, of crawling through a tight, stinking pipe onto a ledge

about a foot wide. We're in the main sewer. A yard below, a poisonous brew of human waste, garbage, and chemical runoff bubbles by us. Parts of the surface are on fire, others emit evil-looking clouds of vapor. One look tells you that if you fall in, you're never coming out. Moving as quickly as we dare on the slippery ledge, we make our way to a narrow bridge and cross it. In an alcove at the far side, Pollux smacks a ladder with his hand and points up the shaft. This is it. Our way out.

A quick glance at our party tells me something's off. "Wait! Where are Jackson and Leeg One?"

"They stayed at the Grinder to hold the mutts back," says Homes.

"What?" I'm lunging back for the bridge, willing to leave no one to those monsters, when he yanks me back.

"Don't waste their lives, Katniss. It's too late for them. Look!" Homes nods to the pipe, where the mutts are slithering onto the ledge.

"Stand back!" Gale shouts. With his explosive-tipped arrows, he rips the far side of the bridge from its foundation. The rest sinks into the bubbles, just as the mutts reach it.

For the first time, I get a good look at them. A mix of human and lizard and who knows what else. White, tight reptilian skin smeared with gore, clawed hands and feet, their faces a mess of conflicting features. Hissing, shrieking my name now, as their bodies contort in rage. Lashing out with tails and claws, taking huge chunks of one another or their own bodies with wide, lathered mouths, driven mad by their need to destroy me. My scent must be as evocative to them as theirs is to me. More so, because despite its toxicity, the mutts begin to throw themselves into the foul sewer.

Along our bank, everyone opens fire. I choose my arrows without discretion, sending arrowheads, fire, explosives into the mutts' bodies. They're mortal, but only just. No natural thing could keep coming with two dozen bullets in it. Yes, we can eventually kill them, only there are so many, an endless supply pouring from the pipe, not even hesitating to take to the sewage.

But it's not their numbers that make my hands shake so.

No mutt is good. All are meant to damage you. Some take your life, like the monkeys. Others your reason, like the tracker jackers. However, the true atrocities, the most frightening, incorporate a perverse psychological twist designed to terrify the victim. The sight of the wolf mutts with the dead tributes' eyes. The sound of the jabberjays replicating Prim's tortured

screams. The smell of Snow's roses mixed with the victims' blood. Carried across the sewer. Cutting through even this foulness. Making my heart run wild, my skin turn to ice, my lungs unable to suck air. It's as if Snow's breathing right in my face, telling me it's time to die.

The others are shouting at me, but I can't seem to respond. Strong arms lift me as I blast the head off a mutt whose claws have just grazed my ankle. I'm slammed into the ladder. Hands shoved against the rungs. Ordered to climb. My wooden, puppet limbs obey. Movement slowly brings me back to my senses. I detect one person above me. Pollux. Peeta and Cressida are below. We reach a platform. Switch to a second ladder. Rungs slick with sweat and mildew. At the next platform, my head has cleared and the reality of what's happened hits me. I begin frantically pulling people up off the ladder. Peeta. Cressida. That's it.

What have I done? What have I abandoned the others to? I'm scrambling back down the ladder when one of my boots kicks someone.

"Climb!" Gale barks at me. I'm back up, hauling him in, peering into the gloom for more. "No." Gale turns my face to him and shakes his head. Uniform shredded. Gaping wound in the side of his neck.

There's a human cry from below. "Someone's still alive," I plead.

"No, Katniss. They're not coming," says Gale. "Only the mutts are."

Unable to accept it, I shine the light from Cressida's gun down the shaft. Far below, I can just make out Finnick, struggling to hang on as three mutts tear at him. As one yanks back his head to take the death bite, something bizarre happens. It's as if I'm Finnick, watching images of my life flash by. The mast of a boat, a silver parachute, Mags laughing, a pink sky, Beetee's trident, Annie in her wedding dress, waves breaking over rocks. Then it's over.

I slide the Holo from my belt and choke out "nightlock, nightlock, nightlock." Release it. Hunch against the wall with the others as the explosion rocks the platform and bits of mutt and human flesh shoot out of the pipe and shower us.

There's a clank as Pollux slams a cover over the pipe and locks it in place. Pollux, Gale, Cressida, Peeta, and me. We're all that's left. Later, the human feelings will come. Now I'm conscious only of an animal need to keep the remnants of our band alive. "We can't stop here."

Someone comes up with a bandage. We tie it around Gale's neck. Get him to his feet. Only one figure stays huddled against the wall. "Peeta," I say.

There's no response. Has he blacked out? I crouch in front of him, pulling his cuffed hands from his face. "Peeta?" His eyes are like black pools, the pupils dilated so that the blue irises have all but vanished. The muscles in his wrists are hard as metal.

"Leave me," he whispers. "I can't hang on."

"Yes. You can!" I tell him.

Peeta shakes his head. "I'm losing it. I'll go mad. Like them."

Like the mutts. Like a rabid beast bent on ripping my throat out. And here, finally here in this place, in these circumstances, I will really have to kill him. And Snow will win. Hot, bitter hatred courses through me. Snow has won too much already today.

It's a long shot, it's suicide maybe, but I do the only thing I can think of. I lean in and kiss Peeta full on the mouth. His whole body starts shuddering, but I keep my lips pressed to his until I have to come up for air. My hands slide up his wrists to clasp his. "Don't let him take you from me."

Peeta's panting hard as he fights the nightmares raging in his head. "No. I don't want to..."

I clench his hands to the point of pain. "Stay with me."

His pupils contract to pinpoints, dilate again rapidly, and then return to something resembling normalcy. "Always," he murmurs.

I help Peeta up and address Pollux. "How far to the street?" He indicates it's just above us. I climb the last ladder and push open the lid to someone's utility room. I'm rising to my feet when a woman throws open the door. She wears a bright turquoise silk robe embroidered with exotic birds. Her magenta hair's fluffed up like a cloud and decorated with gilded butterflies. Grease from the half-eaten sausage she's holding smears her lipstick. The expression on her face says she recognizes me. She opens her mouth to call for help.

Without hesitation, I shoot her through the heart.

Who the woman was calling to remains a mystery, because after searching the apartment, we find she was alone. Perhaps her cry was meant for a nearby neighbor, or was simply an expression of fear. At any rate, there's no one else to hear her.

This apartment would be a classy place to hole up in for a while, but that's a luxury we can't afford. "How long do you think we have before they figure out some of us could've survived?" I ask.

"I think they could be here anytime," Gale answers. "They knew we were heading for the streets. Probably the explosion will throw them for a few minutes, then they'll start looking for our exit point."

I go to a window that overlooks the street, and when I peek through the blinds, I'm not faced with Peacekeepers but with a bundled crowd of people going about their business. During our underground journey, we have left the evacuated zones far behind and surfaced in a busy section of the Capitol. This crowd offers our only chance of escape. I don't have a Holo, but I have Cressida. She joins me at the window, confirms she knows our location, and gives me the good news that we aren't many blocks from the president's mansion.

One glance at my companions tells me this is no time for a stealth attack on Snow. Gale's still losing blood from the neck wound, which we haven't even cleaned. Peeta's sitting on a velvet sofa with his teeth clamped down on a pillow, either fighting off madness or containing a scream. Pollux weeps against the mantel of an ornate fireplace. Cressida stands determinedly at my side, but she's so pale her lips are bloodless. I'm running on hate. When the energy for that ebbs, I'll be worthless.

"Let's check her closets," I say.

In one bedroom we find hundreds of the woman's outfits, coats, pairs of shoes, a rainbow of wigs, enough makeup to paint a house. In a bedroom across the hall, there's a similar selection for men. Perhaps they belong to her husband. Perhaps to a lover who had the good luck to be out this morning.

I call the others to dress. At the sight of Peeta's bloody wrists, I dig in my pocket for the handcuff key, but he jerks away from me.

"No," he says. "Don't. They help hold me together."

"You might need your hands," says Gale.

"When I feel myself slipping, I dig my wrists into them, and the pain helps me focus," says Peeta. I let them be.

Fortunately, it's cold out, so we can conceal most of our uniforms and weapons under flowing coats and cloaks. We hang our boots around our necks by their laces and hide them, pull on silly shoes to replace them. The real challenge, of course, is our faces. Cressida and Pollux run the risk of being recognized by acquaintances, Gale could be familiar from the propos and news, and Peeta and I are known by every citizen of Panem. We hastily help one another apply thick layers of makeup, pull on wigs and sunglasses. Cressida wraps scarves over Peeta's and my mouths and noses.

I can feel the clock ticking away, but stop for just a few moments to stuff pockets with food and first-aid supplies. "Stay together," I say at the front door. Then we march right into the street. Snow flurries have begun to fall. Agitated people swirl around us, speaking of rebels and hunger and me in their affected Capitol accents. We cross the street, pass a few more apartments. Just as we turn the corner, three dozen Peacekeepers sweep past us. We hop out of their way, as the real citizens do, wait until the crowd returns to its normal flow, and keep moving. "Cressida," I whisper. "Can you think of anywhere?"

"I'm trying," she says.

We cover another block, and the sirens begin. Through an apartment window, I see an emergency report and pictures of our faces flashing. They haven't identified who in our party died yet, because I see Castor and Finnick among the photos. Soon every passerby will be as dangerous as a Peacekeeper. "Cressida?"

"There's one place. It's not ideal. But we can try it," she says. We follow her a few more blocks and turn through a gate into what looks like a private residence. It's some kind of shortcut, though, because after walking through a manicured garden, we come out of another gate onto a small back street that connects two main avenues. There are a few poky stores—one that buys used goods, another that sells fake jewelry. Only a couple of people are around, and they pay no attention to us. Cressida begins to babble in a high-pitched voice about fur undergarments, how essential they are during the cold

months. “Wait until you see the prices! Believe me, it’s half what you pay on the avenues!”

We stop before a grimy storefront filled with mannequins in furry underwear. The place doesn’t even look open, but Cressida pushes through the front door, setting off a dissonant chiming. Inside the dim, narrow shop lined with racks of merchandise, the smell of pelts fills my nose. Business must be slow, since we’re the only customers. Cressida heads straight for a hunched figure sitting in the back. I follow, trailing my fingers through the soft garments as we go.

Behind a counter sits the strangest person I’ve ever seen. She’s an extreme example of surgical enhancement gone wrong, for surely not even in the Capitol could they find this face attractive. The skin has been pulled back tightly and tattooed with black and gold stripes. The nose has been flattened until it barely exists. I’ve seen cat whiskers on people in the Capitol before, but none so long. The result is a grotesque, semi-feline mask, which now squints at us distrustfully.

Cressida takes off her wig, revealing her vines. “Tigris,” she says. “We need help.”

Tigris. Deep in my brain, the name rings a bell. She was a fixture—a younger, less disturbing version of herself—in the earliest Hunger Games I can remember. A stylist, I think. I don’t remember for which district. Not 12. Then she must have had one operation too many and crossed the line into repulsion.

So this is where stylists go when they’ve outlived their use. To sad theme underwear shops where they wait for death. Out of the public eye.

I stare at her face, wondering if her parents actually named her Tigris, inspiring her mutilation, or if she chose the style and changed her name to match her stripes.

“Plutarch said you could be trusted,” adds Cressida.

Great, she’s one of Plutarch’s people. So if her first move isn’t to turn us in to the Capitol, it will be to notify Plutarch, and by extension Coin, of our whereabouts. No, Tigris’s shop is not ideal, but it’s all we have at the moment. If she’ll even help us. She’s peering between an old television on her counter and us, as if trying to place us. To help her, I pull down my scarf, remove my wig, and step closer so that the light of the screen falls on my face.

Tigris gives a low growl, not unlike one Buttercup might greet me with. She slinks down off her stool and disappears behind a rack of fur-lined leggings. There's a sound of sliding, and then her hand emerges and waves us forward. Cressida looks at me, as if to ask *Are you sure?* But what choice do we have? Returning to the streets under these conditions guarantees our capture or death. I push around the furs and find Tigris has slid back a panel at the base of the wall. Behind it seems to be the top of a steep stone stairway. She gestures for me to enter.

Everything about the situation screams *trap*. I have a moment of panic and find myself turning to Tigris, searching those tawny eyes. Why is she doing this? She's no Cinna, someone willing to sacrifice herself for others. This woman was the embodiment of Capitol shallowness. She was one of the stars of the Hunger Games until...until she wasn't. So is that it, then? Bitterness? Hatred? Revenge? Actually, I'm comforted by the idea. A need for revenge can burn long and hot. Especially if every glance in a mirror reinforces it.

