

THE HUNGER GAMES



New York Times Bestselling Author

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For James Proimos

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PART I

"THE TRIBUTES"



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.

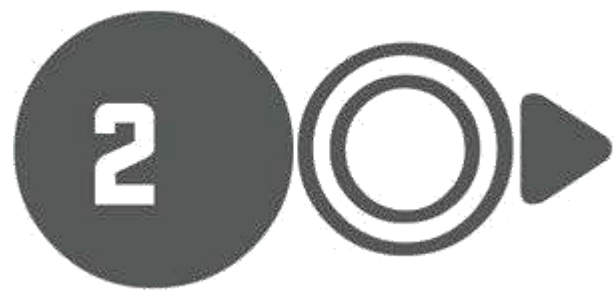
Bright and bubbly as ever, Effie Trinket trots to the podium and gives her signature, “Happy Hunger Games! And may the odds be ever in your favor!” Her pink hair must be a wig because her curls have shifted slightly off-center since her encounter with Haymitch. She goes on a bit about what an honor it 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 reappings 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.



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.

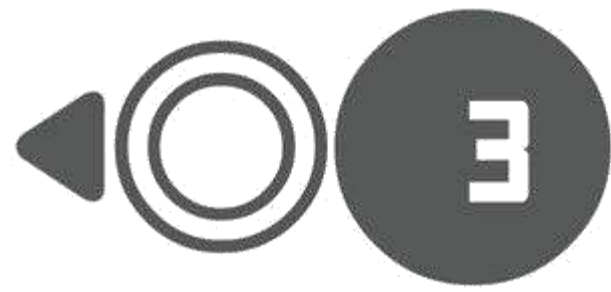
To this day, I can never shake the connection between this boy, Peeta Mellark, and the bread that gave me hope, and the dandelion that reminded me that I was not doomed. And more than once, I have turned in the school hallway and caught his eyes trained on me, only to quickly flit away. I feel like I 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.



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."

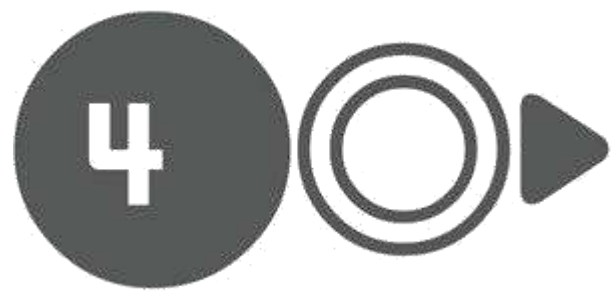
Peeta unexpectedly laughs. "He was drunk," says Peeta. "He's drunk every year."

"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 highlighting 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.

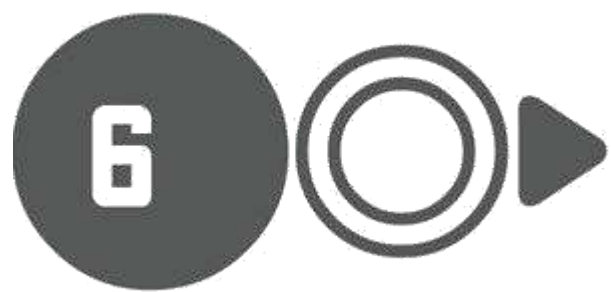
I realize I'm still glued to Peeta and force my stiff fingers to open. We both massage our hands. "Thanks for keeping hold of me. I was getting a little shaky there," says Peeta.

"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.



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.

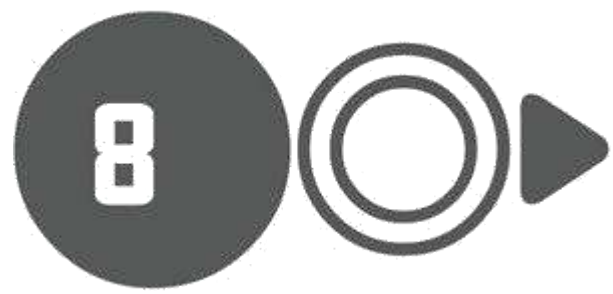
The string's tighter than the one I use at home. The arrow's more rigid. I miss the dummy by a couple of inches and lose what little attention I had been commanding. For a moment, I'm humiliated, then I head back to the bull's-eye. I shoot again and again until I get the feel of these new weapons.

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 a 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. E-le-ven. 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.”