"Did Snow ban you from the Games?" I ask. She just stares back at me. Somewhere her tiger tail flicks with displeasure. "Because I'm going to kill him, you know." Her mouth spreads into what I take for a smile. Reassured that this isn't complete madness, I crawl through the space.

About halfway down the steps, my face runs into a hanging chain and I pull it, illuminating the hideout with a flickering fluorescent bulb. It's a small cellar with no doors or windows. Shallow and wide. Probably just a strip between two real basements. A place whose existence could go unnoticed unless you had a very keen eye for dimensions. It's cold and dank, with piles of pelts that I'm guessing haven't seen the light of day in years. Unless Tigris gives us up, I don't believe anyone will find us here. By the time I reach the concrete floor, my companions are on the steps. The panel slides back in place. I hear the underwear rack being adjusted on squeaky wheels. Tigris padding back to her stool. We have been swallowed up by her store.

Just in time, too, because Gale looks on the verge of collapse. We make a bed of pelts, strip off his layers of weapons, and help him onto his back. At the end of the cellar, there's a faucet about a foot from the floor with a drain under it. I turn the tap and, after much sputtering and a lot of rust, clear water begins to flow. We clean Gale's neck wound and I realize bandages won't be enough. He's going to need a few stitches. There's a needle and sterile thread in the first-aid supplies, but what we lack is a healer. It crosses my mind to

enlist Tigris. As a stylist, she must know how to work a needle. But that would leave no one manning the shop, and she's doing enough already. I accept that I'm probably the most qualified for the job, grit my teeth, and put in a row of jagged sutures. It's not pretty but it's functional. I smear it with medicine and wrap it up. Give him some painkillers. "You can rest now. It's safe here," I tell him. He goes out like a light.

While Cressida and Pollux make fur nests for each of us, I attend to Peeta's wrists. Gently rinsing away the blood, putting on an antiseptic, and bandaging them beneath the cuffs. "You've got to keep them clean, otherwise the infection could spread and—"

"I know what blood poisoning is, Katniss," says Peeta. "Even if my mother isn't a healer."

I'm jolted back in time, to another wound, another set of bandages. "You said that same thing to me in the first Hunger Games. Real or not real?"

"Real," he says. "And you risked your life getting the medicine that saved me?"

"Real." I shrug. "You were the reason I was alive to do it."

"Was I?" The comment throws him into confusion. Some shiny memory must be fighting for his attention, because his body tenses and his newly bandaged wrists strain against the metal cuffs. Then all the energy saps from his body. "I'm so tired, Katniss."

"Go to sleep," I say. He won't until I've rearranged his handcuffs and shackled him to one of the stair supports. It can't be comfortable, lying there with his arms above his head. But in a few minutes, he drifts off, too.

Cressida and Pollux have made beds for us, arranged our food and medical supplies, and now ask what I want to do about setting up a guard. I look at Gale's pallor, Peeta's restraints. Pollux hasn't slept for days, and Cressida and I only napped for a few hours. If a troop of Peacekeepers were to come through that door, we'd be trapped like rats. We are completely at the mercy of a decrepit tiger-woman with what I can only hope is an all-consuming passion for Snow's death.

"I don't honestly think there's any point in setting up a guard. Let's just try to get some sleep," I say. They nod numbly, and we all burrow into our pelts. The fire inside me has flickered out, and with it my strength. I surrender to the soft, musty fur and oblivion.

I have only one dream I remember. A long and wearying thing in which I'm trying to get to District 12. The home I'm seeking is intact, the people

alive. Effie Trinket, conspicuous in a bright pink wig and tailored outfit, travels with me. I keep trying to ditch her in places, but she inexplicably reappears at my side, insisting that as my escort she's responsible for my staying on schedule. Only the schedule is constantly shifting, derailed by our lack of a stamp from an official or delayed when Effie breaks one of her high heels. We camp for days on a bench in a gray station in District 7, awaiting a train that never comes. When I wake, somehow I feel even more drained by this than my usual nighttime forays into blood and terror.

Cressida, the only person awake, tells me it's late afternoon. I eat a can of beef stew and wash it down with a lot of water. Then I lean against the cellar wall, retracing the events of the last day. Moving death by death. Counting them up on my fingers. One, two—Mitchell and Boggs lost on the block. Three—Messalla melted by the pod. Four, five—Leeg 1 and Jackson sacrificing themselves at the Meat Grinder. Six, seven, eight—Castor, Homes, and Finnick being decapitated by the rose-scented lizard mutts. Eight dead in twenty-four hours. I know it happened, and yet it doesn't seem real. Surely, Castor is asleep under that pile of furs, Finnick will come bounding down the steps in a minute, Boggs will tell me his plan for our escape.

To believe them dead is to accept I killed them. Okay, maybe not Mitchell and Boggs—they died on an actual assignment. But the others lost their lives defending me on a mission I fabricated. My plot to assassinate Snow seems so stupid now. So stupid as I sit shivering here in this cellar, tallying up our losses, fingering the tassels on the silver knee-high boots I stole from the woman's home. Oh, yeah—I forgot about that. I killed her, too. I'm taking out unarmed citizens now.

I think it's time I give myself up.

When everyone finally awakens, I confess. How I lied about the mission, how I jeopardized everyone in pursuit of revenge. There's a long silence after I finish. Then Gale says, "Katniss, we all knew you were lying about Coin sending you to assassinate Snow."

"You knew, maybe. The soldiers from Thirteen didn't," I reply.

"Do you really think Jackson believed you had orders from Coin?" Cressida asks. "Of course she didn't. But she trusted Boggs, and he'd clearly wanted you to go on."

"I never even told Boggs what I planned to do," I say.

"You told everyone in Command!" Gale says. "It was one of your conditions for being the Mockingjay. *I kill Snow.*"

Those seem like two disconnected things. Negotiating with Coin for the privilege of executing Snow after the war and this unauthorized flight through the Capitol. “But not like this,” I say. “It’s been a complete disaster.”

“I think it would be considered a highly successful mission,” says Gale. “We’ve infiltrated the enemy camp, showing that the Capitol’s defenses can be breached. We’ve managed to get footage of ourselves all over the Capitol’s news. We’ve thrown the whole city into chaos trying to find us.”

“Trust me, Plutarch’s thrilled,” Cressida adds.

“That’s because Plutarch doesn’t care who dies,” I say. “Not as long as his Games are a success.”

Cressida and Gale go round and round trying to convince me. Pollux nods at their words to back them up. Only Peeta doesn’t offer an opinion.

“What do you think, Peeta?” I finally ask him.

“I think...you still have no idea. The effect you can have.” He slides his cuffs up the support and pushes himself to a sitting position. “None of the people we lost were idiots. They knew what they were doing. They followed you because they believed you really could kill Snow.”

I don’t know why his voice reaches me when no one else’s can. But if he’s right, and I think he is, I owe the others a debt that can only be repaid in one way. I pull my paper map from a pocket in my uniform and spread it out on the floor with new resolve. “Where are we, Cressida?”

Tigris’s shop sits about five blocks from the City Circle and Snow’s mansion. We’re in easy walking distance through a zone in which the pods are deactivated for the residents’ safety. We have disguises that, perhaps with some embellishments from Tigris’s furry stock, could get us safely there. But then what? The mansion’s sure to be heavily guarded, under round-the-clock camera surveillance, and laced with pods that could become live at the flick of a switch.

“What we need is to get him out in the open,” Gale says to me. “Then one of us could pick him off.”

“Does he ever appear in public anymore?” asks Peeta.

“I don’t think so,” says Cressida. “At least in all the recent speeches I’ve seen, he’s been in the mansion. Even before the rebels got here. I imagine he became more vigilant after Finnick aired his crimes.”

That’s right. It’s not just the Tigrises of the Capitol who hate Snow now, but a web of people who know what he did to their friends and families. It

would have to be something bordering on miraculous to lure him out. Something like...

"I bet he'd come out for me," I say. "If I were captured. He'd want that as public as possible. He'd want my execution on his front steps." I let this sink in. "Then Gale could shoot him from the audience."

"No." Peeta shakes his head. "There are too many alternative endings to that plan. Snow might decide to keep you and torture information out of you. Or have you executed publicly without being present. Or kill you inside the mansion and display your body out front."

"Gale?" I say.

"It seems like an extreme solution to jump to immediately," he says. "Maybe if all else fails. Let's keep thinking."

In the quiet that follows, we hear Tigris's soft footfall overhead. It must be closing time. She's locking up, fastening the shutters maybe. A few minutes later, the panel at the top of the stairs slides open.

"Come up," says a gravelly voice. "I have some food for you." It's the first time she's talked since we arrived. Whether it's natural or from years of practice, I don't know, but there's something in her manner of speaking that suggests a cat's purr.

As we climb the stairs, Cressida asks, "Did you contact Plutarch, Tigris?"

"No way to." Tigris shrugs. "He'll figure out you're in a safe house. Don't worry."

Worry? I feel immensely relieved by the news that I won't be given—and have to ignore—direct orders from 13. Or make up some viable defense for the decisions I've made over the last couple of days.

In the shop, the counter holds some stale hunks of bread, a wedge of moldy cheese, and half a bottle of mustard. It reminds me that not everyone in the Capitol has full stomachs these days. I feel obliged to tell Tigris about our remaining food supplies, but she waves my objections away. "I eat next to nothing," she says. "And then, only raw meat." This seems a little too in character, but I don't question it. I just scrape the mold off the cheese and divide up the food among the rest of us.

While we eat, we watch the latest Capitol news coverage. The government has the rebel survivors narrowed down to the five of us. Huge bounties are offered for information leading to our capture. They emphasize how dangerous we are. Show us exchanging gunfire with the Peacekeepers,

although not the mutts ripping off their heads. Do a tragic tribute to the woman lying where we left her, with my arrow still in her heart. Someone has redone her makeup for the cameras.

The rebels let the Capitol broadcast run on uninterrupted. “Have the rebels made a statement today?” I ask Tigris. She shakes her head. “I doubt Coin knows what to do with me now that I’m still alive.”

Tigris gives a throaty cackle. “No one knows what to do with you, girlie.” Then she makes me take a pair of the fur leggings even though I can’t pay her for them. It’s the kind of gift you have to accept. And anyway, it’s cold in that cellar.

Downstairs after supper, we continue to rack our brains for a plan. Nothing good comes up, but we do agree that we can no longer go out as a group of five and that we should try to infiltrate the president’s mansion before I turn myself into bait. I consent to that second point to avoid further argument. If I do decide to give myself up, it won’t require anyone else’s permission or participation.

We change bandages, handcuff Peeta back to his support, and settle down to sleep. A few hours later, I slip back into consciousness and become aware of a quiet conversation. Peeta and Gale. I can’t stop myself from eavesdropping.

“Thanks for the water,” Peeta says.

“No problem,” Gale replies. “I wake up ten times a night anyway.”

“To make sure Katniss is still here?” asks Peeta.

“Something like that,” Gale admits.

There’s a long pause before Peeta speaks again. “That was funny, what Tigris said. About no one knowing what to do with her.”

“Well, *we* never have,” Gale says.

They both laugh. It’s so strange to hear them talking like this. Almost like friends. Which they’re not. Never have been. Although they’re not exactly enemies.

“She loves you, you know,” says Peeta. “She as good as told me after they whipped you.”

“Don’t believe it,” Gale answers. “The way she kissed you in the Quarter Quell...well, she never kissed me like that.”

“It was just part of the show,” Peeta tells him, although there’s an edge of doubt in his voice.

“No, you won her over. Gave up everything for her. Maybe that’s the only way to convince her you love her.” There’s a long pause. “I should have volunteered to take your place in the first Games. Protected her then.”

“You couldn’t,” says Peeta. “She’d never have forgiven you. You had to take care of her family. They matter more to her than her life.”

“Well, it won’t be an issue much longer. I think it’s unlikely all three of us will be alive at the end of the war. And if we are, I guess it’s Katniss’s problem. Who to choose.” Gale yawns. “We should get some sleep.”

“Yeah.” I hear Peeta’s handcuffs slide down the support as he settles in. “I wonder how she’ll make up her mind.”

“Oh, that I do know.” I can just catch Gale’s last words through the layer of fur. “Katniss will pick whoever she thinks she can’t survive without.”

A chill runs through me. Am I really that cold and calculating? Gale didn't say, "Katniss will pick whoever it will break her heart to give up," or even "whoever she can't live without." Those would have implied I was motivated by a kind of passion. But my best friend predicts I will choose the person who I think I "can't survive without." There's not the least indication that love, or desire, or even compatibility will sway me. I'll just conduct an unfeeling assessment of what my potential mates can offer me. As if in the end, it will be the question of whether a baker or a hunter will extend my longevity the most. It's a horrible thing for Gale to say, for Peeta not to refute. Especially when every emotion I have has been taken and exploited by the Capitol or the rebels. At the moment, the choice would be simple. I can survive just fine without either of them.

In the morning, I have no time or energy to nurse wounded feelings. During a predawn breakfast of liver pâté and fig cookies, we gather around Tigris's television for one of Beetee's break-ins. There's been a new development in the war. Apparently inspired by the black wave, some enterprising rebel commander came up with the idea of confiscating people's abandoned automobiles and sending them unmanned down the streets. The cars don't trigger every pod, but they certainly get the majority. At around four in the morning, the rebels began carving three separate paths—simply referred to as the A, B, and C lines—to the Capitol's heart. As a result, they've secured block after block with very few casualties.

"This can't last," says Gale. "In fact I'm surprised they've kept it going so long. The Capitol will adjust by deactivating specific pods and then manually triggering them when their targets come in range." Almost within minutes of his prediction, we see this very thing happen on-screen. A squad sends a car down a block, setting off four pods. All seems well. Three scouts follow and make it safely to the end of the street. But when a group of twenty rebel soldiers follow them, they're blown to bits by a row of potted rosebushes in front of a flower shop.

“I bet it’s killing Plutarch not to be in the control room on this one,” says Peeta.

Beetee gives the broadcast back to the Capitol, where a grim-faced reporter announces the blocks that civilians are to evacuate. Between her update and the previous story, I am able to mark my paper map to show the relative positions of the opposing armies.

I hear scuffling out on the street, move to the windows, and peek out a crack in the shutters. In the early morning light, I see a bizarre spectacle. Refugees from the now occupied blocks are streaming toward the Capitol’s center. The most panicked are wearing nothing but nightgowns and slippers, while the more prepared are heavily bundled in layers of clothes. They carry everything from lapdogs to jewelry boxes to potted plants. One man in a fluffy robe holds only an overripe banana. Confused, sleepy children stumble along after their parents, most either too stunned or too baffled to cry. Bits of them flash by my line of vision. A pair of wide brown eyes. An arm clutching a favorite doll. A pair of bare feet, bluish in the cold, catching on the uneven paving stones of the alley. Seeing them reminds me of the children of 12 who died fleeing the firebombs. I leave the window.

Tigris offers to be our spy for the day since she’s the only one of us without a bounty on her head. After securing us downstairs, she goes out into the Capitol to pick up any helpful information.

Down in the cellar I pace back and forth, driving the others crazy. Something tells me that not taking advantage of the flood of refugees is a mistake. What better cover could we have? On the other hand, every displaced person milling about on the streets means another pair of eyes looking for the five rebels on the loose. Then again, what do we gain by staying here? All we’re really doing is depleting our small cache of food and waiting for...what? The rebels to take the Capitol? It could be weeks before that happens, and I’m not so sure what I’d do if they did. Not run out and greet them. Coin would have me whisked back to 13 before I could say “nightlock, nightlock, nightlock.” I did not come all this way, and lose all those people, to turn myself over to that woman. *I kill Snow*. Besides, there would be an awful lot of things I couldn’t easily explain about the last few days. Several of which, if they came to light, would probably blow my deal for the victors’ immunity right out of the water. And forget about me, I’ve got a feeling some of the others are going to need it. Like Peeta. Who, no matter

how you spin it, can be seen on tape tossing Mitchell into that net pod. I can imagine what Coin's war tribunal will do with that.

By late afternoon, we're beginning to get uneasy about Tigris's long absence. Talk turns to the possibilities that she has been apprehended and arrested, turned us in voluntarily, or simply been injured in the wave of refugees. But around six o'clock we hear her return. There's some shuffling around upstairs, then she opens the panel. The wonderful smell of frying meat fills the air. Tigris has prepared us a hash of chopped ham and potatoes. It's the first hot food we've had in days, and as I wait for her to fill my plate, I'm in danger of actually drooling.

As I chew, I try to pay attention to Tigris telling us how she acquired it, but the main thing I absorb is that fur underwear is a valuable trading item at the moment. Especially for people who left their homes underdressed. Many are still out on the street, trying to find shelter for the night. Those who live in the choice apartments of the inner city have not flung open their doors to house the displaced. On the contrary, most of them bolted their locks, drew their shutters, and pretended to be out. Now the City Circle's packed with refugees, and the Peacekeepers are going door to door, breaking into places if they have to, to assign houseguests.

On the television, we watch a terse Head Peacekeeper lay out specific rules regarding how many people per square foot each resident will be expected to take in. He reminds the citizens of the Capitol that temperatures will drop well below freezing tonight and warns them that their president expects them to be not only willing but enthusiastic hosts in this time of crisis. Then they show some very staged-looking shots of concerned citizens welcoming grateful refugees into their homes. The Head Peacekeeper says the president himself has ordered part of his mansion readied to receive citizens tomorrow. He adds that shopkeepers should also be prepared to lend their floor space if requested.

"Tigris, that could be you," says Peeta. I realize he's right. That even this narrow hallway of a shop could be appropriated as the numbers swell. Then we'll be truly trapped in the cellar, in constant danger of discovery. How many days do we have? One? Maybe two?

The Head Peacekeeper comes back with more instructions for the population. It seems that this evening there was an unfortunate incident where a crowd beat to death a young man who resembled Peeta. Henceforth, all rebel sightings are to be reported immediately to authorities, who will deal

with the identification and arrest of the suspect. They show a photo of the victim. Apart from some obviously bleached curls, he looks about as much like Peeta as I do.

“People have gone wild,” Cressida murmurs.

We watch a brief rebel update in which we learn that several more blocks have been taken today. I make note of the intersections on my map and study it. “Line C is only four blocks from here,” I announce. Somehow that fills me with more anxiety than the idea of Peacekeepers looking for housing. I become very helpful. “Let me wash the dishes.”

“I’ll give you a hand.” Gale collects the plates.

I feel Peeta’s eyes follow us out of the room. In the cramped kitchen at the back of Tigris’s shop, I fill the sink with hot water and suds. “Do you think it’s true?” I ask. “That Snow will let refugees into the mansion?”

“I think he has to now, at least for the cameras,” says Gale.

“I’m leaving in the morning,” I say.

“I’m going with you,” Gale says. “What should we do with the others?”

“Pollux and Cressida could be useful. They’re good guides,” I say. Pollux and Cressida aren’t actually the problem. “But Peeta’s too...”

“Unpredictable,” finishes Gale. “Do you think he’d still let us leave him behind?”

“We can make the argument that he’ll endanger us,” I say. “He might stay here, if we’re convincing.”

Peeta’s fairly rational about our suggestion. He readily agrees that his company could put the other four of us at risk. I’m thinking this may all work out, that he can just sit out the war in Tigris’s cellar, when he announces he’s going out on his own.

“To do what?” asks Cressida.

“I’m not sure exactly. The one thing that I might still be useful at is causing a diversion. You saw what happened to that man who looked like me,” he says.

“What if you...lose control?” I say.

“You mean...go mutt? Well, if I feel that coming on, I’ll try to get back here,” he assures me.

“And if Snow gets you again?” asks Gale. “You don’t even have a gun.”

“I’ll just have to take my chances,” says Peeta. “Like the rest of you.” The two exchange a long look, and then Gale reaches into his breast pocket.

He places his nightlock tablet in Peeta's hand. Peeta lets it lie on his open palm, neither rejecting nor accepting it. "What about you?"

"Don't worry. Beetee showed me how to detonate my explosive arrows by hand. If that fails, I've got my knife. And I'll have Katniss," says Gale with a smile. "She won't give them the satisfaction of taking me alive."

The thought of Peacekeepers dragging Gale away starts the tune playing in my head again....

*Are you, are you
Coming to the tree*

"Take it, Peeta," I say in a strained voice. I reach out and close his fingers over the pill. "No one will be there to help you."

We spend a fitful night, woken by one another's nightmares, minds buzzing with the next day's plans. I'm relieved when five o'clock rolls around and we can begin whatever this day holds for us. We eat a mishmash of our remaining food—canned peaches, crackers, and snails—leaving one can of salmon for Tigris as meager thanks for all she's done. The gesture seems to touch her in some way. Her face contorts in an odd expression and she flies into action. She spends the next hour remaking the five of us. She redresses us so regular clothes hide our uniforms before we even don our coats and cloaks. Covers our military boots with some sort of furry slippers. Secures our wigs with pins. Cleans off the garish remains of the paint we so hastily applied to our faces and makes us up again. Drapes our outerwear to conceal our weapons. Then gives us handbags and bundles of knickknacks to carry. In the end, we look exactly like the refugees fleeing the rebels.

"Never underestimate the power of a brilliant stylist," says Peeta. It's hard to tell, but I think Tigris might actually blush under her stripes.

There are no helpful updates on the television, but the alley seems as thick with refugees as the previous morning. Our plan is to slip into the crowd in three groups. First Cressida and Pollux, who will act as guides while keeping a safe lead on us. Then Gale and myself, who intend to position ourselves among the refugees assigned to the mansion today. Then Peeta, who will trail behind us, ready to create a disturbance as needed.

Tigris watches through the shutters for the right moment, unbolts the door, and nods to Cressida and Pollux. "Take care," Cressida says, and they are

gone.

We'll be following in a minute. I get out the key, unlock Peeta's cuffs, and stuff them in my pocket. He rubs his wrists. Flexes them. I feel a kind of desperation rising up in me. It's like I'm back in the Quarter Quell, with Beetee giving Johanna and me that coil of wire.

"Listen," I say. "Don't do anything foolish."

"No. It's last-resort stuff. Completely," he says.

I wrap my arms around his neck, feel his arms hesitate before they embrace me. Not as steady as they once were, but still warm and strong. A thousand moments surge through me. All the times these arms were my only refuge from the world. Perhaps not fully appreciated then, but so sweet in my memory, and now gone forever. "All right, then." I release him.

"It's time," says Tigris. I kiss her cheek, fasten my red hooded cloak, pull my scarf up over my nose, and follow Gale out into the frigid air.

Sharp, icy snowflakes bite my exposed skin. The rising sun's trying to break through the gloom without much success. There's enough light to see the bundled forms closest to you and little more. Perfect conditions, really, except that I can't locate Cressida and Pollux. Gale and I drop our heads and shuffle along with the refugees. I can hear what I missed peeking through the shutters yesterday. Crying, moaning, labored breathing. And, not too far away, gunfire.

"Where are we going, Uncle?" a shivering little boy asks a man weighed down with a small safe.

"To the president's mansion. They'll assign us a new place to live," puffs the man.

We turn off the alley and spill out onto one of the main avenues. "Stay to the right!" a voice orders, and I see the Peacekeepers interspersed throughout the crowd, directing the flow of human traffic. Scared faces peer out of the plate-glass windows of the shops, which are already becoming overrun with refugees. At this rate, Tigris may have new houseguests by lunch. It was good for everybody that we got out when we did.

It's brighter now, even with the snow picking up. I catch sight of Cressida and Pollux about thirty yards ahead of us, plodding along with the crowd. I crane my head around to see if I can locate Peeta. I can't, but I've caught the eye of an inquisitive-looking little girl in a lemon yellow coat. I nudge Gale and slow my pace ever so slightly, to allow a wall of people to form between us.

“We might need to split up,” I say under my breath. “There’s a girl—”

Gunfire rips through the crowd, and several people near me slump to the ground. Screams pierce the air as a second round mows down another group behind us. Gale and I drop to the street, scuttle the ten yards to the shops, and take cover behind a display of spike-heeled boots outside a shoe seller’s.

A row of feathery footwear blocks Gale’s view. “Who is it? Can you see?” he asks me. What I can see, between alternating pairs of lavender and mint green leather boots, is a street full of bodies. The little girl who was watching me kneels beside a motionless woman, screeching and trying to rouse her. Another wave of bullets slices across the chest of her yellow coat, staining it with red, knocking the girl onto her back. For a moment, looking at her tiny crumpled form, I lose my ability to form words. Gale prods me with his elbow. “Katniss?”

“They’re shooting from the roof above us,” I tell Gale. I watch a few more rounds, see the white uniforms dropping into the snowy streets. “Trying to take out the Peacekeepers, but they’re not exactly crack shots. It must be the rebels.” I don’t feel a rush of joy, although theoretically my allies have broken through. I am transfixed by that lemon yellow coat.

“If we start shooting, that’s it,” Gale says. “The whole world will know it’s us.”

It’s true. We’re armed only with our fabulous bows. To release an arrow would be like announcing to both sides that we’re here.

“No,” I say forcefully. “We’ve got to get to Snow.”

“Then we better start moving before the whole block goes up,” says Gale. Hugging the wall, we continue along the street. Only the wall is mostly shopwindows. A pattern of sweaty palms and gaping faces presses against the glass. I yank my scarf up higher over my cheekbones as we dart between outdoor displays. Behind a rack of framed photos of Snow, we encounter a wounded Peacekeeper propped against a strip of brick wall. He asks us for help. Gale knees him in the side of the head and takes his gun. At the intersection, he shoots a second Peacekeeper and we both have firearms.

“So who are we supposed to be now?” I ask.

“Desperate citizens of the Capitol,” says Gale. “The Peacekeepers will think we’re on their side, and hopefully the rebels have more interesting targets.”

I’m mulling over the wisdom of this latest role as we sprint across the intersection, but by the time we reach the next block, it no longer matters who

we are. Who anyone is. Because no one is looking at faces. The rebels are here, all right. Pouring onto the avenue, taking cover in doorways, behind vehicles, guns blazing, hoarse voices shouting commands as they prepare to meet an army of Peacekeepers marching toward us. Caught in the cross fire are the refugees, unarmed, disoriented, many wounded.

A pod's activated ahead of us, releasing a gush of steam that parboils everyone in its path, leaving the victims intestine-pink and very dead. After that, what little sense of order there was unravels. As the remaining curlicues of steam intertwine with the snow, visibility extends just to the end of my barrel. Peacekeeper, rebel, citizen, who knows? Everything that moves is a target. People shoot reflexively, and I'm no exception. Heart pounding, adrenaline burning through me, everyone is my enemy. Except Gale. My hunting partner, the one person who has my back. There's nothing to do but move forward, killing whoever comes into our path. Screaming people, bleeding people, dead people everywhere. As we reach the next corner, the entire block ahead of us lights up with a rich purple glow. We backpedal, hunker down in a stairwell, and squint into the light. Something's happening to those illuminated by it. They're assaulted by...what? A sound? A wave? A laser? Weapons fall from their hands, fingers clutch their faces, as blood sprays from all visible orifices—eyes, noses, mouths, ears. In less than a minute, everyone's dead and the glow vanishes. I grit my teeth and run, leaping over the bodies, feet slipping in the gore. The wind whips the snow into blinding swirls but doesn't block out the sound of another wave of boots headed our way.

"Get down!" I hiss at Gale. We drop where we are. My face lands in a still-warm pool of someone's blood, but I play dead, remain motionless as the boots march over us. Some avoid the bodies. Others grind into my hand, my back, kick my head in passing. As the boots recede, I open my eyes and nod to Gale.

On the next block, we encounter more terrified refugees, but few soldiers. Just when it seems we might have caught a break, there's a cracking sound, like an egg hitting the side of a bowl but magnified a thousand times. We stop, look around for the pod. There's nothing. Then I feel the tips of my boots beginning to tilt ever so slightly. "Run!" I cry to Gale. There's no time to explain, but in a few seconds the nature of the pod becomes clear to everyone. A seam has opened up down the center of the block. The two sides

of the tiled street are folding down like flaps, slowly emptying the people into whatever lies beneath.

I'm torn between making a beeline for the next intersection and trying to get to the doors that line the street and break my way into a building. As a result, I end up moving at a slight diagonal. As the flap continues to drop, I find my feet scrambling, harder and harder, to find purchase on the slippery tiles. It's like running along the side of an icy hill that gets steeper at every step. Both of my destinations—the intersection and the buildings—are a few feet away when I feel the flap going. There's nothing to do but use my last seconds of connection to the tiles to push off for the intersection. As my hands latch on to the side, I realize the flaps have swung straight down. My feet dangle in the air, no foothold anywhere. From fifty feet below, a vile stench hits my nose, like rotted corpses in the summer heat. Black forms crawl around in the shadows, silencing whoever survives the fall.

A strangled cry comes from my throat. No one is coming to help me. I'm losing my grip on the icy ledge, when I see I'm only about six feet from the corner of the pod. I inch my hands along the ledge, trying to block out the terrifying sounds from below. When my hands straddle the corner, I swing my right boot up over the side. It catches on something and I painstakingly drag myself up to street level. Panting, trembling, I crawl out and wrap my arm around a lamppost for an anchor, although the ground's perfectly flat.

"Gale?" I call into the abyss, heedless of being recognized. "Gale?"

"Over here!" I look in bewilderment to my left. The flap held up everything to the very base of the buildings. A dozen or so people made it that far and now hang from whatever provides a handhold. Doorknobs, knockers, mail slots. Three doors down from me, Gale clings to the decorative iron grating around an apartment door. He could easily get inside if it was open. But despite repeated kicks to the door, no one comes to his aid.

"Cover yourself!" I lift my gun. He turns away and I drill the lock until the door flies inward. Gale swings into the doorway, landing in a heap on the floor. For a moment, I experience the elation of his rescue. Then the white-gloved hands clamp down on him.

Gale meets my eyes, mouths something at me I can't make out. I don't know what to do. I can't leave him, but I can't reach him either. His lips move again. I shake my head to indicate my confusion. At any minute, they'll

realize who they've captured. The Peacekeepers are hauling him inside now. "Go!" I hear him yell.

I turn and run away from the pod. All alone now. Gale a prisoner. Cressida and Pollux could be dead ten times over. And Peeta? I haven't laid eyes on him since we left Tigris's. I hold on to the idea that he may have gone back. Felt an attack coming and retreated to the cellar while he still had control. Realized there was no need for a diversion when the Capitol has provided so many. No need to be bait and have to take the nightlock—the nightlock! Gale doesn't have any. And as for all that talk of detonating his arrows by hand, he'll never get the chance. The first thing the Peacekeepers will do is to strip him of his weapons.

I fall into a doorway, tears stinging my eyes. *Shoot me*. That's what he was mouthing. I was supposed to shoot him! That was my job. That was our unspoken promise, all of us, to one another. And I didn't do it and now the Capitol will kill him or torture him or hijack him or—the cracks begin opening inside me, threatening to break me into pieces. I have only one hope. That the Capitol falls, lays down its arms, and gives up its prisoners before they hurt Gale. But I can't see that happening while Snow's alive.

A pair of Peacekeepers runs by, barely glancing at the whimpering Capitol girl huddled in a doorway. I choke down my tears, wipe the existing ones off my face before they can freeze, and pull myself back together. Okay, I'm still an anonymous refugee. Or did the Peacekeepers who caught Gale get a glimpse of me as I fled? I remove my cloak and turn it inside out, letting the black lining show instead of the red exterior. Arrange the hood so it conceals my face. Grasping my gun close to my chest, I survey the block. There's only a handful of dazed-looking stragglers. I trail close behind a pair of old men who take no notice of me. No one will expect me to be with old men. When we reach the end of the next intersection, they stop and I almost bump into them. It's the City Circle. Across the wide expanse ringed by grand buildings sits the president's mansion.

The Circle's full of people milling around, wailing, or just sitting and letting the snow pile up around them. I fit right in. I begin to weave my way across to the mansion, tripping over abandoned treasures and snow-frosted limbs. About halfway there, I become aware of the concrete barricade. It's about four feet high and extends in a large rectangle in front of the mansion. You would think it would be empty, but it's packed with refugees. Maybe this is the group that's been chosen to be sheltered at the mansion? But as I draw

closer, I notice something else. Everyone inside the barricade is a child. Toddlers to teenagers. Scared and frostbitten. Huddled in groups or rocking numbly on the ground. They aren't being led into the mansion. They're penned in, guarded on all sides by Peacekeepers. I know immediately it's not for their protection. If the Capitol wanted to safeguard them, they'd be down in a bunker somewhere. This is for Snow's protection. The children form his human shield.

There's a commotion and the crowd surges to the left. I'm caught up by larger bodies, borne sideways, carried off course. I hear shouts of "The rebels! The rebels!" and know they must've broken through. The momentum slams me into a flagpole and I cling to it. Using the rope that hangs from the top, I pull myself up out of the crush of bodies. Yes, I can see the rebel army pouring into the Circle, driving the refugees back onto the avenues. I scan the area for the pods that will surely be detonating. But that doesn't happen. This is what happens:

A hovercraft marked with the Capitol's seal materializes directly over the barricaded children. Scores of silver parachutes rain down on them. Even in this chaos, the children know what silver parachutes contain. Food. Medicine. Gifts. They eagerly scoop them up, frozen fingers struggling with the strings. The hovercraft vanishes, five seconds pass, and then about twenty parachutes simultaneously explode.

A wail rises from the crowd. The snow's red and littered with undersized body parts. Many of the children die immediately, but others lie in agony on the ground. Some stagger around mutely, staring at the remaining silver parachutes in their hands, as if they still might have something precious inside. I can tell the Peacekeepers didn't know this was coming by the way they are yanking away the barricades, making a path to the children. Another flock of white uniforms sweeps into the opening. But these aren't Peacekeepers. They're medics. Rebel medics. I'd know the uniforms anywhere. They swarm in among the children, wielding medical kits.

First I get a glimpse of the blond braid down her back. Then, as she yanks off her coat to cover a wailing child, I notice the duck tail formed by her untucked shirt. I have the same reaction I did the day Effie Trinket called her name at the reaping. At least, I must go limp, because I find myself at the base of the flagpole, unable to account for the last few seconds. Then I am pushing through the crowd, just as I did before. Trying to shout her name above the

roar. I'm almost there, almost to the barricade, when I think she hears me.
Because for just a moment, she catches sight of me, her lips form my name.
And that's when the rest of the parachutes go off.

Real or not real? I am on fire. The balls of flame that erupted from the parachutes shot over the barricades, through the snowy air, and landed in the crowd. I was just turning away when one caught me, ran its tongue up the back of my body, and transformed me into something new. A creature as unquenchable as the sun.

A fire mutt knows only a single sensation: agony. No sight, no sound, no feeling except the unrelenting burning of flesh. Perhaps there are periods of unconsciousness, but what can it matter if I can't find refuge in them? I am Cinna's bird, ignited, flying frantically to escape something inescapable. The feathers of flame that grow from my body. Beating my wings only fans the blaze. I consume myself, but to no end.

Finally, my wings begin to falter, I lose height, and gravity pulls me into a foamy sea the color of Finnick's eyes. I float on my back, which continues to burn beneath the water, but the agony quiets to pain. When I am adrift and unable to navigate, that's when they come. The dead.

The ones I loved fly as birds in the open sky above me. Soaring, weaving, calling to me to join them. I want so badly to follow them, but the seawater saturates my wings, making it impossible to lift them. The ones I hated have taken to the water, horrible scaled things that tear my salty flesh with needle teeth. Biting again and again. Dragging me beneath the surface.

The small white bird tinged in pink dives down, buries her claws in my chest, and tries to keep me afloat. *"No, Katniss! No! You can't go!"*

But the ones I hated are winning, and if she clings to me, she'll be lost as well. *"Prim, let go!"* And finally she does.

Deep in the water, I'm deserted by all. There's only the sound of my breathing, the enormous effort it takes to draw the water in, push it out of my lungs. I want to stop, I try to hold my breath, but the sea forces its way in and out against my will. *"Let me die. Let me follow the others,"* I beg whatever holds me here. There's no response.

Trapped for days, years, centuries maybe. Dead, but not allowed to die. Alive, but as good as dead. So alone that anyone, anything no matter how

loathsome would be welcome. But when I finally have a visitor, it's sweet. Morphling. Coursing through my veins, easing the pain, lightening my body so that it rises back toward the air and rests again on the foam.

Foam. I really am floating on foam. I can feel it beneath the tips of my fingers, cradling parts of my naked body. There's much pain but there's also something like reality. The sandpaper of my throat. The smell of burn medicine from the first arena. The sound of my mother's voice. These things frighten me, and I try to return to the deep to make sense of them. But there's no going back. Gradually, I'm forced to accept who I am. A badly burned girl with no wings. With no fire. And no sister.

In the dazzling white Capitol hospital, the doctors work their magic on me. Draping my rawness in new sheets of skin. Coaxing the cells into thinking they are my own. Manipulating my body parts, bending and stretching the limbs to assure a good fit. I hear over and over again how lucky I am. My eyes were spared. Most of my face was spared. My lungs are responding to treatment. I will be as good as new.

When my tender skin has toughened enough to withstand the pressure of sheets, more visitors arrive. The morphling opens the door to the dead and alive alike. Haymitch, yellow and unsmiling. Cinna, stitching a new wedding dress. Delly, prattling on about the niceness of people. My father sings all four stanzas of "The Hanging Tree" and reminds me that my mother—who sleeps in a chair between shifts—isn't to know about it.

One day I awake to expectations and know I will not be allowed to live in my dreamland. I must take food by mouth. Move my own muscles. Make my way to the bathroom. A brief appearance by President Coin clinches it.

"Don't worry," she says. "I've saved him for you."

The doctors' puzzlement grows over why I'm unable to speak. Many tests are done, and while there's damage to my vocal cords, it doesn't account for it. Finally, Dr. Aurelius, a head doctor, comes up with the theory that I've become a mental, rather than physical, Avox. That my silence has been brought on by emotional trauma. Although he's presented with a hundred proposed remedies, he tells them to leave me alone. So I don't ask about anyone or anything, but people bring me a steady stream of information. On the war: The Capitol fell the day the parachutes went off, President Coin leads Panem now, and troops have been sent out to put down the small remaining pockets of Capitol resistance. On President Snow: He's being held prisoner, awaiting trial and most certain execution. On my assassination

team: Cressida and Pollux have been sent out into the districts to cover the wreckage of the war. Gale, who took two bullets in an escape attempt, is mopping up Peacekeepers in 2. Peeta's still in the burn unit. He made it to the City Circle after all. On my family: My mother buries her grief in her work.

Having no work, grief buries me. All that keeps me going is Coin's promise. That I can kill Snow. And when that's done, nothing will be left.

Eventually, I'm released from the hospital and given a room in the president's mansion to share with my mother. She's almost never there, taking her meals and sleeping at work. It falls to Haymitch to check on me, make sure I'm eating and using my medicines. It's not an easy job. I take to my old habits from District 13. Wandering unauthorized through the mansion. Into bedrooms and offices, ballrooms and baths. Seeking strange little hiding spaces. A closet of furs. A cabinet in the library. A long-forgotten bathtub in a room of discarded furniture. My places are dim and quiet and impossible to find. I curl up, make myself smaller, try to disappear entirely. Wrapped in silence, I slide my bracelet that reads mentally disoriented around and around my wrist.

My name is Katniss Everdeen. I am seventeen years old. My home is District 12. There is no District 12. I am the Mockingjay. I brought down the Capitol. President Snow hates me. He killed my sister. Now I will kill him. And then the Hunger Games will be over....

Periodically, I find myself back in my room, unsure whether I was driven by a need for morphling or if Haymitch ferreted me out. I eat the food, take the medicine, and am required to bathe. It's not the water I mind, but the mirror that reflects my naked fire-mutt body. The skin grafts still retain a newborn-baby pinkness. The skin deemed damaged but salvageable looks red, hot, and melted in places. Patches of my former self gleam white and pale. I'm like a bizarre patchwork quilt of skin. Parts of my hair were singed off completely; the rest has been chopped off at odd lengths. Katniss Everdeen, the girl who was on fire. I wouldn't much care except the sight of my body brings back the memory of the pain. And why I was in pain. And what happened just before the pain started. And how I watched my little sister become a human torch.

Closing my eyes doesn't help. Fire burns brighter in the darkness.

Dr. Aurelius shows up sometimes. I like him because he doesn't say stupid things like how I'm totally safe, or that he knows I can't see it but I'll be happy again one day, or even that things will be better in Panem now. He

just asks if I feel like talking, and when I don't answer, he falls asleep in his chair. In fact, I think his visits are largely motivated by his need for a nap. The arrangement works for both of us.

The time draws near, although I could not give you exact hours and minutes. President Snow has been tried and found guilty, sentenced to execution. Haymitch tells me, I hear talk of it as I drift past the guards in the hallways. My Mockingjay suit arrives in my room. Also my bow, looking no worse for wear, but no sheath of arrows. Either because they were damaged or more likely because I shouldn't have weapons. I vaguely wonder if I should be preparing for the event in some way, but nothing comes to mind.

Late one afternoon, after a long period in a cushioned window seat behind a painted screen, I emerge and turn left instead of right. I find myself in a strange part of the mansion, and immediately lose my bearings. Unlike the area where I'm quartered, there seems to be no one around to ask. I like it, though. Wish I'd found it sooner. It's so quiet, with the thick carpets and heavy tapestries soaking up the sound. Softly lit. Muted colors. Peaceful. Until I smell the roses. I dive behind some curtains, shaking too hard to run, while I await the mutts. Finally, I realize there are no mutts coming. So, what do I smell? Real roses? Could it be that I am near the garden where the evil things grow?

As I creep down the hall, the odor becomes overpowering. Perhaps not as strong as the actual mutts, but purer, because it's not competing with sewage and explosives. I turn a corner and find myself staring at two surprised guards. Not Peacekeepers, of course. There are no more Peacekeepers. But not the trim, gray-uniformed soldiers from 13 either. These two, a man and a woman, wear the tattered, thrown-together clothes of actual rebels. Still bandaged and gaunt, they are now keeping watch over the doorway to the roses. When I move to enter, their guns form an X in front of me.

"You can't go in, miss," says the man.

"Soldier," the woman corrects him. "You can't go in, Soldier Everdeen. President's orders."

I just stand there patiently waiting for them to lower their guns, for them to understand, without my telling them, that behind those doors is something I need. Just a rose. A single bloom. To place in Snow's lapel before I shoot him. My presence seems to worry the guards. They're discussing calling Haymitch, when a woman speaks up behind me. "Let her go in."

I know the voice but can't immediately place it. Not Seam, not 13, definitely not Capitol. I turn my head and find myself face-to-face with Paylor, the commander from 8. She looks even more beat up than she did at the hospital, but who doesn't?

"On my authority," says Paylor. "She has a right to anything behind that door." These are her soldiers, not Coin's. They drop their weapons without question and let me pass.

At the end of a short hallway, I push apart the glass doors and step inside. By now the smell's so strong that it begins to flatten out, as if there's no more my nose can absorb. The damp, mild air feels good on my hot skin. And the roses are glorious. Row after row of sumptuous blooms, in lush pink, sunset orange, and even pale blue. I wander through the aisles of carefully pruned plants, looking but not touching, because I have learned the hard way how deadly these beauties can be. I know when I find it, crowning the top of a slender bush. A magnificent white bud just beginning to open. I pull my left sleeve over my hand so that my skin won't actually have to touch it, take up a pair of pruning shears, and have just positioned them on the stem when he speaks.

"That's a nice one."

My hand jerks, the shears snap shut, severing the stem.

"The colors are lovely, of course, but nothing says perfection like white."

I still can't see him, but his voice seems to rise up from an adjacent bed of red roses. Delicately pinching the stem of the bud through the fabric of my sleeve, I move slowly around the corner and find him sitting on a stool against the wall. He's as well groomed and finely dressed as ever, but weighted down with manacles, ankle shackles, tracking devices. In the bright light, his skin's a pale, sickly green. He holds a white handkerchief spotted with fresh blood. Even in his deteriorated state, his snake eyes shine bright and cold. "I was hoping you'd find your way to my quarters."

His quarters. I have trespassed into his home, the way he slithered into mine last year, hissing threats with his bloody, rosy breath. This greenhouse is one of his rooms, perhaps his favorite; perhaps in better times he tended the plants himself. But now it's part of his prison. That's why the guards halted me. And that's why Paylor let me in.

I'd supposed he would be secured in the deepest dungeon that the Capitol had to offer, not cradled in the lap of luxury. Yet Coin left him here. To set a precedent, I guess. So that if in the future she ever fell from grace, it would

be understood that presidents—even the most despicable—get special treatment. Who knows, after all, when her own power might fade?

“There are so many things we should discuss, but I have a feeling your visit will be brief. So, first things first.” He begins to cough, and when he removes the handkerchief from his mouth, it’s redder. “I wanted to tell you how very sorry I am about your sister.”

Even in my deadened, drugged condition, this sends a stab of pain through me. Reminding me that there are no limits to his cruelty. And how he will go to his grave trying to destroy me.

“So wasteful, so unnecessary. Anyone could see the game was over by that point. In fact, I was just about to issue an official surrender when they released those parachutes.” His eyes are glued on me, unblinking, so as not to miss a second of my reaction. But what he’s said makes no sense. When *they* released the parachutes? “Well, you really didn’t think I gave the order, did you? Forget the obvious fact that if I’d had a working hovercraft at my disposal, I’d have been using it to make an escape. But that aside, what purpose could it have served? We both know I’m not above killing children, but I’m not wasteful. I take life for very specific reasons. And there was no reason for me to destroy a pen full of Capitol children. None at all.”

I wonder if the next fit of coughing is staged so that I can have time to absorb his words. He’s lying. Of course, he’s lying. But there’s something struggling to free itself from the lie as well.

“However, I must concede it was a masterful move on Coin’s part. The idea that I was bombing our own helpless children instantly snapped whatever frail allegiance my people still felt to me. There was no real resistance after that. Did you know it aired live? You can see Plutarch’s hand there. And in the parachutes. Well, it’s that sort of thinking that you look for in a Head Gamemaker, isn’t it?” Snow dabs the corners of his mouth. “I’m sure he wasn’t gunning for your sister, but these things happen.”

I’m not with Snow now. I’m in Special Weaponry back in 13 with Gale and Beetee. Looking at the designs based on Gale’s traps. That played on human sympathies. The first bomb killed the victims. The second, the rescuers. Remembering Gale’s words.

“Beetee and I have been following the same rule book President Snow used when he hijacked Peeta.”

“My failure,” says Snow, “was being so slow to grasp Coin’s plan. To let the Capitol and districts destroy one another, and then step in to take power

with Thirteen barely scratched. Make no mistake, she was intending to take my place right from the beginning. I shouldn't be surprised. After all, it was Thirteen that started the rebellion that led to the Dark Days, and then abandoned the rest of the districts when the tide turned against it. But I wasn't watching Coin. I was watching you, Mockingjay. And you were watching me. I'm afraid we have both been played for fools."

I refuse for this to be true. Some things even I can't survive. I utter my first words since my sister's death. "I don't believe you."

Snow shakes his head in mock disappointment. "Oh, my dear Miss Everdeen. I thought we had agreed not to lie to each other."

Out in the hall, I find Paylor standing in exactly the same spot. “Did you find what you were looking for?” she asks.

I hold up the white bud in answer and then stumble past her. I must have made it back to my room, because the next thing I know, I’m filling a glass with water from the bathroom faucet and sticking the rose in it. I sink to my knees on the cold tile and squint at the flower, as the whiteness seems hard to focus on in the stark fluorescent light. My finger catches the inside of my bracelet, twisting it like a tourniquet, hurting my wrist. I’m hoping the pain will help me hang on to reality the way it did for Peeta. I must hang on. I must know the truth about what has happened.

There are two possibilities, although the details associated with them may vary. First, as I’ve believed, that the Capitol sent in that hovercraft, dropped the parachutes, and sacrificed its children’s lives, knowing the recently arrived rebels would go to their aid. There’s evidence to support this. The Capitol’s seal on the hovercraft, the lack of any attempt to blow the enemy out of the sky, and their long history of using children as pawns in their battle against the districts. Then there’s Snow’s account. That a Capitol hovercraft manned by rebels bombed the children to bring a speedy end to the war. But if this was the case, why didn’t the Capitol fire on the enemy? Did the element of surprise throw them? Had they no defenses left? Children are precious to 13, or so it has always seemed. Well, not me, maybe. Once I had outlived my usefulness, I was expendable. Although I think it’s been a long time since I’ve been considered a child in this war. And why would they do it knowing their own medics would likely respond and be taken out by the second blast? They wouldn’t. They couldn’t. Snow’s lying. Manipulating me as he always has. Hoping to turn me against the rebels and possibly destroy them. Yes. Of course.

Then what’s nagging at me? Those double-exploding bombs, for one. It’s not that the Capitol couldn’t have the same weapon, it’s just that I’m sure the rebels did. Gale and Beetee’s brainchild. Then there’s the fact that Snow made no escape attempt, when I know him to be the consummate survivor. It

seems hard to believe he didn't have a retreat somewhere, some bunker stocked with provisions where he could live out the rest of his snaky little life. And finally, there's his assessment of Coin. What's irrefutable is that she's done exactly what he said. Let the Capitol and the districts run one another into the ground and then sauntered in to take power. Even if that was her plan, it doesn't mean she dropped those parachutes. Victory was already in her grasp. Everything was in her grasp.

Except me.

I recall Boggs's response when I admitted I hadn't put much thought into Snow's successor. *"If your immediate answer isn't Coin, then you're a threat. You're the face of the rebellion. You may have more influence than any other single person. Outwardly, the most you've ever done is tolerated her."*

Suddenly, I'm thinking of Prim, who was not yet fourteen, not yet old enough to be granted the title of soldier, but somehow working on the front lines. How did such a thing happen? That my sister would have wanted to be there, I have no doubt. That she would be more capable than many older than she is a given. But for all that, someone very high up would have had to approve putting a thirteen-year-old in combat. Did Coin do it, hoping that losing Prim would push me completely over the edge? Or, at least, firmly on her side? I wouldn't even have had to witness it in person. Numerous cameras would be covering the City Circle. Capturing the moment forever.

No, now I am going crazy, slipping into some state of paranoia. Too many people would know of the mission. Word would get out. Or would it? Who would have to know besides Coin, Plutarch, and a small, loyal or easily disposable crew?

I badly need help working this out, only everyone I trust is dead. Cinna. Boggs. Finnick. Prim. There's Peeta, but he couldn't do any more than speculate, and who knows what state his mind's in, anyway. And that leaves only Gale. He's far away, but even if he were beside me, could I confide in him? What could I say, how could I phrase it, without implying that it was his bomb that killed Prim? The impossibility of that idea, more than any, is why Snow must be lying.

Ultimately, there's only one person to turn to who might know what happened and might still be on my side. To broach the subject at all will be a risk. But while I think Haymitch might gamble with my life in the arena, I

don't think he'd rat me out to Coin. Whatever problems we may have with each other, we prefer resolving our differences one-on-one.

I scramble off the tiles, out the door, and across the hall to his room. When there's no response to my knock, I push inside. Ugh. It's amazing how quickly he can defile a space. Half-eaten plates of food, shattered liquor bottles, and pieces of broken furniture from a drunken rampage scatter his quarters. He lies, unkempt and unwashed, in a tangle of sheets on the bed, passed out.

"Haymitch," I say, shaking his leg. Of course, that's insufficient. But I give it a few more tries before I dump the pitcher of water in his face. He comes to with a gasp, slashing blindly with his knife. Apparently, the end of Snow's reign didn't equal the end of his terror.

"Oh. You," he says. I can tell by his voice that he's still loaded.

"Haymitch," I begin.

"Listen to that. The Mockingjay found her voice." He laughs. "Well, Plutarch's going to be happy." He takes a swig from a bottle. "Why am I soaking wet?" I lamely drop the pitcher behind me into a pile of dirty clothes.

"I need your help," I say.

Haymitch belches, filling the air with white liquor fumes. "What is it, sweetheart? More boy trouble?" I don't know why, but this hurts me in a way Haymitch rarely can. It must show on my face, because even in his drunken state, he tries to take it back. "Okay, not funny." I'm already at the door. "Not funny! Come back!" By the thud of his body hitting the floor, I assume he tried to follow me, but there's no point.

I zigzag through the mansion and disappear into a wardrobe full of silken things. I yank them from hangers until I have a pile and then burrow into it. In the lining of my pocket, I find a stray morphling tablet and swallow it dry, heading off my rising hysteria. It's not enough to right things, though. I hear Haymitch calling me in the distance, but he won't find me in his condition. Especially not in this new spot. Swathed in silk, I feel like a caterpillar in a cocoon awaiting metamorphosis. I always supposed that to be a peaceful condition. At first it is. But as I journey into night, I feel more and more trapped, suffocated by the slippery bindings, unable to emerge until I have transformed into something of beauty. I squirm, trying to shed my ruined body and unlock the secret to growing flawless wings. Despite enormous effort, I

remain a hideous creature, fired into my current form by the blast from the bombs.

The encounter with Snow opens the door to my old repertoire of nightmares. It's like being stung by tracker jackers again. A wave of horrifying images with a brief respite I confuse with waking—only to find another wave knocking me back. When the guards finally locate me, I'm sitting on the floor of the wardrobe, tangled in silk, screaming my head off. I fight them at first, until they convince me they're trying to help, peel away the choking garments, and escort me back to my room. On the way, we pass a window and I see a gray, snowy dawn spreading across the Capitol.

A very hungover Haymitch waits with a handful of pills and a tray of food that neither of us has the stomach for. He makes a feeble attempt to get me to talk again but, seeing it's pointless, sends me to a bath someone has drawn. The tub's deep, with three steps to the bottom. I ease down into the warm water and sit, up to my neck in suds, hoping the medicines kick in soon. My eyes focus on the rose that has spread its petals overnight, filling the steamy air with its strong perfume. I rise and reach for a towel to smother it, when there's a tentative knock and the bathroom door opens, revealing three familiar faces. They try to smile at me, but even Venia can't conceal her shock at my ravaged mutt body. "Surprise!" Octavia squeaks, and then bursts into tears. I'm puzzling over their reappearance when I realize that this must be it, the day of the execution. They've come to prep me for the cameras. Remake me to Beauty Base Zero. No wonder Octavia's crying. It's an impossible task.

They can barely touch my patchwork of skin for fear of hurting me, so I rinse and dry off myself. I tell them I hardly notice the pain anymore, but Flavius still winces as he drapes a robe around me. In the bedroom, I find another surprise. Sitting upright in a chair. Polished from her metallic gold wig to her patent leather high heels, gripping a clipboard. Remarkably unchanged except for the vacant look in her eyes.

"Effie," I say.

"Hello, Katniss." She stands and kisses me on the cheek as if nothing has occurred since our last meeting, the night before the Quarter Quell. "Well, it looks like we've got another big, big, big day ahead of us. So why don't you start your prep and I'll just pop over and check on the arrangements."

"Okay," I say to her back.

“They say Plutarch and Haymitch had a hard time keeping her alive,” comments Venia under her breath. “She was imprisoned after your escape, so that helps.”

It’s quite a stretch. Effie Trinket, rebel. But I don’t want Coin killing her, so I make a mental note to present her that way if asked. “I guess it’s good Plutarch kidnapped you three after all.”

“We’re the only prep team still alive. And all the stylists from the Quarter Quell are dead,” says Venia. She doesn’t say who specifically killed them. I’m beginning to wonder if it matters. She gingerly takes one of my scarred hands and holds it out for inspection. “Now, what do you think for the nails? Red or maybe a jet black?”

Flavius performs some beauty miracle on my hair, managing to even out the front while getting some of the longer locks to hide the bald spots in the back. My face, since it was spared from the flames, presents no more than the usual challenges. Once I’m in Cinna’s Mockingjay suit, the only scars visible are on my neck, forearms, and hands. Octavia secures my Mockingjay pin over my heart and we step back to look in the mirror. I can’t believe how normal they’ve made me look on the outside when inwardly I’m such a wasteland.

There’s a tap at the door and Gale steps in. “Can I have a minute?” he asks. In the mirror, I watch my prep team. Unsure of where to go, they bump into one another a few times and then closet themselves in the bathroom. Gale comes up behind me and we examine each other’s reflection. I’m searching for something to hang on to, some sign of the girl and boy who met by chance in the woods five years ago and became inseparable. I’m wondering what would have happened to them if the Hunger Games had not reaped the girl. If she would have fallen in love with the boy, married him even. And sometime in the future, when the brothers and sisters had been raised up, escaped with him into the woods and left 12 behind forever. Would they have been happy, out in the wild, or would the dark, twisted sadness between them have grown up even without the Capitol’s help?

“I brought you this.” Gale holds up a sheath. When I take it, I notice it holds a single, ordinary arrow. “It’s supposed to be symbolic. You firing the last shot of the war.”

“What if I miss?” I say. “Does Coin retrieve it and bring it back to me? Or just shoot Snow through the head herself?”

“You won’t miss.” Gale adjusts the sheath on my shoulder.

We stand there, face-to-face, not meeting each other's eyes. "You didn't come see me in the hospital." He doesn't answer, so finally I just say it. "Was it your bomb?"

"I don't know. Neither does Beetee," he says. "Does it matter? You'll always be thinking about it."

He waits for me to deny it; I want to deny it, but it's true. Even now I can see the flash that ignites her, feel the heat of the flames. And I will never be able to separate that moment from Gale. My silence is my answer.

"That was the one thing I had going for me. Taking care of your family," he says. "Shoot straight, okay?" He touches my cheek and leaves. I want to call him back and tell him that I was wrong. That I'll figure out a way to make peace with this. To remember the circumstances under which he created the bomb. Take into account my own inexcusable crimes. Dig up the truth about who dropped the parachutes. Prove it wasn't the rebels. Forgive him. But since I can't, I'll just have to deal with the pain.

Effie comes in to usher me to some kind of meeting. I collect my bow and at the last minute remember the rose, glistening in its glass of water. When I open the door to the bathroom, I find my prep team sitting in a row on the edge of the tub, hunched and defeated. I remember I'm not the only one whose world has been stripped away. "Come on," I tell them. "We've got an audience waiting."

I'm expecting a production meeting in which Plutarch instructs me where to stand and gives me my cue for shooting Snow. Instead, I find myself sent into a room where six people sit around a table. Peeta, Johanna, Beetee, Haymitch, Annie, and Enobaria. They all wear the gray rebel uniforms from 13. No one looks particularly well. "What's this?" I say.

"We're not sure," Haymitch answers. "It appears to be a gathering of the remaining victors."

"We're all that's left?" I ask.

"The price of celebrity," says Beetee. "We were targeted from both sides. The Capitol killed the victors they suspected of being rebels. The rebels killed those thought to be allied with the Capitol."

Johanna scowls at Enobaria. "So what's she doing here?"

"*She* is protected under what we call the Mockingjay Deal," says Coin as she enters behind me. "Wherein Katniss Everdeen agreed to support the rebels in exchange for captured victors' immunity. Katniss has upheld her side of the bargain, and so shall we."

Enobaria smiles at Johanna. “Don’t look so smug,” says Johanna. “We’ll kill you anyway.”

“Sit down, please, Katniss,” says Coin, closing the door. I take a seat between Annie and Beetee, carefully placing Snow’s rose on the table. As usual, Coin gets right to the point. “I’ve asked you here to settle a debate. Today we will execute Snow. In the previous weeks, hundreds of his accomplices in the oppression of Panem have been tried and now await their own deaths. However, the suffering in the districts has been so extreme that these measures appear insufficient to the victims. In fact, many are calling for a complete annihilation of those who held Capitol citizenship. However, in the interest of maintaining a sustainable population, we cannot afford this.”

Through the water in the glass, I see a distorted image of one of Peeta’s hands. The burn marks. We are both fire mutts now. My eyes travel up to where the flames licked across his forehead, singeing away his brows but just missing his eyes. Those same blue eyes that used to meet mine and then flit away at school. Just as they do now.

“So, an alternative has been placed on the table. Since my colleagues and I can come to no consensus, it has been agreed that we will let the victors decide. A majority of four will approve the plan. No one may abstain from the vote,” says Coin. “What has been proposed is that in lieu of eliminating the entire Capitol population, we have a final, symbolic Hunger Games, using the children directly related to those who held the most power.”

All seven of us turn to her. “What?” says Johanna.

“We hold another Hunger Games using Capitol children,” says Coin.

“Are you joking?” asks Peeta.

“No. I should also tell you that if we do hold the Games, it will be known it was done with your approval, although the individual breakdown of your votes will be kept secret for your own security,” Coin tells us.

“Was this Plutarch’s idea?” asks Haymitch.

“It was mine,” says Coin. “It seemed to balance the need for vengeance with the least loss of life. You may cast your votes.”

“No!” bursts out Peeta. “I vote no, of course! We can’t have another Hunger Games!”

“Why not?” Johanna retorts. “It seems very fair to me. Snow even has a granddaughter. I vote yes.”

“So do I,” says Enobaria, almost indifferently. “Let them have a taste of their own medicine.”

“This is why we rebelled! Remember?” Peeta looks at the rest of us. “Annie?”

“I vote no with Peeta,” she says. “So would Finnick if he were here.”

“But he isn’t, because Snow’s mutts killed him,” Johanna reminds her.

“No,” says Beetee. “It would set a bad precedent. We have to stop viewing one another as enemies. At this point, unity is essential for our survival. No.”

“We’re down to Katniss and Haymitch,” says Coin.

Was it like this then? Seventy-five years or so ago? Did a group of people sit around and cast their votes on initiating the Hunger Games? Was there dissent? Did someone make a case for mercy that was beaten down by the calls for the deaths of the districts’ children? The scent of Snow’s rose curls up into my nose, down into my throat, squeezing it tight with despair. All those people I loved, dead, and we are discussing the next Hunger Games in an attempt to avoid wasting life. Nothing has changed. Nothing will ever change now.

I weigh my options carefully, think everything through. Keeping my eyes on the rose, I say, “I vote yes...for Prim.”

“Haymitch, it’s up to you,” says Coin.

A furious Peeta hammers Haymitch with the atrocity he could become party to, but I can feel Haymitch watching me. This is the moment, then. When we find out exactly just how alike we are, and how much he truly understands me.

“I’m with the Mockingjay,” he says.

“Excellent. That carries the vote,” says Coin. “Now we really must take our places for the execution.”

As she passes me, I hold up the glass with the rose. “Can you see that Snow’s wearing this? Just over his heart?”

Coin smiles. “Of course. And I’ll make sure he knows about the Games.”

“Thank you,” I say.

People sweep into the room, surround me. The last touch of powder, the instructions from Plutarch as I’m guided to the front doors of the mansion. The City Circle runs over, spills people down the side streets. The others take their places outside. Guards. Officials. Rebel leaders. Victors. I hear the cheers that indicate Coin has appeared on the balcony. Then Effie taps my shoulder, and I step out into the cold winter sunlight. Walk to my position, accompanied by the deafening roar of the crowd. As directed, I turn so they

see me in profile, and wait. When they march Snow out the door, the audience goes insane. They secure his hands behind a post, which is unnecessary. He's not going anywhere. There's nowhere to go. This is not the roomy stage before the Training Center but the narrow terrace in front of the president's mansion. No wonder no one bothered to have me practice. He's ten yards away.

I feel the bow purring in my hand. Reach back and grasp the arrow. Position it, aim at the rose, but watch his face. He coughs and a bloody dribble runs down his chin. His tongue flicks over his puffy lips. I search his eyes for the slightest sign of anything, fear, remorse, anger. But there's only the same look of amusement that ended our last conversation. It's as if he's speaking the words again. *"Oh, my dear Miss Everdeen. I thought we had agreed not to lie to each other."*

He's right. We did.

The point of my arrow shifts upward. I release the string. And President Coin collapses over the side of the balcony and plunges to the ground. Dead.

In the stunned reaction that follows, I'm aware of one sound. Snow's laughter. An awful gurgling cackle accompanied by an eruption of foamy blood when the coughing begins. I see him bend forward, spewing out his life, until the guards block him from my sight.

As the gray uniforms begin to converge on me, I think of what my brief future as the assassin of Panem's new president holds. The interrogation, probable torture, certain public execution. Having, yet again, to say my final goodbyes to the handful of people who still maintain a hold on my heart. The prospect of facing my mother, who will now be entirely alone in the world, decides it.

"Good night," I whisper to the bow in my hand and feel it go still. I raise my left arm and twist my neck down to rip off the pill on my sleeve. Instead my teeth sink into flesh. I yank my head back in confusion to find myself looking into Peeta's eyes, only now they hold my gaze. Blood runs from the teeth marks on the hand he clamped over my nightlock. "Let me go!" I snarl at him, trying to wrest my arm from his grasp.

"I can't," he says. As they pull me away from him, I feel the pocket ripped from my sleeve, see the deep violet pill fall to the ground, watch Cinna's last gift get crunched under a guard's boot. I transform into a wild animal, kicking, clawing, biting, doing whatever I can to free myself from this web of hands as the crowd pushes in. The guards lift me up above the fray, where I continue to thrash as I'm conveyed over the crush of people. I start screaming for Gale. I can't find him in the throng, but he will know what I want. A good clean shot to end it all. Only there's no arrow, no bullet. Is it possible he can't see me? No. Above us, on the giant screens placed around the City Circle, everyone can watch the whole thing being played out. He sees, he knows, but he doesn't follow through. Just as I didn't when he was captured. Sorry excuses for hunters and friends. Both of us.

I'm on my own.

In the mansion, they handcuff and blindfold me. I'm half dragged, half carried down long passages, up and down elevators, and deposited on a

carpeted floor. The cuffs are removed and a door slams closed behind me. When I push the blindfold up, I find I'm in my old room at the Training Center. The one where I lived during those last precious days before my first Hunger Games and the Quarter Quell. The bed's stripped to the mattress, the closet gapes open, showing the emptiness inside, but I'd know this room anywhere.

It's a struggle to get to my feet and peel off my Mockingjay suit. I'm badly bruised and might have a broken finger or two, but it's my skin that's paid most dearly for my struggle with the guards. The new pink stuff has shredded like tissue paper and blood seeps through the laboratory-grown cells. No medics show up, though, and as I'm too far gone to care, I crawl up onto the mattress, expecting to bleed to death.

No such luck. By evening, the blood clots, leaving me stiff and sore and sticky but alive. I limp into the shower and program in the gentlest cycle I can remember, free of any soaps and hair products, and squat under the warm spray, elbows on my knees, head in my hands.

My name is Katniss Everdeen. Why am I not dead? I should be dead. It would be best for everyone if I were dead....

When I step out on the mat, the hot air bakes my damaged skin dry. There's nothing clean to put on. Not even a towel to wrap around me. Back in the room, I find the Mockingjay suit has disappeared. In its place is a paper robe. A meal has been sent up from the mysterious kitchen with a container of my medications for dessert. I go ahead and eat the food, take the pills, rub the salve on my skin. I need to focus now on the manner of my suicide.

I curl back up on the bloodstained mattress, not cold but feeling so naked with just the paper to cover my tender flesh. Jumping to my death's not an option—the window glass must be a foot thick. I can make an excellent noose, but there's nothing to hang myself from. It's possible I could hoard my pills and then knock myself off with a lethal dose, except that I'm sure I'm being watched round the clock. For all I know, I'm on live television at this very moment while commentators try to analyze what could possibly have motivated me to kill Coin. The surveillance makes almost any suicide attempt impossible. Taking my life is the Capitol's privilege. Again.

What I can do is give up. I resolve to lie on the bed without eating, drinking, or taking my medications. I could do it, too. Just die. If it weren't for the morphling withdrawal. Not bit by bit like in the hospital in 13, but cold turkey. I must have been on a fairly large dose because when the craving

for it hits, accompanied by tremors, and shooting pains, and unbearable cold, my resolve's crushed like an eggshell. I'm on my knees, raking the carpet with my fingernails to find those precious pills I flung away in a stronger moment. I revise my suicide plan to slow death by morphling. I will become a yellow-skinned bag of bones, with enormous eyes. I'm a couple of days into the plan, making good progress, when something unexpected happens.

I begin to sing. At the window, in the shower, in my sleep. Hour after hour of ballads, love songs, mountain airs. All the songs my father taught me before he died, for certainly there has been very little music in my life since. What's amazing is how clearly I remember them. The tunes, the lyrics. My voice, at first rough and breaking on the high notes, warms up into something splendid. A voice that would make the mockingjays fall silent and then tumble over themselves to join in. Days pass, weeks. I watch the snows fall on the ledge outside my window. And in all that time, mine is the only voice I hear.

What are they doing, anyway? What's the holdup out there? How difficult can it be to arrange the execution of one murderous girl? I continue with my own annihilation. My body's thinner than it's ever been and my battle against hunger is so fierce that sometimes the animal part of me gives in to the temptation of buttered bread or roasted meat. But still, I'm winning. For a few days I feel quite unwell and think I may finally be traveling out of this life, when I realize my morphling tablets are shrinking. They are trying to slowly wean me off the stuff. But why? Surely a drugged Mockingjay will be easier to dispose of in front of a crowd. And then a terrible thought hits me: What if they're not going to kill me? What if they have more plans for me? A new way to remake, train, and use me?

I won't do it. If I can't kill myself in this room, I will take the first opportunity outside of it to finish the job. They can fatten me up. They can give me a full body polish, dress me up, and make me beautiful again. They can design dream weapons that come to life in my hands, but they will never again brainwash me into the necessity of using them. I no longer feel any allegiance to these monsters called human beings, despise being one myself. I think that Peeta was onto something about us destroying one another and letting some decent species take over. Because something is significantly wrong with a creature that sacrifices its children's lives to settle its differences. You can spin it any way you like. Snow thought the Hunger Games were an efficient means of control. Coin thought the parachutes would

expedite the war. But in the end, who does it benefit? No one. The truth is, it benefits no one to live in a world where these things happen.

After two days of my lying on my mattress with no attempt to eat, drink, or even take a morphling tablet, the door to my room opens. Someone crosses around the bed into my field of vision. Haymitch. “Your trial’s over,” he says. “Come on. We’re going home.”

Home? What’s he talking about? My home’s gone. And even if it were possible to go to this imaginary place, I am too weak to move. Strangers appear. Rehydrate and feed me. Bathe and clothe me. One lifts me like a rag doll and carries me up to the roof, onto a hovercraft, and fastens me into a seat. Haymitch and Plutarch sit across from me. In a few moments, we’re airborne.

I’ve never seen Plutarch in such a good mood. He’s positively glowing. “You must have a million questions!” When I don’t respond, he answers them anyway.

After I shot Coin, there was pandemonium. When the ruckus died down, they discovered Snow’s body, still tethered to the post. Opinions differ on whether he choked to death while laughing or was crushed by the crowd. No one really cares. An emergency election was thrown together and Paylor was voted in as president. Plutarch was appointed secretary of communications, which means he sets the programming for the airwaves. The first big televised event was my trial, in which he was also a star witness. In my defense, of course. Although most of the credit for my exoneration must be given to Dr. Aurelius, who apparently earned his naps by presenting me as a hopeless, shell-shocked lunatic. One condition for my release is that I’ll continue under his care, although it will have to be by phone because he’d never live in a forsaken place like 12, and I’m confined there until further notice. The truth is, no one quite knows what to do with me now that the war’s over, although if another one should spring up, Plutarch’s sure they could find a role for me. Then Plutarch has a good laugh. It never seems to bother him when no one else appreciates his jokes.

“Are you preparing for another war, Plutarch?” I ask.

“Oh, not now. Now we’re in that sweet period where everyone agrees that our recent horrors should never be repeated,” he says. “But collective thinking is usually short-lived. We’re fickle, stupid beings with poor memories and a great gift for self-destruction. Although who knows? Maybe this will be it, Katniss.”

“What?” I ask.

“The time it sticks. Maybe we are witnessing the evolution of the human race. Think about that.” And then he asks me if I’d like to perform on a new singing program he’s launching in a few weeks. Something upbeat would be good. He’ll send the crew to my house.

We land briefly in District 3 to drop off Plutarch. He’s meeting with Beetee to update the technology on the broadcast system. His parting words to me are “Don’t be a stranger.”

When we’re back among the clouds, I look at Haymitch. “So why are you going back to Twelve?”

“They can’t seem to find a place for me in the Capitol either,” he says.

At first, I don’t question this. But doubts begin to creep in. Haymitch hasn’t assassinated anyone. He could go anywhere. If he’s coming back to 12, it’s because he’s been ordered to. “You have to look after me, don’t you? As my mentor?” He shrugs. Then I realize what it means. “My mother’s not coming back.”

“No,” he says. He pulls an envelope from his jacket pocket and hands it to me. I examine the delicate, perfectly formed writing. “She’s helping to start up a hospital in District Four. She wants you to call as soon as we get in.” My finger traces the graceful swoop of the letters. “You know why she can’t come back.” Yes, I know why. Because between my father and Prim and the ashes, the place is too painful to bear. But apparently not for me. “Do you want to know who else won’t be there?”

“No,” I say. “I want to be surprised.”

Like a good mentor, Haymitch makes me eat a sandwich and then pretends he believes I’m asleep for the rest of the trip. He busies himself going through every compartment on the hovercraft, finding the liquor, and stowing it in his bag. It’s night when we land on the green of the Victor’s Village. Half of the houses have lights in the windows, including Haymitch’s and mine. Not Peeta’s. Someone has built a fire in my kitchen. I sit in the rocker before it, clutching my mother’s letter.

“Well, see you tomorrow,” says Haymitch.

As the clinking of his bag of liquor bottles fades away, I whisper, “I doubt it.”

I am unable to move from the chair. The rest of the house looms cold and empty and dark. I pull an old shawl over my body and watch the flames. I guess I sleep, because the next thing I know, it’s morning and Greasy Sae’s

banging around at the stove. She makes me eggs and toast and sits there until I've eaten it all. We don't talk much. Her little granddaughter, the one who lives in her own world, takes a bright blue ball of yarn from my mother's knitting basket. Greasy Sae tells her to put it back, but I say she can have it. No one in this house can knit anymore. After breakfast, Greasy Sae does the dishes and leaves, but she comes back up at dinnertime to make me eat again. I don't know if she's just being neighborly or if she's on the government's payroll, but she shows up twice every day. She cooks, I consume. I try to figure out my next move. There's no obstacle now to taking my life. But I seem to be waiting for something.

Sometimes the phone rings and rings and rings, but I don't pick it up. Haymitch never visits. Maybe he changed his mind and left, although I suspect he's just drunk. No one comes but Greasy Sae and her granddaughter. After months of solitary confinement, they seem like a crowd.

"Spring's in the air today. You ought to get out," she says. "Go hunting."

I haven't left the house. I haven't even left the kitchen except to go to the small bathroom a few steps off of it. I'm in the same clothes I left the Capitol in. What I do is sit by the fire. Stare at the unopened letters piling up on the mantel. "I don't have a bow."

"Check down the hall," she says.

After she leaves, I consider a trip down the hall. Rule it out. But after several hours, I go anyway, walking in silent sock feet, so as not to awaken the ghosts. In the study, where I had my tea with President Snow, I find a box with my father's hunting jacket, our plant book, my parents' wedding photo, the spile Haymitch sent in, and the locket Peeta gave me in the clock arena. The two bows and a sheath of arrows Gale rescued on the night of the firebombing lie on the desk. I put on the hunting jacket and leave the rest of the stuff untouched. I fall asleep on the sofa in the formal living room. A terrible nightmare follows, where I'm lying at the bottom of a deep grave, and every dead person I know by name comes by and throws a shovel full of ashes on me. It's quite a long dream, considering the list of people, and the deeper I'm buried, the harder it is to breathe. I try to call out, begging them to stop, but the ashes fill my mouth and nose and I can't make any sound. Still the shovel scrapes on and on and on....

I wake with a start. Pale morning light comes around the edges of the shutters. The scraping of the shovel continues. Still half in the nightmare, I run down the hall, out the front door, and around the side of the house,

because now I'm pretty sure I can scream at the dead. When I see him, I pull up short. His face is flushed from digging up the ground under the windows. In a wheelbarrow are five scraggly bushes.

"You're back," I say.

"Dr. Aurelius wouldn't let me leave the Capitol until yesterday," Peeta says. "By the way, he said to tell you he can't keep pretending he's treating you forever. You have to pick up the phone."

He looks well. Thin and covered with burn scars like me, but his eyes have lost that clouded, tortured look. He's frowning slightly, though, as he takes me in. I make a halfhearted effort to push my hair out of my eyes and realize it's matted into clumps. I feel defensive. "What are you doing?"

"I went to the woods this morning and dug these up. For her," he says. "I thought we could plant them along the side of the house."

I look at the bushes, the clods of dirt hanging from their roots, and catch my breath as the word *rose* registers. I'm about to yell vicious things at Peeta when the full name comes to me. Not plain rose but evening primrose. The flower my sister was named for. I give Peeta a nod of assent and hurry back into the house, locking the door behind me. But the evil thing is inside, not out. Trembling with weakness and anxiety, I run up the stairs. My foot catches on the last step and I crash onto the floor. I force myself to rise and enter my room. The smell's very faint but still laces the air. It's there. The white rose among the dried flowers in the vase. Shriveled and fragile, but holding on to that unnatural perfection cultivated in Snow's greenhouse. I grab the vase, stumble down to the kitchen, and throw its contents into the embers. As the flowers flare up, a burst of blue flame envelops the rose and devours it. Fire beats roses again. I smash the vase on the floor for good measure.

Back upstairs, I throw open the bedroom windows to clear out the rest of Snow's stench. But it still lingers, on my clothes and in my pores. I strip, and flakes of skin the size of playing cards cling to the garments. Avoiding the mirror, I step into the shower and scrub the roses from my hair, my body, my mouth. Bright pink and tingling, I find something clean to wear. It takes half an hour to comb out my hair. Greasy Sae unlocks the front door. While she makes breakfast, I feed the clothes I had shed to the fire. At her suggestion, I pare off my nails with a knife.

Over the eggs, I ask her, "Where did Gale go?"

"District Two. Got some fancy job there. I see him now and again on the television," she says.

I dig around inside myself, trying to register anger, hatred, longing. I find only relief.

“I’m going hunting today,” I say.

“Well, I wouldn’t mind some fresh game at that,” she answers.

I arm myself with a bow and arrows and head out, intending to exit 12 through the Meadow. Near the square are teams of masked and gloved people with horse-drawn carts. Sifting through what lay under the snow this winter. Gathering remains. A cart’s parked in front of the mayor’s house. I recognize Thom, Gale’s old crewmate, pausing a moment to wipe the sweat from his face with a rag. I remember seeing him in 13, but he must have come back. His greeting gives me the courage to ask, “Did they find anyone in there?”

“Whole family. And the two people who worked for them,” Thom tells me.

Madge. Quiet and kind and brave. The girl who gave me the pin that gave me a name. I swallow hard. Wonder if she’ll be joining the cast of my nightmares tonight. Shoveling the ashes into my mouth. “I thought maybe, since he was the mayor...”

“I don’t think being the mayor of Twelve put the odds in his favor,” says Thom.

I nod and keep moving, careful not to look in the back of the cart. All through the town and the Seam, it’s the same. The reaping of the dead. As I near the ruins of my old house, the road becomes thick with carts. The Meadow’s gone, or at least dramatically altered. A deep pit has been dug, and they’re lining it with bones, a mass grave for my people. I skirt around the hole and enter the woods at my usual place. It doesn’t matter, though. The fence isn’t charged anymore and has been propped up with long branches to keep out the predators. But old habits die hard. I think about going to the lake, but I’m so weak that I barely make it to my meeting place with Gale. I sit on the rock where Cressida filmed us, but it’s too wide without his body beside me. Several times I close my eyes and count to ten, thinking that when I open them, he will have materialized without a sound as he so often did. I have to remind myself that Gale’s in 2 with a fancy job, probably kissing another pair of lips.

It is the old Katniss’s favorite kind of day. Early spring. The woods awakening after the long winter. But the spurt of energy that began with the primroses fades away. By the time I make it back to the fence, I’m so sick and dizzy, Thom has to give me a ride home in the dead people’s cart. Help

me to the sofa in the living room, where I watch the dust motes spin in the thin shafts of afternoon light.

My head snaps around at the hiss, but it takes awhile to believe he's real. How could he have gotten here? I take in the claw marks from some wild animal, the back paw he holds slightly above the ground, the prominent bones in his face. He's come on foot, then, all the way from 13. Maybe they kicked him out or maybe he just couldn't stand it there without her, so he came looking.

"It was the waste of a trip. She's not here," I tell him. Buttercup hisses again. "She's not here. You can hiss all you like. You won't find Prim." At her name, he perks up. Raises his flattened ears. Begins to meow hopefully. "Get out!" He dodges the pillow I throw at him. "Go away! There's nothing left for you here!" I start to shake, furious with him. "She's not coming back! She's never ever coming back here again!" I grab another pillow and get to my feet to improve my aim. Out of nowhere, the tears begin to pour down my cheeks. "She's dead." I clutch my middle to dull the pain. Sink down on my heels, rocking the pillow, crying. "She's dead, you stupid cat. She's dead." A new sound, part crying, part singing, comes out of my body, giving voice to my despair. Buttercup begins to wail as well. No matter what I do, he won't go. He circles me, just out of reach, as wave after wave of sobs racks my body, until eventually I fall unconscious. But he must understand. He must know that the unthinkable has happened and to survive will require previously unthinkable acts. Because hours later, when I come to in my bed, he's there in the moonlight. Crouched beside me, yellow eyes alert, guarding me from the night.

In the morning, he sits stoically as I clean the cuts, but digging the thorn from his paw brings on a round of those kitten mews. We both end up crying again, only this time we comfort each other. On the strength of this, I open the letter Haymitch gave me from my mother, dial the phone number, and weep with her as well. Peeta, bearing a warm loaf of bread, shows up with Greasy Sae. She makes us breakfast and I feed all my bacon to Buttercup.

Slowly, with many lost days, I come back to life. I try to follow Dr. Aurelius's advice, just going through the motions, amazed when one finally has meaning again. I tell him my idea about the book, and a large box of parchment sheets arrives on the next train from the Capitol.

I got the idea from our family's plant book. The place where we recorded those things you cannot trust to memory. The page begins with the person's

picture. A photo if we can find it. If not, a sketch or painting by Peeta. Then, in my most careful handwriting, come all the details it would be a crime to forget. Lady licking Prim's cheek. My father's laugh. Peeta's father with the cookies. The color of Finnick's eyes. What Cinna could do with a length of silk. Boggs reprogramming the Holo. Rue poised on her toes, arms slightly extended, like a bird about to take flight. On and on. We seal the pages with salt water and promises to live well to make their deaths count. Haymitch finally joins us, contributing twenty-three years of tributes he was forced to mentor. Additions become smaller. An old memory that surfaces. A late primrose preserved between the pages. Strange bits of happiness, like the photo of Finnick and Annie's newborn son.

We learn to keep busy again. Peeta bakes. I hunt. Haymitch drinks until the liquor runs out, and then raises geese until the next train arrives. Fortunately, the geese can take pretty good care of themselves. We're not alone. A few hundred others return because, whatever has happened, this is our home. With the mines closed, they plow the ashes into the earth and plant food. Machines from the Capitol break ground for a new factory where we will make medicines. Although no one seeds it, the Meadow turns green again.

Peeta and I grow back together. There are still moments when he clutches the back of a chair and hangs on until the flashbacks are over. I wake screaming from nightmares of mutts and lost children. But his arms are there to comfort me. And eventually his lips. On the night I feel that thing again, the hunger that overtook me on the beach, I know this would have happened anyway. That what I need to survive is not Gale's fire, kindled with rage and hatred. I have plenty of fire myself. What I need is the dandelion in the spring. The bright yellow that means rebirth instead of destruction. The promise that life can go on, no matter how bad our losses. That it can be good again. And only Peeta can give me that.

So after, when he whispers, "You love me. Real or not real?"

I tell him, "Real."

EPILOGUE

They play in the Meadow. The dancing girl with the dark hair and blue eyes. The boy with blond curls and gray eyes, struggling to keep up with her on his chubby toddler legs. It took five, ten, fifteen years for me to agree. But Peeta wanted them so badly. When I first felt her stirring inside of me, I was consumed with a terror that felt as old as life itself. Only the joy of holding her in my arms could tame it. Carrying him was a little easier, but not much.

The questions are just beginning. The arenas have been completely destroyed, the memorials built, there are no more Hunger Games. But they teach about them at school, and the girl knows we played a role in them. The boy will know in a few years. How can I tell them about that world without frightening them to death? My children, who take the words of the song for granted:

*Deep in the meadow, under the willow
A bed of grass, a soft green pillow
Lay down your head, and close your sleepy eyes
And when again they open, the sun will rise.*

*Here it's safe, here it's warm
Here the daisies guard you from every harm
Here your dreams are sweet and tomorrow brings them true
Here is the place where I love you.*

My children, who don't know they play on a graveyard.

Peeta says it will be okay. We have each other. And the book. We can make them understand in a way that will make them braver. But one day I'll have to explain about my nightmares. Why they came. Why they won't ever really go away.

I'll tell them how I survive it. I'll tell them that on bad mornings, it feels impossible to take pleasure in anything because I'm afraid it could be taken away. That's when I make a list in my head of every act of goodness I've

seen someone do. It's like a game. Repetitive. Even a little tedious after more than twenty years.

But there are much worse games to play.

THE END

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